Cape Town: Juta. 217 + v pp.

Glancing at the cover of the book immediately opens up a window for questioning the title African voices in education. It implies that there are many voices, and if so, it gets one thinking: Why do the editors refer us to African ones? We quickly see some of the reasons as we read through this most compelling and fascinating collection of “voices” that would otherwise have been muted if not for the contribution of this book. That this book comprises a collection of essays framed in a deconstructive narrative is beyond questioning. This review traces the deconstructive journey of twelve authors as they set out to look beyond the margins of Eurocentricism and other hegemonic voices of Western thought and education.

Odera Hoppers’ contribution “African voices in education: retrieving the past, engaging the present and shaping the future” fittingly succeeds the Preface since it articulates “African voices in education” as those “voices” that witnessed the pain and inhumanity of colonialism, “voices” which have been subjected to the imposed violence of dominance of Western thought. She convincingly argues that through deconstruction and reconstruction the marginalized and silenced majority of post colonial Africa would be able to challenge not only the Eurocentric perspective of education but also an African philosophy constituted by ethical and humanistic principles of self reliance. In her words, “African voices in education would have as its objective the goal of transcending the present eschewed and partially constituted educational thinking and practice which thrives on the hope that African cosmology and indigenous systems have been successfully decimated and do not deserve a place in the universal heritage of societies” (p 6). Her flirtation with deconstructive scrutiny in a Derridian sense is quite tangible as she makes a convincing case for the marginalised and silenced majority of post colonial Africa whom she believes are able to dispel the self doubts and self loathing inflicted upon them and face the future with a democratic and integrated education system.

I read this stimulating book very much through a deconstructive lens with the aim to search for textual meanings which celebrate plurality and repudiate universal truth claims. My own reflexive venture into the content identified four distinct themes which I think offer more choice, freedom and possibilities for an emancipatory view of knowing: education, re search and knowledge production, philosophy and rethinking, and transformation.

Matos’ “The nature of learning, teaching and research in higher education in Africa” traces the roots of higher education to Africa, two or three centuries BC and AD One which led the way for scientific scholarship. She argues that during the period of colonialism, the mission of the early universities in Africa was to train personnel to fill European positions and serve the colonial system. Matos comprehensively explores difficulties, problems and shortcomings of not having some common international education policy which addresses education in a holistic way vis à vis access, equity, relevance and quality. She suggests strategies for revitalising higher education in Africa, ending with a “charter” for international cooperation.

Hountonji’s “Manufacturing unemployment: The crisis of education in Africa”, argues that the legacy Africa inherited from colonial higher education is a university education policy which does not meet the requirements of the new post independence job market, as well as a scholarship tradition whereby students perceive it as their right to receive scholar ships from the state. The result is that graduates are unemployed and student strikes and riots are the order of the day. Research and formal education were designed to facilitate colonial exploitation, and research tools were, and still are, imported. Hountonji suggests that educationists to work on three factors: (i) re evaluate the dependence on research tools and materials from the North; (ii) promote African languages as a means for scientific expression and communication; and (iii) make use of the technology of information and communication, ie the Internet, as a tool to facilitate documentation.

Vilakazi’s “The problem of education in Africa” attributes the crisis that prevails in Africa, to the debilitating effects of the African slave trade, European colonialism and the domination of Africa by the whites. With the exploitation, dehumanisation and brutalisation of the African, came a deep decline in the moral, mental and spiritual health of the general capitalist civilization. The social character of people changed. He argues that research has shown that scientific knowledge originated in Africa and posits romantically that the “African Renaissance” would culminate in the rise of all humankind. Similar to Matos and Hountonji who both make a case for the re emergence of (higher) education in Africa, Vilakazi suggests that those in the policy making posts should re educate themselves in the principles and patterns of African civilization with universities becoming the guiding light of society.
II

Nkomo’s “Educational research in the African development context: rediscovery, reconstruction and prospects” argues that education research can play a crucial role in the project of effectively repositioning Africa in world affairs. According to him, the sense of inferiority and inadequacy instilled in the African by the colonials can be displaced by rediscovering and reconstructing themselves through a democratic development education research programme which can result in replacing Eurocentric sentiments with a sense of self worth. He contends that schools, tertiary institutions and the private sector should commit themselves to initiating this process of development and construction. In the main, Africans should rediscover their traditions, culture and language, i.e “for merely silenced indigenous knowledge systems should be brought back to life”. Next, he posits that in order to compete in the global arena, Africa must first produce first class researchers. The South African Development Committee (SADC) member states should create an environment that will foster greater horizontal and intersectional research collaboration among African organisations.

Diop in “African education: mirror of humanity” argues African societies have had political systems which have imposed upon them a type of economy as well as education which served the interests of foreign minority groups. He suggests an educational agenda for Africa which can serve to unify ethnic groups, act as a springboard for developing peace, and to a lesser extent, for resolving conflicts. According to him, Africans should “do all they can to avoid being transformed into an institutional static power, whose sole preoccupation is to maintain itself”.

Teffo’s “Africanist thinking: an invitation to authenticity” urges “the African” to rediscover African philosophy, culture, and to re-establish and re-internalise concepts of Africanisation, Afrocentrism, as well as African renaissance. This reclaiming of African heritage is vital for African authenticity. For him, Africanisation involves the affirmation of African culture and identity in a world community, and a conscious and deliberate assertion of the “right to be African”.

Afrocentrism, he states, is a mental attitude, a perception of reality peculiarly African, always placing the African experience at the centre of thinking, discourse and action. For the African to become authentic, he or she has to assert him or herself as an individual, to believe in him or herself and not to depend on the reassurance from others by doing what everybody else is doing. Rather, engaging or committing oneself, he/she affirms his/her freedom.

Seepe brilliantly exposes Eurocentric myths about Africa’s non contribution to world mathematics by quoting from various research papers about the origin of mathematics, medicine and agricultural science in his “Africanisation of knowledge: exploring mathematical and scientific knowledge embedded in African cultural practices”. He refers to Emeagwali’s research which addresses Western civilization’s deliberate and selective omission of Africa’s contribution to science and mathematics. His contribution in this volume, particularly exploring textile technology in Nigeria, and metallurgy in West Africa, comes the closest to drawing on deconstructive scrutiny. He states that in 1978, American scientists uncovered an astronomical observatory in Kenya, dated 300 BC which obviously means that they had a mathematical system for the most precise record keeping, measuring complex distances and times, and calculating orbits, azimuths and convergences. Seepe links the inability of Africans to progress in teaching science and technology, to its continuous reliance on colonial educational tenets. In his view, it continues to be based on “the authority of the text, the teacher and the memory of pupils”. He suggests teachers begin with what pupils accumulated in their cultural surroundings, and use indigenous mathematical/scientific knowledge systems and familiar terrain as a point of departure.

III

In her contribution “African/indigenous philosophies: legitimising spiritually centred wisdoms within the academy” Goduka argues that the post colonial apartheid era in South Africa experiences a wave of educational revolution which challenges higher education to reconstruct its institutions. Perhaps a weakness in her contribution is the fact that she ignores an important philosophical constraint: reconstructing institutions does not occur independently from the concepts which guide them. She seeks to legitimise African/indigenous philosophies and spiritual wisdoms. According to her, Africa has been socialised through colonial/Christian national education which has denigrated its culture, history, and language to levels of barbarism, superstition and “no value”. Although she argues that one of the facets of African philosophy is to take personal responsibility for one’s inner self before one can make meaningful contributions to others, she accentuates the importance of interconnectedness and interdependence to happen among people (Ubuntu).

Lumumba Kasongo’s “Rethinking educational paradigms in Africa: imperatives for social progress in the new millennium” argues that despite the many graduates in many disciplines, Africa is still not showing social progress. He contends that either the whole educational system is irrelevant or teachers are not teaching and “transmitting” knowledge the way
they ought to. He argues that the colonial education system, with its exploitation, subjugation and dehumanising objectives, can never be regarded as a relevant system of education. Rather, its mandate is to disconnect Africa from its traditional culture, and to propagate that African metaphysics is associated with paganism and barbarism. He holds that technical and scientific knowledge should be indigenously generated, that is, Africa should democratically develop an indigenous educational paradigm with a pan African or regional content.

Letseka’s “African philosophy and educational discourse” contends an African philosophy of education should become the major concern of educationists. African philosophy revolves around botho or ubuntu, that is, humanness and altruism. She argues that Africans should be socialised with values and virtues such as kindness, generosity, compassion and concern for others in order to secure togetherness: the aim of an African philosophy of education is to promote botho or ubuntu.

IV

Finally, the process of deconstructive scrutiny throughout this book would be incomplete without the beautifully written contribution of Kunnie. In “Indigenous African philosophies and socioeducational transformation in ‘Post Apartheid’ Azania” he argues for the de-Westernisation and de-Europeanisation of the Western educated indigenous community, through a process of rediscovering African indigenous traditions and culture. After taking us through the advantages of the African tradition and culture, and discussing the exploitive and dehumanising nature of the colonial education system, he concisely, yet comprehensively, offers praxiological steps towards attaining such a transformation.

This book merits deserved attention from any potential scholar serious about exploring possibilities for indigenous research in African educational studies.

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