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Autochthones Making their Realities Strange in Order to Better Understand Them

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In my paper titled “African(ized?) Gnosis as Sense-making?”, (Achieng’ 2005:54-57) one cannot help noticing my heavy borrowing from already existing debates on methods in the social sciences. One can ‘justly’ claim that indeed, there is nothing new the paper proposes! Undoubtedly, in as much as we researching African environments would like to formulate our own methods for doing research, I argue that it would be advantageous for us to first epistemologically¹ reorient our standpoints in order to discover our own methodologies² and consequently methods³ of doing research. I further posit that we are not operating in a social science vacuum. Rather, a lot in terms of knowledge production, transfer of knowledge and exchange has occurred, such that for researchers in African environments, the ‘catch 22’ is to find our place in the universal wheel of knowledge and contribute to its recognition and sustenance. It would, therefore, be justifiable to claim that whereas we could operate with the already existing research methods, it would be of profound importance to discover our own epistemological and, consequently, methodological standpoints. To this end, this chapter is a contribution towards the discovery of a methodological standpoint for African environments for those subscribing to a particular epistemic community⁴.

I argue from the premise that each society has a way in which it organises its knowledge and passes this down across generations. Varying from context⁵ to context, this knowledge is handed down through oral or written modes of communication, or through material culture (mostly artistic works). This knowledge shapes how those who belong to a given society comprehend, explain and view occurrences within their own world or those of others. Hence, all of us have a way in which we approach and understand things. Conclusively, one can claim that how we approach things thus depends on the context from which we are discussing or the context which we have acquired.

The knowledge we produce that flows from a particular context is organized in a particular way. Phenomenologists refer to such an organization of knowledge following certain categories as typifications. We come to know about this organized knowledge through what is handed down to us as knowledge across time, through lived experience and encounters, and through observation. This knowledge is presented to us through the process of socialization. We eventually internalize this knowledge in the process of our interaction with others sharing the same context. In the process of socialization where knowledge is presented to us one has to be acquainted with the forms of expression emergent of a context as a medium of grasping this knowledge.

In the very process of internalization, such knowledge becomes commonsensical, taken for granted or natural. This is for the reason that one partakes of this knowledge every day. Many things are done in a routine manner even unconsciously without asking every time why something is being done in the way it is. This knowledge is so naturalized that it becomes difficult for one to see anything 'strange' or 'new' in it.

Now, if we take the latter as our point of departure, the question that comes to the fore is, given that African researchers more or less research their 'own' naturalized contexts, how do they question this commonsense knowledge in order to understand it in new ways? Put differently, how do autochthones as partakers of the naturalized knowledge in their contexts begin to question this very knowledge? How do autochthones begin to see their everyday realities in a new way in order to explain it differently from the taken for granted way? Conceptually, the question at large is how does a subject research itself without being subjective and thus biased?

It has been variously argued that autochthones cannot research 'objectively' their own contexts. At best, they can only regurgitate what is handed down to them as knowledge without raising critical questions about it. For, as the claim goes, they cannot 'see' in new ways and thus conceptualize on the reality that they partake of!⁶ Thus for African social researchers, the big question is how do I make my everyday reality 'strange' in order to better understand it? Conceptually, the question is how do autochthones strike a balance between being subjective (knower) and obtaining objectivity (take a distance to what they know in order to explain it in a new way). Certainly, the question of what is true objectivity is one that is still strewn with philosophical debate (see some of the chapters in this volume that have addressed the question of what true objectivity is). My working definition of objectivity is to understand the true situation as it reveals itself. But what is true and whose truth counts? Truth to me is what is agreed upon by actors in a context as what holds true for that situation, such that truth is relative and can change according to context. Therefore, there are many truths and this depends on the context we are in. But how does this truth reveal itself to us as autochthones?

Three Theses in Support of Sensemaking as a Methodological Standpoint

As autochthones, we are both the subjects and the objects of research. We have a double effect – like two sides of the same coin. This is what I call a mirror effect. Consequently, we have to make sense of what we see, experience or partake of. Sense making as a possibility of a methodological standpoint for autochthones is based on two foundations: getting subjective and maintaining objectivity and representing social reality as it really is by discovering the hidden meaning behind the reality that is unfolding itself to us (going to the truth itself).

But how do we take a distance to the reality we partake of in order to better understand it and in a new way or go to the hidden truth?

Trans-historical methodology

This is through analyzing historical periods with an aim of tracing the changes in the social order. The objective will be to discern which structures there were, what type of action brought a change in the structures and why there was a change in the prevailing order. These, however, should not be taken in isolation but inter-linkages analyzed in order to account for continuities, discontinuities or new modes of doing. Furthermore, this trans-historical methodology should not be understood as going beyond the threshold of history. Rather, we confine ourselves to the past and present activities in order to understand the 'there and then' and make sense of the 'here and now'. This means that we have to go deep into the context and excavate all background information. Rich background information of the changes across historical periodicity helps us in beginning to see things in a different way and thus begin to question why something is like it is now and not like it was before.

A comparative methodology

As we have seen, living in different contexts presupposes seeing things in different ways as those living within that context. Though we are autochthones, we have different contexts, which we can oscillate in order to make the taken for granted strange. We have rural-urban environments with different kinds of neighbourhoods. The latter harbour people experiencing diverse lifestyles, living in different conditions and thus bearing knowledge of divergent realities depending on the context one is in. We have different climatic regions, from desert to semi desert, equatorial rain forests to swamps and grass-lands presupposing different ways of doing and diverse experiences. We are divided into Northern, Southern, Eastern, Western and Central regions. We interact with people from different hemispheres. Comparison of one set of circumstances to another could be a strategy for autochthones to engage in, in order to better understand their reality.

Comparison can be done in three ways:

- (a) Contextual comparison: This is through a deep contextualization process of the social, political and economic conditions and transformations over time in different contexts. The aim could be to look at the similarities and dissimilarities, continuations and discontinuations in order to understand and account for (by giving explanations to the why and how of processes and the changing dynamics).
- (b) Methods: A triangulation of methods in a comparative way could also assist autochthones to make their realities strange in order to better understand them. The question to ask here is why one method produces a certain set of information and the other another sort of information.
- (c) Different categories in society: Through engaging perspectives from different clusters of people in an intergenerational manner, people from different regions, gender, ethnicity and racial dispositions, autochthones can make their realities strange. This is for the reason that the different categories in society will have different explanations to the same observable reality depending on their lived or shared experience. Therefore, the task of the autochthon researcher would be to make sense of these different explanations by trying to find out the hidden meaning in explanations derived from the different categories of people in society.

Multidisciplinarity

The question of engaging in a multidisciplinary methodological approach is indeed a difficult one. The critical issue is how scientists with different ways of looking discuss? How can perspectives be integrated? How can one avoid paradigmatic and conceptual quarrels as different ways of seeing or viewing reality are introduced? In my opinion, engaging in a multidisciplinary dialogue can only proceed at a conceptual level or at the level of generalizations. This is for the reason that multidisciplinary necessarily involves different methodologies or ways of looking at the same reality. To reconcile these divergent ways into one particular way of viewing reality would be succumbing to the development of dogmatism. I am of the view that, methodologically, multidisciplinary as a standpoint can successfully be adopted at the level of conceptual analysis. A typical example to illustrate this is research on HIV-AIDS which could easily involve political scientists, social scientists, philosophers, medics, and those in the medical, chemical and physical sciences. In such a manner, different ways of viewing the same reality are introduced. However,

how each scientific discipline is to proceed in viewing the reality is a disciplinary issue that cannot be resolved in a matter of fact way. As an example, how can political scientists basically interested in macro structures and their functions reconcile their methodological standpoint to that of chemical or physical scientists interested in micro organisms? Engaging in the particulars of a discipline would thus not move any research agenda forward. A multidisciplinary approach would at best dwell on the generalizations (conceptualizations). The task of the researchers engaged in a multidisciplinary standpoint would then be to account for the why and how of the different explanations, with the aim of not only uncovering the underlying truths, but also seeing the reality in many different new ways; and in this way develop further questions into the why of occurrences.

A Note on Methods

If we adopt sense making as one of the basis of a methodological approach for people circumscribing to a certain epistemic community, then we will be necessitated to also interrogate our methods of inquiry. For those who are familiar with the history of qualitative research, we know that ethnographic methods, mainly of the Chicago and Manchester schools in the 20s, were involved with the notion of the other. In other words, ethnography grew out of the interest of knowing how the other (named primitive people) lived. The methods here were mainly participant observation and the narrative interview method.

Whereas I agree that for African realities, because of the oral tradition that still characterizes our medium of communication, our version of the narrative interviews or *hadithi* is still a valid way of collecting information, I query the credibility of participant observation as a method of collecting information. Participant observation presupposes that an ethnographer leaves her/his community to go and stay and observe another community that is not one's, own. However, as autochthones, we are already participants studying our own realities. The paradox is how we who are already participants in a culture also participate in observation?

I propose a move from participant observation to communicative observation for autochthones. We thus need to be communicative observers. By communicative observation, I mean engaging in critical observation and critical questioning (elements of which I have explored above). Communicative observation also means that we become aware of other means of expression in the community such as artistic works and material cultures; for example, song (music), masks, carvings and billboards.

Notes

1. By epistemology, I mean how we come to know.
2. By methodology, I mean how we approach what we want to know.
3. By methods, I mean the tools we use in searching for what we want to know.
4. By epistemic community, I mean those subscribing to a particular way of knowing and a particular approach in doing research.
5. Apart from the territorial, in my view, context also implies shared experience.
6. El Kenz (2005) has explored it in terms of the quarrel between 'anthropos' and 'Humanitas' and the struggle that ensues when the former wants to become the latter.
7. See one of the standard books on participant observation by W. Foot Whyte (1943) *Street Corner Society* where the author engaged in qualitative research with a gang of street-boys in an Italian town.

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