

Locating Africa in Area Studies-Disciplines Dialogue

—Sandipani Dash and Pragya Singh

Africa positions herself prominently in dialogue among area studies and disciplines that are indeed complimentary academic styles. Thematic concentration in knowledge space is construed to be disciplines while area specification of knowledge space constitutes area studies. Knowledge gets accumulated in particular locality with initial acquisition, retention and later on assimilation. This three layered process leads to knowledge formation. As a natural process of spill over, the accumulated knowledge of multiple localities get inter-communicated with each other. Thus, knowledge space unfolds with exchange among multiple localities with initial formation of disciplinary boundary and subsequent interdisciplinary persuasion that gets elevated into multi-disciplinary interactions thus facilitating interoperability among locality and disciplinarity.

Knowledge space naturally unfolds through historic inter-linkages among all co-equal localities, reiterating inter-belongingness between individual and whole or microsom and macrosom and by implication inter-belongingness between local and global. The intellectual historicity has, however, its own share of irony that afflicts the world with conceptual illusions including theological uniformism, anthropo-centrism, mono-civilization exceptionalism perpetrated by the theologians, linguists and anthropologists of the West. Consequently, the world suffers from the inevitable functional perversions namely slavery, colonialism, settler-colonialism, racism, relational hierarchy, privilege concentration, systemic pauperization, domineering wars and terror.

The pre-existing global connectivity that is predicated on spontaneous exchange of ideas and needs degenerates into confinement of lives and livelihood under slavery and colonialism. This painfully brutalizing process of seizing people and land has manifold motivational dimensions including the proselytising mission, military misadventurism, resource extraction, skill deprivation, capital-technology formation, political domination and above all the terrible complex of West European civilisational exceptionalism. Even after hard won independence, coloniality travels to normative, institutional and procedural edifices of formally independent countries, consequently impelling them to seek selfhood in ideas and praxis.

What remains a deeper source of concern is the risk of local abstraction masquerading as universal narration. One can explain the problem of Eurocentricism through this illusion, while abstraction remains an inevitable actuality in the progression of knowledge. De-contextualized abstraction creates conceptual illusion and functional perversion. Offering a powerful critique of Eurocentric knowledge systems, Paul Tiyambe Zeleza says, "The history of modern knowledge production has been marked by universalization of the West and provincialization of the rest." In a similar plea for having much needed selfhood in ideas, K. C. Bhattacharya exposes the historically entrenched 'colonization of mind' and 'hybridization of ideas' syndrome.

Excessive disciplinary indulgence and over abstraction makes the disciplinary findings inadequate in responding to the identified problems. In this case, it becomes necessary for dialogue among disciplines. Initial dialogue occurs between two disciplines and it is called interdisciplinary as and when the quest for response to the subject puzzle intensifies. The dialogue moves from

interdisciplinary to multidisciplinary directions where more than two disciplines engage in mutual interaction, then pursuit of multidisciplinary dialogues does not make the original disciplinary exercises irrelevant rather than it further enriches its problem responding capacity. So in a way it channels, the inter-communication among area studies and disciplines through inter/multi-disciplinarity.

Hegel in his 1830-1831 Philosophy of History lectures at the University of Jena stated, "The Negro.....represents the natural man in his completely wild and untamed state. We must lay aside all thought of reverence and morality-all that we call feeling-if we would rightly comprehend him; there is nothing harmonious with humanity to be found in this type of character. The copious and circumstantial accounts of Missionaries completely confirm this."

Hegel's typecast description of Africans lacks credibility, since there is evidence of humanity protection institutions in pre-colonial Africa. The sphere of security has prevailed in most pre-colonial African states through their local customary and formal institutions. The maintenance of peace within many African communities was based on four legal principles: deliberation and discussion based dispute settlement, rather than force driven justice system; compensatory rectification of misconduct (except in severe crimes such as killing); assessment and adjudication by elders with standing of impartiality; and fairness. In this context, the thirteenth century's Mande Charter of West Africa deserves a proper notice.

Significantly, Mande Charter ensured in Mali: - a) the prevalence of two inviolable principles guiding people's interrelationship: *sanankunya* (joking relation) and *tanamannyonya* (blood pact); b) consequently establishing respect of the other and peaceful settlement of disputes as the rule; c) significantly the

absence of harm to foreigners and inviolability of foreign envoy's security. Reflecting on the security setting in Mali Empire, Ibn Battuta pertinently observed, "Among these qualities[of the Blacks] there is also the prevalence of peace in their country, the traveler is not afraid in it, nor is he who lives there in fear of the chief or of the robber by violence."

There is an increasing realization in pre-existing usage of sovereignty in African context prior to evolution of Westphalia state system and transplantation of colonial state-hood. Various empires and ruling institutions exercised authority over defined territories, maintained diplomatic relations, regulated external interactions, and asserted political autonomy. These historical experiences demonstrate that ideas related to political independence, territorial authority, and self-rule were present in African societies long before colonial rule and the emergence of the 'modern' international system.

Following independence, Pan-African leaders and institutions promoted norms of sovereign equality, territorial integrity, self-determination, and non-intervention. These principles were essential for safeguarding newly independent states from exogenous pressures and extra-regional interference. In this sense, Africa was not merely a passive recipient of a Western concept but an active contributor to the evolution of contemporary sovereignty.

The systemic power relations reinforce global hierarchy in norms, languages, life style/skill, creative/performing arts, institutions, customs, behaviours through legitimization of spatio-temporal unequal binaries. It exacerbates over abstraction and de-contextualization of knowledge leading to conceptual illusion and functional perversion. Its reversal lies in the dialogue among area studies and disciplines where Africa as a dynamic knowledge canvass occupies a prominent position. Contrasting the dominant narrative of passivity in it, Africa rather functions as a repository where multiple forms of heritage and

contemporary knowledge are continuously generated, preserved and transmitted. It makes Africa a lively canopy of ideas and praxis, contributing to both area and disciplinary facets of knowledge space that can regenerate cosmic habitation and eco-conscious aspirations.

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