



# The Contribution of Southern Theory for Sustainable Development in Africa

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**Abstract:** For years, knowledges from non-western contexts have been under-represented in the both Western and non-Western contexts. This study argues that, for African region to achieve sustainable development, African indigenous values, customs and practices need to be considered/ privileged, and not to be marginalised. This reviewed study, therefore, uses Southern theory (Connell, 2007), to challenge Western ideologies that what counts as rational knowledge comes from the West. Southern theory, therefore, challenges this dominant discourse, this Eurocentric belief that African societies are backwards and incapable, and paves the way for the possibility for change in finding and using knowledge from an African perspective. The application of Southern theory therefore makes it possible for knowledge originating from non-Western contexts to be recognised and legitimated. On the other hand, Southern theory is employed to suggest ways of making knowledge from Western contexts more responsive to Southern contexts. In other words, it suggests the deconstructions of Western knowledge to fit into non-Western contexts, such as Tanzania. Drawing in some postcolonial ideas, the study suggests that it is high time for people in Africa to embrace African ways of thinking, their ways of living, and their languages to ensure sustainable development in Africa.

**Keywords:** Southern Theory, Southern contexts, Colonialism, Sustainable Development, Africa

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## 1. Introduction

For years, knowledges from non-western contexts have been under-represented in the both Western and non-Western contexts. Western ideologies believe that what counts as rational knowledge comes from the West. Chakrabarty (2007) says, the knowledge from the West is assumed to be rational and universal. This implies that Western countries appeared to privilege their knowledge on the one hand, and marginalising the knowledge from non-Western countries on the other. However, this assumption may be challenged on the grounds that this universal application is not possible because of differences in culture. Martin (2000) used the term “difference” to critique the universalised presumptions of the Western philosophical tradition. Martin critiques the assimilation ways as a paradigm for relation to the

other—cultural or ethnic “other” (p. 83). According to Martin, differences in cultures should be acknowledged, and not ridiculed. Therefore, this study suggests that it is high time for the people in the Southern contexts to stand out for their knowledges, languages and cultures to ensure their sustainable development.

According to Ashcroft et al. (1989), contemporary forces such as globalisation are evidence of the continuing control of the “West” over the “Rest” (p. 194). Since most textbooks come from the West as a result of globalisation, this means the West controls the Rest through knowledge found in those textbooks and other teaching and learning materials. This study, therefore, challenges the Western domination of knowledge globally. It problematises how the dominant Anglo-American ideologies/theories are discursively reproduced and turned into legitimate knowledge in

both Western and non-Western contexts, and it looks for possibilities for change such as appropriating knowledge from the West in Southern contexts (Connell, 2007).

In a similar vein, Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) describes how Western knowledge has become accepted as universal truths and legitimate knowledge. According to Said (1978), Orientalism is the negative representation of Eastern cultures, and all non-European cultures, by Western culture. Orientalism is regarded as "a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (p.3). Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (1995) added that the values, cultures, and traditions of the orient were misrepresented by the West. Said used two binary opposites—the Occident (to represent the West), and the Orient (to represent the Middle East). Said argues that "Orientals were regarded as backward, degenerate, uncivilized, the poor; Orientals were rarely seen or looked at, they were seen through, analysed not as citizens, or even people, but as problems to be solved or confined" (Said, 1978, p. 207). The Occident regarded the Orient as passive and inferior, so justifying Western cultures' use of power to dominate and control knowledge about the Orient. This shows how Orientals were represented in negative ways by the West. By using Southern theory, this study, therefore, challenges this Eurocentric belief that African societies are backwards and incapable, and paves the way for the possibility for change in finding and using knowledge from an African perspective. In that way, the knowledge from the non-Western contexts, particularly in the African region will be legitimated and therefore, paves way for sustainable development in the region.

The United Nations, on the other hand, highlights 17 sustainable development goals to be attained by 2030. Goal number 4 says '*to provide equitable and inclusive quality education and life-long learning opportunities for all*'. This could mean that in order to achieve sustainable development in the Southern contexts, particularly in the African region, it needs sustainable education, values, skills and attitudes that can accommodate people in the Southern contexts. This could be argued that, importing directly Western models of education to non-western contexts will not enable non-western contexts to achieve sustainable development, and therefore, decision makers in such contexts need to engage more critically with imported models, to contextualise and make them characteristically their own. As the argument of this study stands, western knowledge could be relevant if the people in the Southern contexts could contextualise it and make it relevant to their own contexts. However, drawing upon Canagarajah's (2002) concept of localisation, knowledge from the West could be localised in non-Western contexts and be meaningful to people in these contexts, for their sustainable development.

The study at hand argues that, colonisers made the people in the Southern contexts, particularly in the African region think their languages, cultures and knowledge are primitive, while those of the colonisers are legitimate (Wa Thiong'o, 1986). Therefore, drawing in some postcolonial ideas, the study suggests that it is high time for people in Africa to embrace African ways of thinking, their ways of living, their languages and culture in order to ensure sustainable development in Africa. The literature review section that follows discusses more on the impact of colonialism in Africa and why it is high time for Africans to unite and thrive for their sustainable development.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 The effects of colonialism to the people in the Southern contexts**

Colonialism in African region and other non-western contexts has brought negative effects in these countries. For instance, during colonialism in African countries, the dominant imperial language and culture were privileged over the people's traditions. People in such contexts were made to feel inferior and backwards. In his work—*Black Skin, White Masks* (1967) — Fanon describes how colonisation led to a condition of an inferiority complex on the part of the black man. According to Fanon, the black man saw himself as inferior because he looked at himself through the white man's eyes. Explaining this inferiority complex of the black people, Nayar (2010) notes that "the white man has constantly portrayed the black as less-than human, an 'object' without a soul, an animal and years of such indoctrination have made the black man believe this to be true" (p. 8). Nayar adds that "as a result of colonisation, the white man becomes the epitome of perfection and the black man seeks to emulate him—'a white mask' over his 'black skin' (p. 9). Fanon argues that colonialism made Africans lose their sense of identity by forcing them to adopt the language and culture of the colonisers. He argues that the colonisers' language, culture, customs, and beliefs were considered as universal and superior while those of the Africans' were inferior and local. Fanon stressed the idea of claiming back the history of the colonised by the colonised from the negative notions produced by the colonisers.

Moreover, Smith (1999) challenges traditional Western ways of knowing and researching. In her book '*Decolonizing Methodologies*', Smith argues that Western researchers have denied the indigenous people's ways of thinking, their ways of living, and their languages. She calls for indigenous values, customs and practices to be considered/ privileged in research, and not to be marginalised. In the same vein, Manathunga (2015) challenges the notion of perceiving Northern knowledge and research and publication practices as

universal. She insists on the need for recognising the cultural knowledge brought by students. She adds that “if we are to wrestle effectively with the serious global problems facing our world, then we need to draw together the vast array of knowledge systems that all of our cultures have produced” (p.19). According to her, recognising students’ cultural knowledge is important, and that students should not abandon and discount their cultural knowledge in favour of Northern knowledge and research practices. This study argues that to achieve meaningful sustainable development in the African region, Africans need first to embrace African ways of thinking, learning, languages and cultures because these represent their identity. Also, they need to use knowledge from other countries on how they do their things, and appropriate such knowledge in order to fit in their own African contexts.

According to Fabian (1986), “the other is never simply given, never just found or encountered, but made” (p. 208). Thus, the notion of Western knowledge as appropriate and rational and non-Western knowledge as inappropriate and irrational is a discursive construction based on colonial thinking (Martin & Agneta, 2007).

Colonisation involved the export of Western knowledge, technologies and cultural beliefs to the world (Manathunga, 2015). For instance, during colonialism in Tanzania (Tanganyika by then), during the British colonial period (1918-1961), English, the language of the colonialists, was the official language in Tanganyika. It was the medium of instruction (the MOI) after primary education. Qorro (2013) notes that, “the English language was introduced in Tanzania by the British during the colonial administration and was made the main prerequisite for the acquisition of formal education at the post-primary education level and for employment in white collar jobs” (p. 31). Qorro’s assertion is supported by Swilla (2009), who argues that during British colonial rule, a small number of African people were trained purposely to serve in the colonial administration. During this period, the English language was given high status, and very few spoke English because few went to secondary school (Rubagumya, 1991). African languages were not permitted in schools during colonial period because they were regarded as primitive. This implies that, colonisers legitimated their own language and culture, at the expense of Tanzanians’ languages and cultures. This suggests that colonial education was designed for the interests and survival of the colonial administration, and not necessarily for the benefit of the Tanzanians.

After independence, Tanzania inherited the colonial education system, maintaining English as the MOI for post-primary education levels (Swilla 2009). This perpetuated the colonial legacy (Bwenge, 2012). Studies conducted in Tanzania show that the shift of the MOI from Kiswahili to English in secondary education has brought a lot of confusion to students and acts as a

barrier to learning because the language is not familiar to them (Brock-Utne 2002, 2006; Qorro, 2006; Senkoro, 2005). These students, according to Qorro (2013), “face serious difficulties using English knowledge in all subjects. Since students’ languages and cultures are not included in learning, it is clear that students are disconnected from their home languages and cultures.

This Eurocentric discourse of seeing English is the legitimate language that can be used to produce and transfer knowledge around the globe is still working to date. According to Connell (2017), Eurocentric curriculum prevails in different universities around the globe. Connell argues that, English has become the language of instruction in elite universities, and the global North countries, such as the USA and Europe have become the centres for world’s resources for research. Connell’s arguments support the ideas of Ashcroft and colleagues (1989) that, globalisation forces made possible for the knowledge from the North/West to continue dominating to the rest of the world. However, this study challenges this Eurocentric belief that what counts as knowledge comes from the North. It argues that for African region to really achieve sustainable development, then Africans should use their local languages and diverse knowledge systems (i.e., indigenous knowledges and cultures) to provide solutions to their problems. One example is how Tanzanians handled COVID-19 pandemic. Kiswahili was used to provide knowledge to Tanzanians on how to protect themselves from contacting COVID -19. Moreover, majority Tanzanians used traditional herbs and steaming to protect themselves from COVID-19, and there is evidence that, the knowledge they used worked really well, as most Tanzanians survived the pandemic.

This study, among other things, argues that it is high time for Africans, in particular Tanzanians, to restore what was lost during colonialism, including their languages and cultures. May (2005) argues that maintaining students’ languages and cultures in their education is important because it allows them to learn successfully. This in turn will ensure sustainable development in the Southern contexts because students will learn meaningfully by using approaches and models that are familiar to them. This is about legitimising and valuing Southern knowledge, using local-cultural knowledge (Connell, 2007) and making it explicit and appropriate for the people in that particular context.

This study, therefore, argues that, for the people in the African region and other Southern contexts to achieve sustainable development, knowledge from the West need to be contextualised and appropriated to non-western contexts (Caragarajah, 2002), in order to allow people from non-western contexts such as Tanzania to learn effectively to ensure their sustainable development. Southern theory (Connell, 2007) is therefore adopted in this study to challenge this colonial

thinking and Western ideologies that, what counts as rational knowledge comes from the West. On the other hand, this study stresses that, challenging the Western knowledge does not imply that people from non-Western contexts cannot learn from the Western contexts. It argues that, rather than seeing knowledge from the West as ‘a continual dominance’ of Western power in non-Western countries, Africans could benefit by appropriating Western knowledge into their own contexts by explaining it to local contexts and using approaches that fit in African contexts as Canagarajah (2002) has suggested. The next section explores Southern theory and how it fits in the study at hand.

## **2.2 Theoretical framework**

This study is underpinned by Southern theory (Connell, 2007) as a theoretical framework to suggest that people in the Southern contexts such as Tanzania can learn more by using approaches and models from Southern contexts. Southern theory is employed to explore how the knowledge from the Western contexts could be useful to the people in Southern contexts, and to suggest ways of making it more responsive to Southern contexts. Southern theory in this study implies all knowledges, approaches and ideas from non-Western contexts, particularly, from African region. Moreover, Southern contexts in this study are used to represent all non-western contexts.

### **2.2.1 Understanding Southern theory in the context of this study**

Southern theory proposes that for people in Southern contexts to understand and use theories and knowledge from the West, it is important for such theories or knowledge to be explained in familiar terms used by people in that specific community (Canagarajah, 2002). Therefore, in this study, Southern theory proposes to contextualise the concepts or ideas brought from Western contexts so that they can be understood and become useful in Southern contexts. In other words, people in the Southern contexts can benefit from the knowledge from the West by contextualising it and make it their own.

Furthermore, Southern theory makes it possible for knowledge originating from non-Western contexts to be recognised and legitimated. For example, a study by Singh and Huang (2012) reported some prejudice and stereotypes misrepresenting non-Western intellectual cultures, observing that knowledge produced by students from non-Western countries was seen by Western intellectuals as limited. In particular, the authors challenged widespread stereotypes of non-Western students being passive and uncritical, arguing that students from non-Western countries are capable of critical theorising using metaphors, concepts, and images from their own linguistic backgrounds.

In a similar vein, Akiwowo’s (1986) work, “Contributions to the Sociology of Knowledge from an African Oral Poetry” proposes to draw theories from a Southern/African context and make the knowledge known to the rest of the world. His proposal suggests that people in the Western world can learn from concepts originating in the non-Western world, such as Africa. His concept of “indigenous sociology” made a significant contribution to the scholarship of Sociology globally by including theories of Sociology originating from Africa. Instead of importing concepts from Europe and North America and applying them to local data, Akiwowo proposed to find data in Nigeria and export them to the rest of the world. In the context of this study, Southern theory, therefore, challenges this dominant discourse, this Eurocentric belief that African societies are backwards and incapable, and paves the way for the possibility for change in using knowledge from an African perspective.

However, Connell (2007) argues that for concepts and theories to be understood and reach the rest of the world, they need to be explained clearly for people from other cultures to understand. Connell suggests that the background knowledge of the concepts or theories is important for other people of different cultures to be able to use such concepts in their own contexts. This helps people avoid wrong interpretations or misunderstanding because of lack of background knowledge. In his work, although Akiwowo used Yoruba’s terms to explain critical contemporary problems in Nigeria, his work could be useful in the global context/discourse, from which other African countries, and countries around the world, could learn. Southern theory therefore proposes that, theories or concepts should be explained by using the local knowledge of the specific society for a better understanding. The diversity of cultures means that some knowledge/concepts cannot be understood by a specific group, for instance, although Africans have a shared culture, there are some concepts that might not be familiar in a specific cultural group.

From the explanations above, it could be argued that, Southern theory is useful to understanding Africa’s sustainable development because it acknowledges local knowledge. What is needed is a critical approach that allows local knowledges “to be seen in relation to other knowledges, criticised and reappropriated in forms relevant to the development of African societies” (Connell, 2007, p. 103). Therefore, the use of Southern theory in this study addresses the gap created by the lack of Southern theories in the issue of sustainable development in African region. This study argues that, African region need to rethink before using development models from the West because they may not be compatible to Africa because of the differences in contexts and cultures (Martin, 2000).

According to Connell (2007), Western knowledge appears to be the only type of knowledge that is seen as legitimate, while Southern knowledge is ignored. Connell argues that it is time to legitimate and disseminate Southern knowledge, and provides the example of Nigerian sociologist Akiwowo whose work, "Contributions to the Sociology of Knowledge from an African Oral Poetry" (1986), appears to challenge the knowledge from Europe and North America. He proposed "to find concepts in Nigeria and export them to the rest of the world" (p. 90). This suggests that Akiwowo thought knowledge from Southern contexts, such as Nigeria, could also be useful to the rest of the world and, therefore, he resisted the notion that all legitimate knowledge comes from the West.

Drawing from Akiwowo's comment above, this study argues that to allow knowledge from Southern contexts to be known to the rest of the world, the concepts should be made available by making the interpretations clear to allow other people from other languages and cultures to use them in their own contexts. Connell (2007) also argued that it is high time for Southern contexts to examine forms of power from Western knowledge, because not all knowledge from the West is applicable to non-Western contexts. This supports this study's argument made above: the knowledge which is Western-based, cannot fit easily in other contexts, particularly in non-Western contexts. This implies that it may not be possible to apply the same pedagogies suggested for the Western contexts and apply them directly to non-Western contexts.

### 3. Discussion

This section presents and discusses some key issues that may ensure sustainable development in Southern contexts, particularly in the African region. It starts by highlighting about restoring what was lost during colonialism, and it further discusses how people in Southern contexts can appropriate knowledge from the West to fit into their own contexts, in order to ensure sustainable development in these contexts.

#### 3.1 Claiming back what was lost during colonialism

During colonialism in Tanzania as discussed elsewhere in this paper, English was privileged and was constituted by the colonialists as the language of opportunities and white collar jobs (Swilla, 2009), while local languages, such as Kiswahili, were undermined. East (2008) highlights the importance of first language arguing that it "defines who we are in relation to others" (p. 156). It could be argued that when students' first languages and cultures are marginalised in schools, it creates a sense of alienation from their own languages and cultures (Brock-Utne, 2006, 2012; Qorro, 2013), and that their

"identity positions" (Norton & Toohey, 2011) seem to be dislocated/misplaced. In that way, students may not learn for understanding and use the knowledge they get at school for their sustainable development because studies suggest that students understand and learn more when they are taught by the language which is familiar to them (May, 2005; Sleeter, 2010).

Today, most African writers stress the need to regain precolonial languages and cultures (Fanon, 1967; wa Thiong'o, 1986). Fanon, who was a psychiatrist, had several opportunities to observe the psychological effects of colonial domination towards the Black people. His work seemed to locate African mental illness within the exploitative and cruel conditions of colonial domination. In terms of culture, the black Africans have appeared to extend this notion of inferiority complex and to believe that the only values that matter are those of the white man. Nayar (2010) explains:

The native take on the western values, religion, the language and practices of the white colonial and rejects his own traditions. But at the same time his own traditions and customs continue to exert a powerful pull on the black man. The result is a schizophrenic condition, torn between the white man's culture that he seeks to appropriate and his own culture that is reluctant to let go. The neurosis and psychological crises experienced by the black man were, therefore, less a pure mental condition than the effect of the social and economic realities of colonialism. (p. 9)

Fanon's metaphor of black skin/white masks symbolises that even after colonialism, the colonial subjects remained colonised internally, and therefore he argues for the colonised to claim back their history. The explanations above seem to suggest that Black Africans need to liberate their minds by 'claiming back' their traditions and cultures which were lost during colonialism. This reviewed study suggests that it is high time for the people in the African region to embrace their values, cultures, their ways of thinking and learning by using their local languages in order to ensure their sustainable development.

The idea of claiming back what was lost during colonialism is supported by wa Thiong'o who encourages African writers to write African literature in African languages, and not in English. In his work, "Decolonizing the Mind", wa Thiong'o (1986) urged the African writers to leave the European values and beliefs including their language. He believed that to continue using English when writing African literature is to perpetuate colonialism. In postcolonial theory, such action is a form of resistance against colonial domination. wa Thiong'o decided to write in Gikuyu rather than English because he wanted to address the audience (Africans), and not the outsiders. He wanted Africans to gain "full independence", including the

recovery of using their own local languages and cultures. wa Thiong'o's concept of "Decolonizing the Mind" suggests opposing all forms of power of the colonial system and aims to equip Kenyans and other Africans to use their own languages for learning at school and to restore their identity, which was lost during colonialism. Wa Thiong'o's concept of Decolonizing the Mind supports the idea of "claiming back" African identity proposed by postcolonial theorist, Fanon.

Drawing upon Fanon's (1967) and wa Thiong'o's 1986 works, this study challenges people in mainstream cultures, particularly the US and the UK, who see their own knowledge, language and culture as the centre of the world. It could be argued that these Western countries assume that Southern countries such as Tanzania are incapable of finding their own ways of learning. Kim and Hubbard (2007) suggest that ethnocentrism leads to misunderstanding of others because people tend to see the "other" as deficit rather than different. This study suggests that people should view differences in cultures as a resource, rather than a deficit. In this way, people will be able to learn from each other (Manathunga, 2011). In her recent work on intercultural supervision (Manathunga, 2015), she insists on the need of supervisors to understand better their students' geographies, histories, knowledges and cultures. According to her, students' geographies shape their thinking, and therefore, it is necessary for supervisors to know their students' geographies and cultures. This implies that supervisors need to regard students' prior professional and cultural knowledges in order to prepare them for a future as intercultural citizens and workers. The next section discusses how Southern contexts can localise knowledge from the West to fit in their own contexts.

### **3.2 Localising Western knowledge to non-Western contexts**

According to Canagarajah (2002), any knowledge is context bound and community specific, because it is generated through social practices in the everyday life of that specific community. This implies that people in non-Western countries can interpret Western knowledge to fit into their own contexts by thinking about the alternatives based on their own perspectives which are relevant to their interests. Canagarajah asserts that this practice of localised knowledge construction involves "deconstructing dominant or established knowledge to understand its local shaping" (p. 252). He adds that by "appreciating the rationale and validity of dominant constructs in their contexts of origins, we are able to translate the futures that are useful for other localities with greater insight" (p. 252).

Moreover, Canagarajah suggests that non-Western contexts can negotiate knowledge from Western contexts and appropriate it to their own contexts in order

to meet their contemporary needs. However, Canagarajah says that "we should not underestimate local knowledge to be relevant only for local needs" (p. 252). This suggests that non-Western contexts could contribute their local knowledge to global communities. For instance, Ntuli's (2012) study in South Africa describes how differences in culture might lead to misunderstandings and misconceptions among the interlocutors. Ntuli provided examples of how African ways of communicating and interacting across age groups are observed. Such knowledge from African contexts could be extended to global contexts for people to learn in order to avoid miscommunications or misunderstandings when people of other cultures interact and communicate with Africans. This study also invites educators from Western contexts to learn and use theories from non-Western contexts. For instance, Takayama et al. (2016) argue that some Western education thinkers such as John Dewey have learned from non-Western philosophies and pedagogic traditions. The exposure they got from working in non-Western contexts, such as China, has shaped their thinking. From the explanations above, the study suggests that people in Southern contexts need to deliberate their thinking, that, the West is not the only source of knowledge, rather, knowledge can also originate from non-Western contexts, and the people in the Western contexts can learn great ideas from the people in Southern contexts.

## **4. Conclusion and Recommendations**

### **4.1 Conclusion**

This study has shown how for years the knowledge from the West has been prioritised and legitimated as the universal truth while marginalising other knowledges originated from non-Western contexts. On the other hand, the study has discussed how people in the Southern contexts can localise and appropriate the knowledge from the West in order to fit in their non-Western contexts for their sustainable development. That, although knowledge from the West may not be appropriate and fit in non-Western contexts, however, people in the Southern contexts can make it possible by critically analysed it and appropriated it in their own contexts.

The study therefore, concludes that, continuing using knowledge from the West does not mean that people in non-Western contexts are backwards, incapable, primitive or inferior, as some scholars such as wa Thiong'o (1986) and Fanon (1967) have suggested. Rather, such knowledge could benefit people in the Southern contexts only if the knowledge could be contextualised and appropriated for the benefit of the people in the Southern contexts, for their sustainable development. In other words, knowledge from the West

could be explained in local ways to allow people in the Southern contexts to understand and use it for their own benefit. In that way, sustainable development in the Southern contexts could be ensured.

## 4.2 Recommendations

This study recommends that, in order to have a sustainable development in the African region, and in Tanzania, education provided should allow students' background knowledge, languages and cultures to be included in learning. In other words, students' background knowledge, languages and cultures should be regarded as resources in learning, and not as barriers/problems. This implies that knowledge and skills provided should empower students (Sleeter, 2010) to

allow them make proper decisions for their sustainable development.

It also recommends that for Africa to achieve sustainable development, the ministries of education and their departments, and educational stakeholders in the African region must consider the development trends in the African region when designing educational policies to allow students learn for understanding and be able to use the knowledge for their sustainable development.

Moreover, the study recommends that Africans should be empowered to use their local knowledge and also to deconstruct the knowledge from the West and use it for their sustainable development.

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