

AFRICAN UNIVERSITIES ON A GLOBAL RANKING SCALE: LEGITIMATION OF KNOWLEDGE HIERARCHIES?

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ABSTRACT

In this theoretical article, I argue that the interconnection between the excruciating superiority of the West to conflate its own prototype of society with the ideal state of being is manifested through the hierarchisation of knowledge in the name of the university global rankings. My case is that by accepting the centre–periphery disjunction within the knowledge–power dynamic through situating African universities within the global university rankings is only an entrenched fashion of endorsing the legitimisation of the hierarchisation of knowledge. Ranking universities on the league table puts western scientific knowledge systems at the epitome against the local and African indigenous knowledges seating at the bottom of the global knowledge ladder. Arguing from a critical theory perspective, I submit that the elite universities domiciled in the world’s wealthiest economies enjoy a disparate influence over the international standards for scholarship and knowledge processes while denigrating African ways and sources of knowing by placing them at the bottom of the knowledge pyramid. While acknowledging the need for excellence and competitiveness on a global scale, I advance and provide strong evidence that knowledge processes in African universities should not be measured against western-dominated processes due to the uniqueness of each. Conversely, I forward the case that each system of knowing is distinct and placing them on an equal pedestal is indefensible and therefore illegitimate. To that end, I make proposals for African universities to find alternatives to global university rankings that measure their own competitiveness.

Keywords: globalisation, indigenous knowledge, Africanisation, decolonisation, hierarchisation, rankings, competitiveness, power, legitimacy

INTRODUCTION

The tide of ranking has taken education by storm resulting in the vertical differentiation of research, teaching and learning and service as the core business of the university on a global scale. Global economic change has manifested itself in higher education through the contemporary university ranking mania while preoccupations with university rankings reflect ‘... the general recognition that economic growth and global competitiveness are increasingly driven by knowledge, and that universities can play a key role in that context’ (Salmi 2009, 1).

In a globalized world, the systems of knowledge production have experienced intense transformation to emerge as the primary engines of development. Such trends have put immense pressure on countries across all regions globally to intensify their research and knowledge production functions particularly in the university sector.

Global ranking of universities is one of the processes for nations to assess how well they are performing in the competitive global knowledge economy and this signals a new world order in which we live a compared and ranked life. Nations are fascinated with the creation of élite research universities in a bid to amplify their competitive advantage within the global knowledge economy. The fascination for university rankings and league tables is driven by a multiplicity of factors and the concomitant notion of world-class university. Nevertheless, there continue to be pronounced inequalities in capacity and opportunity between countries and across income levels. This has engendered the emergence of university hierarchies and the attendant heirarchisation of the knowledges they produce and disseminate.

It is uncontested that universities are among the top echelons of pace-setter institutions influencing how other facets of society are evaluated and ranked hence it is inescapable that they find themselves subjected to weighting and rankings. The notion of hierarchies of knowledge in the university, can be reduced, if not expanded, to the ordering of knowledges using some predetermined criteria to rank on a league table from the best to the worst knowledge producers in the world. This draws me to question: whose knowledge is most worthwhile? (see Weiler 2011). Conversely, are there some best or worst sources of knowledge measured across the world? Literature is awash with evidence of the pros and cons of global university rankings (see Altbach 2006; Badat 2010a; Hazelkorn 2011; Liu 2009; Marginson 2007). Despite this truism, and due to the complex nature of the institution of the university and the intricacies of related world systems, it is correspondingly unavoidable to conceive comparing and ranking universities as hotly controversial. Interestingly, for some ‘... the emergent rankings are probably considered as nothing more than an entertaining read’ (Stensaker and Kehm 2009, vii).

This article challenges the skewed template of ranking knowledge processes which, from the start, are different. My argument is premised on two main assumptions, namely that:

- 1) the academic world has always been characterized by *centres* and *peripheries* (Altbach, Reisberg and Rumbley 2009) with the position of Africa as an object of study and centre of knowledge production remaining unwarranted in the international division of intellectual labour (Zezeza 2012) and
- 2) there are dehumanizing tendencies of global theory, which have repeatedly re-enacted

deep historical propensity of ‘Western’ science and high culture to make flattened, dehumanized portrayals of Africans and African humaneness (Lowe 1997, 299).

While I will not claim complete uniqueness in this discourse, this theoretical article proffers an analysis of the epistemological issues related to knowledge production and dissemination in the African university by arguing that placing universities on a global ranking scale is one form of endorsing the hierarchies of the sources and forms of knowledge imposed by dominant colonial powers and which continue to perpetuate and manifest themselves much to the inferiorisation of the knowledge systems indigenous to Africa.

I acknowledge the presence of critical scholars who have spoken to significant themes in contemporary higher education focusing on the functionality of critical political theories. These include, among others, the commercialization of knowledge production (De Sousa Santos 2006), critical approaches to power in higher education (Marginson 1997), questioning excellence in higher education policies (Rostan and Vaira 2011), rankings and the reshaping of higher education (Hazelkorn 2011), to mention only a few. I enter this discourse after realising a notable void in researching of power as and when it speaks to the place of global university rankings in legitimising knowledge hierarchies. I engage critical theory as an analytical basis for assessing inequity in global university education and the resultant legitimization of the heirarchisation of knowledges. I will not use critical theory to defend, validate or stipulate normative sanction, nor to account for what is happening, but more precisely to *critique*, and explore conditions of possibility for change. Rather, I will attempt to apply the analytical instrument to evince *how* rankings of African university knowledges might, and could become different by sharing the discourse with decolonial theorists from the South who now enlighten a global field of ‘decolonising thought’ and share ‘a view of coloniality as a fundamental problem’ (Maldonado-Torres 2011, 2). Starting off with a brief description of the nature of university rankings will clear the roadmap to a critical analysis of how the practice is a form of legitimising knowledge hierarchies in the African university.

I challenge the much-prized western scientised knowledges for constituting the basic criteria for the endorsement of world renowned universities. I start by exposing the nature and origins of university rankings before briefly examining the place of globalisation in the knowledge economy discourse. This will be followed by an entry into the critical theory of the legitimization of knowledge hierarchies. Taking the debate to the context of Africa, I then critique the conditions of the legitimization of knowledge hierarchies in African universities and will wind the debate by making some propositions (not necessarily providing prescriptions) of how epistemologies in African universities can be grounded in African identities without inexorably

bending to the circumstances established by global university rankings.

NATURE AND ORIGINS OF UNIVERSITY RANKINGS

There has been growing interest in the phenomenon of world university rankings in recent times although national rankings of universities have lived some decades (see Hursh and Wall 2008). World university rankings are lists of higher education institutions ordered using a combination of indicators although there is

... wrangling and scrambling for positions on such lists, as well as scepticism from those institutions that appeared or did not appear on them ... (*however*) ... the practice was soon emulated in other countries it was more or less met with disinterest and little debate outside of closeted academic corridors (Marope and Wells 2013, 7).

The publication of the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) in 2003 by Shanghai Jiao Tong University in China and the *Times Higher Education (THE)* World University Rankings in 2004 is a recent development in the history of the global university rankings history. In addition, other players have entered the *field*, among them, The Webometrics Ranking of World Universities, (WRWU) SCImago Institutions Rankings (SIR), the European Union and the University of Leiden, while national rankings in the United States, for example, the *US News and World Report* and *The Top American Research Universities* are emerging. In the United Kingdom, several newspapers for example *The Times*, *The Independent* and *The Guardian* also publish occasional guides to the best universities (see Ordorika and Lloyd 2013).

In order to reveal the nature of global university rankings, this section surveys the question: What are the key methodological constituents of global university rankings? In the paragraphs that follow, I briefly examine the criteria used for global ranking of universities for 2 most popular ranking houses namely Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) and the *Times Higher Education (THE)* World University Rankings.

Academic Ranking of World Universities [Shanghai Jiao Tong University]

This ranking house has its origins in the Chinese government's mission to create 'world-class universities' acting as vehicles of development (see Badat 2010b) and prioritises the indicators and weights as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Indicators and weights for ARWU

Criteria	Indicator	Weight %
Quality of education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Alumni of an institution winning Nobel Prizes and Fields Medals Alumni 	10
Quality of faculty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Staff of an institution winning Nobel Prizes and Fields Medals Highly cited researchers in 21 broad subject categories 	20 20
Research output	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Papers published in <i>Nature</i> and <i>Science</i> Papers indexed in Science Citation Index-expanded and Social Science Citation Index 	20 20
Per capita performance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Per capita performance of an institution 	10
Total		100

(Adapted from Liu 2013, 26)

From the above, it is notable that select subject fields are ranked in ARWU, among them Natural Sciences and Mathematics, Engineering/Technology and Computer Sciences, Life and Agriculture Sciences, Clinical Medicine and Pharmacy, and Social Sciences while the Arts and Humanities are excluded in the ranking criteria (Liu 2013). It compares 1,200 universities worldwide and classifies 500. Institutions are then ranked according to their academic or research performance in each subject field. Ranking indicators include alumni and staff winning Nobel Prizes, Fields Medals and Turing Awards, highly cited researchers, papers indexed in the Science Citation Index-Expanded and the Social Science Citation Index, and the percentage of papers published in the top 20 per cent of journals in each subject field.

Times Higher Education (THE)

This ranking institution has as its focus ‘... to recognise universities as the multi-faceted organisations that they are, [and] to provide a global comparison of their success against the notional mission of remaining or becoming world-class’ (Badat 2010a, 5). Its discourse, coupled with the attendant *world esteem*, draws on and from the gold standard ‘world-class university’ to which all universities should presumably aim and the index to which they should be gauged. In the words of Marginson, the THE-QS perspective of higher education is about ‘... reputation for its own sake, about the aristocratic prestige and power of the universities as an end in itself’ (Marginson 2007, 138–139). With a number of criticism levelled against it, the THE has, of late, developed a new rankings system in collaboration with Thomson Reuters, capturing as many characteristics as possible of the global research-led university, across all of its core missions (Baty 2013). Below are the indicators and criteria used by the ranking house.

Annual ranking of best universities in terms of:

- Research reputation
- Research citations per head
- Graduate student output
- Research funding from industry
- Teaching reputation
- Total staffing resources
- Total revenue
- Proportion of staff who are international in origin
- Proportion of students who are international in origin

Elevates institutions:

- with advanced reputations in both teaching and research, as historical bearers of state mission
- with exceptional concentrations of research resources in the science-based disciplines, while also research active across the whole academic staff; this elevates institutions fitting the template of the United States/United Kingdom research university (favouring English-speaking countries, Western Europe, parts of East Asia)
- with enhanced wealth, as signified in the indicator for institutional income and that for staffing resources
- with high utility for industry, as measured by the indicator for industry income, thereby also fitting the neoliberal template for entrepreneurial universities
- with enhanced global reputation together with high concentrations of foreign students, thereby favouring institutions that market foreign education on a high-volume commercial basis and also fitting the neoliberal template for entrepreneurial universities (Adapted from Pusser and Marginson 2013, 555).

Given the above setting, what then is the place of global university rankings within the mantra of globalisation and the knowledge economy? In the next section, I explore the notion globalisation and the knowledge economy as a precursor to the debate to address the challenges of global university rankings as legitimisation of knowledge hierarchies.

GLOBALISATION AND THE KNOWLEDGE ECONOMY

There has been an unprecedented explosion in the idea of globalisation since the mid-1980s

coupled with the eminence and inspiration of a gamut of multilateral and supranational bodies. However, the notion of globalization is a characteristically convoluted phenomenon that ‘... stubbornly resist easy interpretation and application’ (Powell and Snellman 2004). In this section I enter briefly into underlying assumptions of this mantra as I make links between the notions of globalisation and knowledge economy.

Variouly understood, globalisation can be regarded as a spatial process of the increasing interdependence and convergence of worldwide economic, social, environmental and political actions. Held, McGrew and Goldblatt sum up the meaning of globalisation as ‘... the widening, deepening and speeding up of worldwide interconnectedness’ (Held et al. 1999, 2) and elaborate that ‘... the world is rapidly being moulded into a shared social space by economic and technological forces and that developments in one region of the world can have profound consequences for the life chances of individuals or communities on the other side of the globe’ (Held et al. 1999, 1). This denotes globalisation as the compression of the world and the rise of realisation of the world as a totality. Despite contestations in its meaning, globalisation continues to remain a contemporary reality with a fascinating and authoritative voice especially in the field of higher education. To this end, Altbach and Knight 2006, 1) assert that ‘globalization is the economic, political, and societal forces pushing twenty-first century higher education toward greater international involvement’. Globalisation in the context of higher education can thus be referred to as ‘... the sum of these exogenous forces pressing down on higher education’ (Cantwell and Maldonado-Maldonado 2009, 290).

The contemporary world has entered a new order of the ‘knowledge society’ of as a form of movement and disconnection from materialist means of economic production to an economy directed by the production and communication of information. The new setup foregrounds knowledge as one factor of production side-lining labour and capital (Marginson and Sawir 2005) with information now driving the new economy, and paying attention to technology, while upholding the human minds as the most critical asset (see Castell in Altbach and Knight 2006). The notion of knowledge economy embraces a wide assortment of undertakings and analyses as the core component the production and services based on knowledge-intensive activities and a greater reliance on intellectual capabilities than on physical inputs or natural resources (Marginson and Van der Wende 2007). The arrival of the knowledge economy, which in part, can be ascribed to the effects of globalisation and technological advances, has steered in wide-ranging discourses on the demand for higher levels of competencies not only at local but also at the regional and global scale. Knowledge economy thus implies the most effective use and exploitation of all types of knowledge for economic success with knowledge, skills and the innovative potential forming a key asset for competitive leverage in the emergent economic

structure.

A nation's capacity to operate globally and the raw potential it has to do so are key to its global position. In terms of higher education, central to the nation's potential to appear on the global map is

... the size and wealth of the economy; the systems, resources and techniques of government; cultures and languages; the skills and talents of people; and the inherited educational system itself and its academic cultures including the size and resources of the national system and of institutions, research capacity in the different fields of inquiry (Marginson and Van der Wende 2009, 29).

From the above, one is persuaded to infer that global university rankings have come to be a process of globalisation just like any other sector of the economy. Countries across the globe are confronted with increased demand to intensify their research capacities and knowledge production in line with the global demands in the competitive global scene. The new importance to national knowledge-oriented institutions has compelled urgent attempts to revamp systems and structures of higher education in general and universities in particular so that each country takes its place in the competitive and precarious knowledge-based economy. Such an economy is characterised by situating knowledge at the service of development, converting that knowledge into value through its application to society and sharing good practice in order that it is beneficial to the wider society. While it is true that the knowledge nexus forms the core and apex for driving sustainable social and economic development, the question of the '... great disparities in capacity and opportunity between countries and across income levels' (Olsson and Mkandawire 2009) remains to be addressed.

There is a muddled vocabulary about the growth of a knowledge economy coupled with the relentless forces of globalization and the demand for a responsive applied research in the university. While institutions of higher learning compete to be at the top and this obsession that has overwhelmed the minds of national leaders and financial stakeholders, there is an equally annihilating tendency to ignore the fact that university academics teach and research in convoluted and frequently contested epistemological spaces. Their means and ways of constructing, harnessing and applying different ways of knowing and approaches to knowledge are unique giving them absolute '*epistemic identities*' (Alcoff 2010). I argue that to place knowledge production and research on a uniform pedestal negates the underlying changes in the concept of 'knowledge' in recent times leading to '... deepening sense of crisis in the modern knowledge system' (Kothari 1987, 283) given that different attitudes and beliefs can create opposing truth claims within and between cultures. In the succeeding sections I will make strong cases that evince how economic globalization is converting knowledge into a commodity

and consequently into symbolic status and power resources with significant ramifications.

LEGITIMATION OF KNOWLEDGE HIERARCHIES IN THE GLOBALISING ECONOMY

The current economic situation relies heavily on knowledge production and access to high quality knowledge essentially determines a nation's ability to compete in the market economy as discussed above. Knowledge in this context implies the constructs, assumptions, and beliefs by which people understand and make meaning of their world. But what are hierarchies and what do they signify? This brings me to draw on Hans Weiler's assumption that

Hierarchies are the quintessential manifestation of power. They signify higher and lower ranks in a given order, domination and subordination, greater and lesser value, prestige and influence. Wherever they occur, they reflect structures of authority and power, and thus the essence of politics (Weiler 2011, 2).

Taking it from Weber (1947)'s concept of power as the ability of an actor to enforce his or her will regardless of resistance, its role in creating structures that legitimise processes of authority tends to advance the interests of the privileged elite. Just as Michael Foucault, in his exploration of power, demonstrated how power and knowledge are closely related wherein power has the ability to produce forms of knowledge that influence and shape social relations at any given time while, power elicits knowledge to arrogate and legitimize itself (see Foucault 1980). Taking into cognisance this dialectical relationship between knowledge and power, the domain of knowledge in the university is a function of the paramount importance of hierarchies in the existing knowledge order, the relationship of reciprocal legitimation between knowledge and power, the transnational division of labour in the contemporary knowledge order, and the political economy of the commercialization of knowledge (Weiler 2011, 2). The dynamics above can also be explained in the context of the centre-periphery construction whereby knowledges produced in African universities have perpetually maintained a peripheral position of the knowledge society despite Africa being an equally competent region of the world. Such a characterisation of African products and artefacts can best be described in the context of what (De Sousa Santos 2014) once referred to as the knowledge apartheid which excludes the former from the centred networked society. This is underscored by the assumption that '... the knowing subject in the disciplines is transparent, disincorporated from the known and untouched by the geo-political configuration of the world in which people are racially ranked and regions are racially configured' (Mignolo 2009, 1).

Drawing closer to the core of this discussion, and taking it to the macro politics of

knowledge, I project that rankings have become storehouses of ‘... prestige, depending on their position in the hierarchy created ... define who is hot and who is not, due to the emphasis on hierarchy and exclusivity’ (the haute couture) ... playing the role as the normative filter’ (Stensaker and Kehm 2009, xi) in the university field. In such a situation, the agents of power compete for resources and status creating a hierarchy and choosing for themselves position-taking strategies (see Bourdieu 1993). The disproportionate balance of global economic and political power tends to privilege the dominance in knowledge construction, and reproduction by universities in the North in the name of universality of knowledge characterised by western scientism and rationalism. This comes at the expense of ‘local’ (Southern) knowledge seated at the bottom of the table in the knowledge pyramid.

In the new neoliberal logic characterised by cost-effectiveness, competition and efficiency, ‘... questions of *difference* have been neatly conflated and diffused by a hypocrisy fuelled by racism, elitism and a tenacious disbelief in the equality of those who exist outside the narrow rationality of its profit logic’ (Darder 2012). In the same vein, the postmodern era has seen the emergence of a sharp change in the status of knowledge due to the rise of the performativity criterion, what (Lyotard 1984) refers to as the *mercantilization* of knowledge whereby knowledge has been converted to a saleable commodity in order to fuel a new production. With the activity of the free market, only knowledge that brings profit to the producer is most valuable thereby allocating an epistemic character that foregrounds the ‘commodification of knowledge’. This mania for global knowledge economy marks an era in which the university knowledge has been converted from being perceived as a public good to a private one. While competition has its merit in raising the quality of knowledge produced, if taken to academia, the marketisation and commodification of knowledge has come with costs of giving pressure to academics to take short-cuts, by targeting quantity over quality while producing knowledge in order to regenerate funding from donors and other stakeholder in the current atmosphere stressing the adage of ‘publish or perish’. But who determines whose knowledge is most worthwhile? In the sections that follow, I position the above debates in the context of African universities.

IN THE CONTEXT OF THE AFRICAN UNIVERSITY

African universities find themselves entrapped in crises as they are confronted with the challenges presented by the world university rankings. The critical question which they will continually fail to settle for a consensual answer is whether they should pursue global university rankings and world-class status (which they are least likely to achieve even in the long run) in order to be ‘an international university of choice, anchored in Africa’ (see University of

Johannesburg Vision and Mission Statement 2016) or to serve the African priorities and ameliorate the African problems and challenges in order to defensively bear the authentic name ‘African university’? The perching and pegging of California University of Technology, Stanford, Harvard (all from the United States of America) and Cambridge and Oxford (both British universities) at the peak of global university rankings is an indicator of how the practice of rankings legitimises the heirarchisation of some knowledge sources and forms over others and this depends on the economic history of the country hosting the university. A quick scan of global university rankings for the 2015–2016 period also shows only 5 African universities (all from South Africa) appearing in the top 500 of all global league tables. For instance, the ARWU (2015) rankings and THE (2015–2016) show how University of Cape Town, University of the Witwatersrand, Stellenbosch University and the University of Kwazulu Natal, in that order, are the only universities on the African continent that have fairly consistently maintained and survived in the top 500 in a couple of years. The fact that they are all located in South Africa, a country whose economy is one of the best on the continent, speaks volumes to the epistemological question (whose knowledge matters?) and goes to show the link between rankings, the state of economic growth and the legitimation of knowledge hierarchies. It can be argued that the predicament of knowledges originating in the African countries vis-a-vis those from their counterparts in Europe and North America is a product of the colonial history whose

... assumptions and preconceptions that Africa has little to offer beyond its status as the cradle of human kind, violence and conquest have been justified with benevolent discourses of the gift of civilisation and enlightenment to the reluctant darkness of a continent trapped in inertia and the emotive logic of ignorance (Nyamnjoh 2015, 2).

Rankings have been used as a rhetoric device to legitimise knowledge hierarchies and not as tools to improve systems’ and institutional performance. On this view, Marginson reaffirms that

... education as a performative market of competing universities-as-firms necessitates the plausible mapping of the higher education field in the form of a hierarchy of institutional performance, that can be represented as the outcome of market competition. ... The ideal model functions as a template against which institutions of higher education are measured and ranked (Marginson 2009).

This, in the eyes of Nyamnjoh, makes Africa a ‘victim of a resilient colonial and colonising epistemology, which takes the form of science as ideology and hegemony’ (Nyamnjoh 2002, 112) and is therefore ‘... a devaluation of African creativity, agency and value systems, and an internalised sense of inadequacy’ (Nyamnjoh 2013, 128).

Global university rankings are controlled and directed by the knowledge institutions and traditions of the West just as the powerful centre of benefactor and stakeholder agencies prevail over the international development order. The dominating epistemological ideals and exports from the west have been insensitive to and hence denied African academia the authority and effect to advance competing systems of knowledge that originate in Africa (Mudimbe 1988). Furthermore, the determinants of the most worthwhile knowledges and the positions they hold in the knowledge economic order are all under the control of the above powerful institutions who have continued to manage the impressions university knowledge leaders in Africa have about them, by so doing authenticating and legitimating the given knowledge hierarchies. This goes to respond to Ndlovu-Gatsheni's (2014, 181) question that 'Is it possible to use the same knowledge system that created global coloniality to create African futures?' Such a fundamental epistemological question does not often gain favour among university leaders as they dialogue on the future of universities on the African continent. The fact that most African university managers and curriculum leaders received their education from the top ranked global universities from the west or their own tuition and scholarship were funded by the same or donor agencies located in the privileged societies, they have turned a blind eye on the elevation of local knowledges and are astonishingly dispassionate about and unmindful of contesting the status quo of skewed knowledge hierarchies endorsed by global university rankings. In effect, as they assume the position of the powerless in global university rankings, contemporary African university managers endorse systems that are characteristically unequal and in doing so they proceed to legitimize the ranking of those institutions residing in pole positions of power including the knowledges they produce. In the process of doing so and

... in the name of introducing modern science, alternative knowledge and science found in Africa were destroyed and the social groups that relied on these systems to support their own autonomous path of development have been humiliated as epistemicides were being committed (De Sousa Santos 2008b, xviii)

But for how long should Africa continue to tolerate and accept the postcolonial elite who often justify the power of endurance of the unpleasant colonial epistemology and the education it encourages founded in the vocabulary of the need for competitiveness and position-taking on global rankings and world classness? As Nyamnjoh rightly affirms

Educated and steeped in the dualisms of colonial ways of knowing and producing knowledge, these elite tend to despise endogenous African ways of knowing and knowledge production. Ordinary Africans immersed in popular traditions of meaning making are denied the right to think and represent their realities in accordance with the civilisations and universes they know best. African elites schooled in western modernity are all too eager to label and dismiss (however

hypocritically) as traditional knowledge the creative imagination of what their western counterparts love to term ‘the African mind’ – instead of creating space for the fruit of that mind as a tradition of knowledge (Nyamnjoh 2015, 3).

One of the key drivers that have significantly contributed to the dismal failure by African universities to fare well on global university rankings is the use of English language as the medium of communication. Global university rankings criteria and indicators give preference to publishing in English journals thereby privileging the English language and those who research and publish in the language. To that end, ‘... it is English that stands at the very centre of the global knowledge system. It has become the *lingua franca par excellence* and continues to entrench that dominance in a self-reinforcing process’ (Held, McGrew and Goldblatt 1999, 346). Meanwhile, local researchers begin from a disadvantaged position as they struggle to make meaning of their research in English much to the profit of their counterparts in English speaking universities who already occupy pole positions as they enter the knowledge production competition.

Even as universities attempt to internationalise its student population, the general trend has been that student migration to English-speaking universities from non-English-speaking countries (and not the reverse) is on the increase as they all aspire to attain degrees awarded in the English language. Anecdotal evidence points to the fact that;

The universities that host the most international students and scholars and attract the largest numbers of postdoctoral students are likely to be the most visible to the most people, and these universities are largely in the English-speaking countries (Altbach 2012, 29).

Furthermore, even regionally, English-speaking universities in Africa are regarded with esteem and prestige and hence the knowledge they produce and disseminate is rated highly. It also stresses my point of the legitimization of knowledge hierarchies through global rankings. If the top universities are domiciled in English-speaking nations, recruiting and attracting the best students and faculty from all over the world to do research and publish in English, what stops the same universities from remaining at the highest echelons of global university league tables? Conversely, if the knowledges they produce (in English), is the determinant of quality knowledge, what stops one to conclude that global university rankings are a clear endorsement and legitimization of knowledge hierarchies that favour western-centric knowledges at the expense of the local African ones? What then are the possibilities for African universities which are entrapped in this malaise? For how long should African universities continue to chase the wild goose of position-taking on the global university table with its characteristic commercialisation of knowledges through annual rankings of academic institutions? I argue

that institutions of higher learning in Africa should revert to knowledges that identify their Africanness as will be discussed below.

IN SEARCH OF KNOWLEDGE IDENTITIES IN THE AFRICAN UNIVERSITY

As argued above, the World Bank and other regional development agencies liberally formed and nurtured, a global knowledge industry by way of imposing its knowledge products and legitimating knowledge structures and hierarchies prioritising the interests of universities housed in the already privileged societies domiciled in Western Europe and North America. But for how long should colonial modernity in the form of global knowledge rankings continue to successfully win in ‘... pushing African forms of knowledge into the barbaric margins’ (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013, 28) by denying them the agency to take responsibility over their own fortunes? Ranking knowledges via global university league tables has gone a long way in undermining knowledges from the South especially those from the poorest continent of Africa. This calls for the need for ‘decolonial epistemic perspective’ that will assist with ‘...unveiling epistemic silences, conspiracies, and epistemic violence hidden within Euro-American epistemology and to affirm the epistemic rights of the African people that enable them to transcend global imperial designs’ (Castells 1994, 114). I regard world university rankings as one of the indirect ways of epitomising western scientific epistemological identity; one that claims universality, neutrality, objectivity, disembodiment, as well as being the singular mode of knowing (Lyotard 1984). In this section I argue, in line with Castell’s call for opening up of plurality of epistemologies to enrich human experience from different vantage points (Castells 1994, 113).

Africa and Africans have a continental or regional identity although they still need to remain and maintain a cosmopolitan outlook. Development challenges that African societies experience originate in the specific national conditions, realities and priorities of the Africans. Equally, institutions such as universities (and the knowledges they produce and disseminate) are powerhouses of the development and advancement of the African people just as is the case elsewhere. This calls for university differentiated knowledge processes targeted to serve the interests of the societies in which those institutions are located. To that end, I challenge the placing of knowledges produced by universities on a league table as if there are universal and homogenous socioeconomic needs, missions, goals, capacities and capabilities across nations, regions and continents. Africans and the fruit of their creative imagination (the knowledges they produce) should adopt different forms and manifest themselves differently according to context and necessity (Nyamnjoh 2015) as a way of self-liberation and identification. We can, in the same vein, attribute global university rankings as a form of ‘academic capitalism in the

age of globalization' (De Sousa Santos 2014) which can be described as

The metaphor of academic capitalism *revealing* a power global trend *which* blinds us to the power of national traditions, agencies, and agents in shaping the work of higher education, as well as to the local agency exercised by students, faculty, non-faculty professionals, and administrators, pursuing prestige, knowledge, social critique, and social justice (De Sousa Santos 2008, 287) (*emphasis mine*)

This is despite the fact that local traditional African epistemologies are regarded with high esteem by ordinary Africans although the elite African leaders in the academy unsurprisingly or surprisingly continue to gaze and ape their western and westernised colleagues by pushing the knowledge institutions they lead to seek world classness and/or fight for a position on the world university ranking table. In the final analysis, African universities have lost their knowledge identity which they can claim to be authentically African. I agree with the view that, '... while competition has always been a force in academe and can help produce excellence, it can also contribute to a decline in a sense of academic community, mission and traditional values' (Altbach, Reisberg and Rumbley 2009, iv). Besides, setting a 'gold standard' by placing knowledge systems on a ranking scale only to selectively discriminate those originating from disadvantaged communities is to undermine the sources that engender them and a confirmed way of legitimating knowledge hierarchies.

One way of claiming an African identity in the epistemological realm in the university is to marry new partners in the global economy while distancing themselves from those with interests of maintaining the hegemonic tastes in the form of western superiority such as global university rankings. Countries in Africa and university institutions can learn good lessons of working together with strategic groups from the South for example Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS) and G22 that enabled them space within global governance to articulate common interests (Lopes 2010). Associating with such robust and articulate groups of the developing countries have of the potential of African university authorities the space and voice in global politics and economy (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013). Through the regional influence of conventional university activities and more effective commitment in the regional integration process, African universities have a promising and critical role to play in furthering the economic and social development of the region if they are to fulfil the mandate of the 1972 Accra Declaration which stated that '... all universities must be "development universities"' (see Yesufu 1973) emphasising and embracing the development role of higher education in the knowledge economy. Africa can benefit from universities as Castells' 'engines of development' if they take the cue that

In the current condition of the global knowledge economy, knowledge production and technological innovation become the most important productive forces. So, without at least some level of a national research system, which is composed of universities, the private sector, public research centres and external funding, no country, even the smallest country, can really participate in the global knowledge economy (Castells 2001, 14).

I however take the above further by noting that if national research systems are to remain relevant, their emphasis should attend to researching African challenges for example prioritising hunger, disease, ignorance, corruption and technological disadvantage. Knowledge emanating from such practices will make a vital cog in ameliorating the perpetual reference to *African crises as a world tragedy*. To invest in researching in nuclear physics and robotics in order to gain recognition on the global university ranking scale when people are dying en masse due to hunger and famine is an abdication of duty on the part of African universities and associated research centres and misdirection of scarce resources in an effort to remain and compete with the already advantaged knowledge systems.

The explosion of university regional groupings such as Southern African Regional Universities Association (SARUA) and the African Research Universities Association (ARUA) is testimony of the belief that wider and closer regional collaboration and integration in Africa are vital to enable universities to tackle their challenges including those of an epistemic nature. The formation of the BRICS Academic Forum, for example, can be an alternative that provides a platform for scholars within the grouping to share ideas and reflect on a variety of topics as determined by member states. Its aim is to generate and promote intra-BRICS knowledge and exchange in order to reduce dependency on the west as sources of knowledge on individual BRICS members. The establishment of parallel institutions such as these on the African continent constitutes an essential demystification of the unilateral hegemonic pretences of universality of the current global order and to usher in a new paradigm that ‘recognises the diversity of humanity and the potential contribution that each knowledge base can make to human development’ (BRICS 2014). The above are only a few suggested directions that African universities may take, though not exhaustive, towards epistemological self-liberation from the skewed hegemonic influence and deterministic tendencies of global university rankings as legitimisation of knowledge hierarchies. The above should however not alienate African universities whose primary business is the production of knowledge, from playing a key role in the global knowledge economy since they make an essential constituent for the acceleration of globalisation. Besides, African universities should equally be more cautious when they deal with Sinocentric economic powers since there is no guarantee that associations such as the BRICS grouping will ensure ‘... genuine decolonisation and deimperialisation’ (Ndlovu-

Gatsheni 2014, 181) of global knowledges to the extent of being responsive to the construction and appreciation of other alternative knowledge futures including the marginalised. But given all the above Africa and African universities remain entrapped in the boundaries of colonialism as they grapple perennially to respond to the intricacies of the question: 'How can Africans create African futures within a modern world system structured by global coloniality' (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2014, 181) (emphasis mine) as they endeavour to justify their authentic African identity?

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this article, I have posited global university rankings as a social construct manifesting and mirroring political interests and power. I discussed how globalisation is linked to the discriminatory disembedding of universities from their local social, economic and political contexts due to the intensification of worldwide flows of people, information and resources. The problems of aping and educational borrowing growing out of globalisation and the global forces for convergence to neo-liberal norms and competitiveness as enshrined in the global university rankings offer significant threats to values and cultural norms and the knowledges produced by the African people. I exposed and challenged global university rankings as momentous indicators of the power relations and competitions while playing homage to the legitimisation of knowledge hierarchies pegging western scientific knowledges at the helm while those from Africa and other developing countries in the South are considered either non-existent on league table or are anchored at the bottom, if they are fortunate to be acknowledged. It was shown how rankings lack openness in their methodology, their preference of English language as main, if not sole medium of instruction and their standardising power, are clear testimony of the numerous drawbacks and shortcomings which often far offset their prospective benefits.

My conclusion is that rankings will continue to legitimate knowledge hierarchies which are not in favour of knowledge systems originating from Africa. I aver that it is time African academic leaders start to move on and exit themselves from these skewed practices of knowledge production which derogate endogenous African ways of knowing and knowledge production. Time has come to take seriously their right to think and represent their experiences in harmony with the civilisations and universes they are most familiar with instead of being tactfully dragged to competitions they will never win. The article has shown evidence of how rankings are a clear demonstration of the hierarchisation of knowledge that endorses the African epistemological predicament characterised by a dominant Eurocentric agenda-setting. Without entirely ruling out the place of convergence through global university rankings the adage *Think*

global, act local sums up my thesis.

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