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Reiland Rabaka

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Africanization
Historical and normative dimensions

Esperanza Brizuela-Garcia

Introduction

The concept of Africanization has been a recurrent theme in academic and policy discussions since the era of African independence. It has been used to address a variety of questions in a diverse range of contexts. In this essay, I suggest that it is possible to classify these uses into two general categories. First, scholars, particularly historians, anthropologists and other social scientists, have used the concept of Africanization as a tool to examine the continent's dynamic history of exchange and interaction. In its historical dimension, the concept of Africanization has served a descriptive or interpretative role aimed at explaining how African societies have been affected by their contact with non-African societies and vice-versa.

A second dimension of the concept has been used to specifically criticize the use of Western disciplines or systems of knowledge for the study of African realities. In its normative dimension, the concept of Africanization is used to address the destruction of African cultures and values through the processes of slave trade, colonialism and neo-colonialism. The argument that is often presented is that cultural and social practices as well as institutions ought to be Africanized for the benefit of African communities.

In the remainder of this paper I will explain how these two dimensions of the concept of Africanization have appeared in academic and policy discussions. I will provide a few examples of these uses in an attempt to illustrate that even though the goals pursued within these two contexts are different, their usefulness and relevance depends largely on being able to rely on one another. It is important to note that the examples provided in this essay are not exhaustive. The concept of Africanization is used more widely than the few examples used in this paper. In this paper, I have limited myself to examples that specifically use the concept.

Historical Africanization

Scholarly interest in the concept of Africanization is closely connected to the question of African agency. Colonial and post-colonial discourses questioned whether Africans could be seen as effective builders of society and culture and active participants in their own history.
Among the many myths historians have tried to dispel are those that explained any signs of progress or sophistication among African societies as the result of external influences. The Senegalese historian Cheik Anta Diop, for example, was one of the first to try to “Africanize” Egypt, by asserting that it was in fact an African society. However, he offered little exploration of the complex dynamics of exchange that connected Egypt with the Mediterranean world and even less with the larger African continent. Despite its shortcomings, Diop touched on two important questions that continue to guide the work of scholars interested in the study of African societies: First, what has been the place of Africa in world history? And, second, are modern scholarly methods adequate for the study of African realities? Diop understood that arguing for the African origins of Egypt was not just an exercise in historical research, but an argument for how historical research needed to change. In this regard, he realized the dual dimensions of the Africanization question even though the execution of his argument had many flaws. A wealth of research has been done since Diop published his work and it demonstrates that having developed at the center of four major cultural regions (the Mediterranean, the Near East, the Indian Ocean, and the Atlantic ocean), Africa and its peoples have experienced momentous environmental changes that have encouraged large internal movements of peoples and ideas, but also presented significant obstacles for outsiders who have tried to settle within its shores. The trans-Atlantic and trans-Saharan trade also created large diasporic communities of African peoples throughout the globe. All of these have combined to create societies that have been at the center of global history in some ways, but also quite isolated in others. Under these conditions, the question of what makes an African community or culture authentically African is one that is impossible to answer in the abstract, and also a question that has been used to justify the exploitation of African peoples. African peoples are diverse, complex and, despite what colonial thinkers might have believed, continuously evolving. These are societies that have secured their survival through constant innovation and change. The question for scholars then, is not what it means to be African, but how have these meanings changed throughout time and how they have been informed by cultural, social, economic and academic exchanges among peoples from inside and outside the continent.

In his groundbreaking work on the Africanization of Mozambican Prazos, the historian Allen Isaacman concluded that “One of the overriding themes in African history has been the impact of population diffusion on the nature and direction of change in the receiving areas.” Isaacman’s investigation illustrates the centrality of the Africanization question in the study of African societies and those in the diaspora. Ultimately, these communities have been shaped not just by their connections with one another but also with non-African societies. As a historical question, Africanization tries to understand how historical processes such as slavery, commerce, migration and colonialism have left an indelible mark on African peoples, and how said communities in turn, have affected the course of world history.

Isaacman identified four levels at which these contacts can take place, and these give us a useful reminder of the complexity of these exchanges. In his analysis, the interaction between migrant groups and African populations produced four basic patterns:

First, those instances in which the imposition of cultural and political forms for the migrants led to profound changes in the indigenous population. Second, those instances in which migrant groups introduced some new institutions and ideas, generally in the political sphere, but had only a limited cultural impact and tended themselves to be absorbed into the dominant local culture. Third, those instances in which the impact of the stranger group remained almost negligible and absorption of strangers was rapid and
complete. Fourth, those instances in which the fusion of the two groups resulted in the emergence of a new ethnic and cultural unit.3

This classification underlines the diversity and complexity of experience that can be derived even in a relatively small region of Africa during a particular period of time. Yet, by the author’s own admission, this represents but the broadest generalization. As he concludes that “Rather than initiating radical change, the prazeros tended to be absorbed into the predominant local culture. Such generalization, however, must be treated with the utmost care since the cultural variations between a family which resided in the Zambesi for six months and one which had lived there for six generations were obviously enormous”.4

Isaacman’s analysis underlines the wide range of outcomes that different forms of cultural exchange could produce and that could be categorized under the umbrella of Africanization. Similar examples can be found all over the historical and anthropological literature. The question of religious change in the context of the expansion of world religions offers many instances of this. A central preoccupation of both the study of Islam and Christianity in Africa has been how did African societies receive these world religions and what were the changes elicited by these contacts. As Isaacman could have predicted, the picture that emerges from the literature is varied and complex. In both cases, studies have shown that Christianity and Islam not only came to thrive among African communities, but were also transformed in the process.5

Among the many examples one can find of these works, one can turn to an article by Anne Vermeyden where she examines the life of Mabel Easton Busye, an American Evangelical missionary who worked in the African Inland Mission in 1917. According to Vermeyden “…During her time in Africa, Easton Busye’s understanding of Christianity was challenged as she witnessed Alur, Lugbara and Zande Christians integrate their faith into their own cultural contexts.”6 In the case of Easton Busye, the experience of Christianity in a different continent changed the meaning of Christianity for the missionary woman. Moreover, as the author concludes, the process highlighted the role that Africans played in the establishment and growth of Christian practices among their communities:

Just as evangelical missionaries were responsible for initially bringing the Christian message to the area around Lake Albert, Africans were responsible for much of the faith, and even for encouraging missionaries to think critically about their own faith assumptions. This agency of both missionaries and Africans is what has given the church in East Africa its shape.7

A significant portion of the literature that explicitly uses the concept of Africanization examines how Africans came to occupy influential positions in cultural or political institutions that were not created by Africans, particularly those imposed on them during colonialism. Concerns about this kind of Africanization were present during colonial times and, most importantly, in the years that immediately followed independence. A wealth of literature has been devoted to what was called the “Africanization” of the civil service or government more generally, however, it also affected mid and upper level positions in educational and cultural institutions. This literature has shown that the Africanization of personnel, as a means of transforming colonial institutions, has in itself a complicated past.8

The Africanization of the workforce was neither easy to achieve, nor a simple solution to the challenge of Africanizing colonial institutions. Branwyn Poleykett and Peter Mangesho offer an insightful example of the complex dynamics of Africanization within a single
institutional setting: The National Institute for Medical Research Amani Hill Station located in the Eastern Usambaras in north eastern Tanzania. The authors describe how an educated African workforce worked towards the Africanization of the institution and conclude that “the debates and practices of Africanization emerged out of antagonistic labour relations, and that Africanization at Amani was experienced more forcefully – by Africans and Europeans alike – as increasingly contentious and problematic labour relations surfaced, and as vociferous claims to the cultural power of science were made by African workers.”

The example of Amani demonstrates that attempts to Africanize colonial institutions had to contend with a multiplicity of interests that could not be simply distinguished as “African” or “European.” African workers at Amani saw themselves as more than just Africans. They understood themselves as laborers and scientists and they were determined to pursue their multifaceted goals sometimes in the face of obstacles imposed by their own, newly created African governments. The authors conclude that:

The archive reveals Amani to have been closely connected not only to local labour economies but also to national and regional political institutions through the mobility and political activity of African employees. This ability to work on the scale at which scientific research operates – to localize, Africanize or globalize scientific production – is clearly not distributed equally between actors. Today, so-called ‘global’ science is often synonymous with international partnerships that lock African researchers into complex, transnational hierarchies that are difficult to query or to resist. The stories traced in this paper, however, remind us that ‘global’ places such as Amani have always been connected to the world through close ties created by African ambition and by African labor.

These few examples of historical Africanization illustrate that African societies have a long history of contact, exchange, adaptation and even rejection of ideas and practices introduced by non-African peoples. They also show that answering questions such as what it means to be African? or What it means to Africanize something? Is not an abstract exercise. Such exercise should be grounded in an understanding of how African societies have changed, and continue to change, in response to both local, national, and global challenges. In this sense, historical Africanization serves the purpose of informing an ongoing process described by former Vice-Chancellor of the University of Natal, Malegapuru William Makgoba when he wrote that:

Africanisation is not about expelling Europeans and their cultures, but about affirming African culture and their identity in a world community. It is not a process of exclusion, but of inclusion…[I]t is a learning process and a way of life for Africans. It involves incorporating, adapting and integrating other cultures into and through African visions to provide the dynamism, evolution and flexibility so essential in the global village. Africanisation is the process of defining or interpreting African identity and culture. It is informed by the experience of the African diaspora and has endured and matured over time from the narrow nationalistic intolerance to an accommodating, realistic and global form.

History has shown that African societies have been engaged in this process of “defining or interpreting African identity and culture” for millennia. The challenge and goal for those engaged in studying the historical dimensions of Africanization is to produce solid and
rigorous scholarship that can help us understand the changing meanings of what it means to be African. By doing this, scholars will also be able to question and inform the systems of knowledge that are used to examine African realities and their relationship to the rest of the world, which takes us to the normative dimension of Africanization.

**Normative Africanization**

Despite the prevalence and centrality of the concept of Africanization in the historical context, one is more likely to find the concept discussed in a normative context. These debates place particular emphasis on the need to Africanize education and, more broadly, Africanize the methods and concepts through which knowledge is produced and disseminated. The basic premise underlying normative uses of the concept of Africanization states that European systems of knowledge and European institutions cannot adequately guide the exploration of African realities and cannot serve the needs of African peoples; thus, they have to be replaced by African forms of knowledge and African institutions. For instance, in an article published in 2001, Andre Le Roux makes the case that African education needs to be grounded in “African forms of knowledge.” This is a common concern among many commentators, although, it is not always clear what these African systems of knowledge are and what should be their role. Even in instances where specific examples of African forms of knowledge are identified – as Sipho Seepe does in his chapter about Mathematical knowledge – there are not clear roadmaps about the ways in which they are to be used as foundations for a new educational systems or curricula.

Theology is another field where one often finds calls for Africanization. Rothney Tshaka states that: “Current theological discourse is Western in its very nature... Primarily, the reason for the continued hegemony of Western forms of knowledge production is a result of the inherent disregard that those in the West had for Africa and her purported inability to produce ‘true knowledge.’” And he continues “…our raison d’etre is nothing less than the attempt to unhinge Africa from the Western episteme.” Yet later in his conclusions he seems to ask that said episteme not be eliminated but informed by the experiences of Africans: “Africanization means that the story of the old lady who questioned structures of knowledge production in a context where the dominant refuses to credit African epistemology as ‘proper knowledge,’ has to be told and retold.”

Examples of normative Africanization often sustain that Africa has been victim to an “epistemicide:”

First generation colonialism was the conquering of the physical spaces and bodies of the colonized, and the second generation colonialism was the colonization of the mind through disciplines, such as education, science, economics and law [...] colonization concerned an unequal exchange of cultures and as a consequence, the decimation (‘murder of knowledge’) – epistemicide.

A more precise definition of the term is presented by Dennis Masaka in his article about the Africanization of Philosophy: “‘epistemicide’ as the partial or near total destruction of one knowledge paradigm by hegemonic cultures with the objective of presenting their own as the dominant one.” The notion of an “epistemicide” seems to at least partially contradict what the historical study of Africanization has suggested, that is, that contacts between African and non-African cultures has resulted in a variety of outcomes. While it is quite possible to find instances in which African values and ideas were destroyed, undermined and
replaced, it is also the case that the study of African peoples and experiences has in itself effected some changes in Western paradigms of knowledge. The relevant question for scholars is to explain, in more specific terms, what has been the nature of the exchanges, and what have been the outcomes.

In an article published in 2006 I examined the question of Africanization in the context of Anglophone Africanist historiography. In that piece I pointed out that two factors explained the importance of the Africanization concept in the development of African Studies. First, being that the modern study of Africa emerged in the context of decolonization and nationalism, scholars were particularly committed to the study of African agency, we have in fact seen that the study of historical Africanization was largely the result of this commitment. Second, in light of the gradual decline of many African institutions, much of the research produced by Africans has struggled entering, let alone leading, the research agendas that were more often established in European and North American research centers. Even when historians and other scholars have effectively documented the vibrancy of African agency in the past. It is clear that many obstacles remain for Africans to fully participate in the production of knowledge about their own continent.18

This pervasive and prevalent inequality is what the concept of normative Africanization is trying to address. In this context, Africanization is seen as a way of redressing or correcting the outcomes of an unequal pattern of exchange in which African communities have seen their own cultural and social values undermined and thus their ability to respond to their own problems has been diminished. In this context, Africanization is understood as a means to restore and/or recover questions, values, systems of knowledge that were dismissed and nearly destroyed during colonial and post-colonial times. For instance, the philosopher Magobe Bertrand Ramose once wrote:

Africanisation holds that the African experience in its totality is simultaneously the foundation and the source for the construction of all forms of knowledge… Africanisation… holds that different foundations exist for the construction of pyramids of knowledge. It disclaims the view that any pyramid is by its very nature eminently superior to all others. It is a serious quest for a radical and veritable change of paradigm so that the African may enter into a genuine and critical dialogical encounter with other pyramids of knowledge. Africanisation is a conscious and deliberate assertion of nothing more and nothing less than the right to be African.19

There are a number of problems with this view. First, this position relies on an essentialized view of Africa. The notion that African experience is or should be the foundation and source for the construction of all forms of knowledge suggests that knowledge is to be evaluated solely on the basis of its perceived “Africanity.” As the earlier examination of historical Africanization showed, there is no single or simple or abstract way for making this determination. Raymond Suttner, for instance, argues that the concept of Africanization needs to be dynamic and flexible if it is to be a useful conceptual and analytical tool. In his view, any use of the idea of Africanization should resist the essentialism that is often inherent in the concept:

Any curriculum development in a liberated and emancipatory South Africa should operate with the assumption of contestation, rather than essentialist notions of all Africans thinking in the same way, always, and at all times. Essentialism is depicting such African
Suttner establishes a clear and vital connection between the historical and normative dimensions of the Africanization question. In his view, Africanization should be seen as the process through which the question of what it means to be African should be continuously debated. Suttner acknowledges that so-called Western paradigms cannot be universalized even in the regions where they originated, so the question as to whether they are suitable to address problems in Africa is one that should be examined on a case by case basis and always in light of an understanding of particular historical conditions.

Other critics complain that essentialized calls for Africanization distract from the existence of concrete conditions that prevent Africans from achieving social progress and equality. In his critique of Africanisation the psychologist Wahbie Long concludes that:

The looming danger, however, is that the recent escalation of essentializing, racializing and polarizing discourse in South African public life will spawn yet another round of essentialist attempts at ‘Africanizing’ the discipline that — if the past is anything to go by — will result once again in theoretical and practical dead-ends. With politicians resorting to invocations of ‘race’ in last-ditch attempts at papering over the cracks in their constituencies, we would do well to reflect, as psychologists, on the staggering levels of class inequality in our country. Being ‘African’ has less to do, surely, with cultural uniqueness than material exploitation — and an ‘African’ psychology that ignores this, does so at its peril.

Both Suttner and Long suggest that Africanization, understood as the process of defining what it means to be African, should focus on concrete historical experiences rather than on trying to define an African essence. In this regard, they support a stronger connection between the goals of historical and normative Africanization. But these critiques do not explicitly or directly address the second problem, what should be the criteria to validate knowledge that is to be taught to African students and thus serve as the foundation for Africa’s future development?

Ramose’s view that by rejecting the idea that one pyramid of knowledge is superior to others, Africans will be able to “enter into a genuine and critical dialogical encounter with other pyramids of knowledge” may lead to the problem of an extreme relativism. Asserting an abstract equality among different systems of knowledge does not, by itself, enable them to meaningfully communicate or interact. Furthermore, equality alone does not offer epistemic criteria to determine how ideas from different systems of knowledge can be discussed or evaluated. In fact, it precludes the possibility to critically examine specific systems of knowledge and bypasses the historical question of whether said systems were and/or continue to be useful and effective and why. The question then is how can African ideas, concepts and practices inform the ways in which knowledge is validated.

The philosopher Kai Horsthemke examines this question by first looking at the Africanization of practical knowledge, that is, the project of legitimizing traditional African practices such as healing, basket weaving, conflict resolution, etc. However, he admits that legal or cultural legitimacy that could or should be granted to these practices does not resolve the question of their epistemic value. In other words, one may agree that there is a social or cultural value in trying to preserve and protect knowledge of traditional practices, but this has nothing to do with the question of whether they constitute valid knowledge.
When looking at the question of African knowledge understood in the factual or propositional sense, he concluded that the idea of Africanizing knowledge injects an extreme relativism that would render it almost meaningless. He reminds us that for a statement to be recognized as knowledge it needs to fulfill three conditions: belief, truth and justification. For the purposes of his argument, he offered a slightly modified definition that states that:

A person (S) knows that something is the case (p) if and only if:

S believes that p,

P is true, and

S has suitable justification for believing that p. (This may mean that the justification for believing that p does not involve any false beliefs, or – more circumspectly – that it is suitably connected with the truth of the beliefs in question.

The purpose of the revised justification condition is to allude to the importance of context in epistemological considerations. ‘Suitable’ is a deliberately open-ended notion and, therefore, enables some kind of sensitivity to epistemic contexts.24 [My emphasis].

In the end, Horsthemke concludes that:

‘Africanisation of knowledge’ makes a certain limited sense when applied to skills and to acquaintance-type knowledge. When applied to propositional knowledge, either the term ‘Africanisation’ is redundant or what is at issue would more correctly be called the ‘Africanisation of belief.’25

In his view, the language of Africanization is not a helpful tool for trying to determine the validity of knowledge that can or should be applied to the solution of African problems. However, by offering a modified definition, Horsthmeke reminds us that existing understandings of knowledge can be adapted so as to include a more diverse range of ideas and also enable meaningful dialogues and exchanges among scholars from different cultural backgrounds. In this regard, he presents us with yet the best example of how normative Africanization can make valuable contributions to new understandings of knowledge production and the disciplines.

If the central challenge of normative Africanization is to insure that African voices and ideas have equal access to the market of ideas, it is reasonable to expect that the ensuing debates should be guided by sound and clear epistemological criteria and not by essentialist definitions of what it means to be African. If this is the case, the promise of Africanization can and should transcend the particular questions about African knowledge and aim to transform broader methods and epistemological values. As historians Toyin Falola and Christian Jennings wrote:

… being receptive to new possibilities in research and writing requires both a critical mindset, in order to maintain academic standards, and, at the same time, a willingness to rethink those standards when African experiences and contexts suggest that they might be inadequate or inappropriate for African studies.26

I have in fact suggested that the true challenge of Africanization should not be limited to producing a better history of Africa and its peoples, but it should include the broader transformation of the historical discipline and the general epistemological principles that govern
the ways in which knowledge is produced, evaluated and discussed among peoples form different cultural settings. This can only be achieved if the goals of historical and normative Africanization complement one another. While normative Africanization should be informed by concrete knowledge of Africa’s past and present; scholars engaged in the production of knowledge in and about Africa should continuously evaluate the suitability of the concepts and methods they use. They should seek to ensure that these are adequate tools, not just for the study of African realities, but also contribute to the challenge of creating new systems of knowledge that are better suited to the study and understanding of our shared human experience.

Notes


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