

Pondering over the Public Administration Discipline: A Move towards African Epistemology

NE Mathebula¹

Abstract: *It would prove very challenging to meaningfully study Africa, let alone African Public Administration with science based on epistemologies of non-African societies. By this, it is suggested that African scholars have a duty of knowledge generation on Africa using research procedures, methodologies and theories founded on African epistemology. In a similar vein, the relationship between politics and public administration cannot simply be ignored for its long uncertain discourse as it bears repercussions of disciplinary identity particularly in an African context. The question that prominent scholars have attempted to resolve is whether Africa has its own epistemology, let alone African Public Administration? It is for this position that this article attempts to interrogate the state of the Public Administration discipline in Africa and thereby clearing the epistemological confusion. This is the confusion that has resulted in the discipline being viewed sometimes as an art while others argue it is a science. Despite all this, this paper seeks to propagate in an Afrocentric perspective for African epistemology in the field of Public Administration particularly the development of theories and conceptualisations from an African perspective grounded in African knowledge and minds. This paper is purely theoretical and collects literature from secondary sources. It is therefore concluded that Public Administration curricular must be solely based on African epistemology and Indigenous Knowledge Systems.*

Keywords: epistemology, public administration, Afrocentric, indigenous knowledge system, pedagogies, Africa

Introduction

It would prove very challenging to meaningfully study Africa, let alone African Public Administration with science based on epistemologies of non-African societies (Narh, 2013: 2). By this Narh suggests that African scholars have a duty of knowledge generation on Africa using research procedures, methodologies and theories founded on African epistemology. This is necessary because if African scholars fail to act in that regard according to Maserumule (2014: 439), Africa runs the danger of being defined by the West in its absence. However, there are several factors inhibiting the creation of an African knowledge hub. Instead of collaboration amongst African minds for African knowledge generation, scholars compete against each other thus weakening the capacity to assert African scholarship (Maserumule, 2014: 440). Against this brief background, the question that prominent scholars have attempted to resolve is whether Africa has its own epistemology, let alone African Public Administration. It is for this position that this article attempts to interrogate the state of the Public Administration discipline in Africa and thereby clearing the epistemological confusion from an Afrocentric perspective. The article does so by conceptualisation the concept of theory and Public

¹ University of Limpopo, South Africa

Administration theory with a quest to question African Public Administration theory. Furthermore, the relationship between politics and Public Administration in an African context is provided in this article. The quest and advocacy of Afrocentrism and African epistemology is explored with a view of establishing the effects it has on African epistemology, Public Administration curricular and pedagogies.

Theory and Public Administration theorisation

A question that continues to ponder the terrains of the public administration is whether the discipline has its own theory(ies). This is so because most academics and researchers in the field fail to comprehend the normative foundations of the discipline (Coetzee, 1988: 49). This has to be ascribed also to the eclectic nature of the public administration discipline and its reliance on related disciplines to explain, direct and inform study and practice (Thornhill & van Dijk, 2010: 95). One must not be ignorant of the fact that Public Administration has relationships with other dominant social science disciplines and an offspring of political science. To answer a question posed earlier as to whether Public Administration has its own independent theories; it was in the paradigm of Identity Crisis (1948-1970) that the lack of Public Administration theory was established. According to Basheka (2012: 48-49), those in political science started developing theories to understand challenges associated with the lack of contribution to Public Administration as the discipline 'had a very serious poverty of theories'. The use of the words serious poverty seems to suggest that although there might have been signs of theory development in the discipline, it was not at a stage where it could be universally lifted and applied to solve global challenges. Basheka (2012: 47) is of the view that "a theory of Public Administration in our times means theory of politics also". A discourse on whether Public Administration has its own theory(ies) or whether it is borrowing from other disciplines is continual. However, one needs to interrogate the concepts of theory and Public Administration theory.

Conceptualising what theory is according to Nixon (2004: 28), is a very big and imposing question. This is so because theorising involves the difficult art of arguing beyond the dead-end of disagreement (Nixon, 2004: 29), something which scholars in the field of public administration do not own. This is evident by the replication and repetition of theories built centuries ago rather than developing theories to benefit their own realms. According to Thornhill and van Dijk (2010: 96), the word theory is derived from the Latin *theoria* and the Greek *theoro* which basically refer to contemplation, speculation and sight. In the light of this, a theory therefore refers to how we mentally view a phenomenon or system which forms the basis for chain of reasoning and suppositions. In an attempt to develop a theory one must be able to attach meanings and contexts to concepts. This according to Coetzee (1988: 49), is for the purposes of preventing semantic confusion. It is in this line that Coetzee suggests that in order to build a theory particularly in the discipline of public administration, concepts such as epistemology, hypotheses, methodology, paradigm, foundation, model, phenomenon and others need to be conceptualised and contextualised. In a nutshell, theory according to Wacker

(1988: 361), must have four basic criteria of conceptual definition, domain limitations, relationship-building, and predictions.

According to Nixon (2004: 29), 'no science will relieve common sense, even if scientifically informed, of the task of forming a judgement'. By this, Nixon is of a view that answering the most sensitive and difficult questions in the world around us requires theorisation. The lack of theory and theorisation particularly in Public Administration postgraduate qualifications in Africa in general and South Africa in particular pose a serious challenge in the existence and independence of the discipline. It is therefore necessary to interrogate in the real sense Public Administration theories and possibly advocate for theory(ies) of African origin to answer African challenges. A Public Administration theory does not concern an individual human being or a limited number of employees in one (public) organisational structure (Thornhill & van Dijk, 2010: 97). This is the case in African epistemology which is often inducted for being a communal venture that denies individuals the ability to reason and come up with knowledge that is uninfluenced by society and irrationality of the community (Ani, 2013: 304) which is the case with Western epistemology. This Western epistemology and theorisation according to Maserumule (2014: 439), is accepted as a large part by African scholarship with its paradigmatic orientation imbedded by Western philosophies. Such position in turn adversely affects the theorisation of Public Administration in an African context. Chizuma (2014) for example attempted to contextualise corruption in an African environment. The theorisation and the basis of the argument was that giving a chief or traditional leader a gift while expecting favours in the near future could not and does not amount to corruption as it would in Western epistemological theorisation.

Public Administration as an offspring of Political Science

As mentioned before in the paper that Public Administration is eclectic in nature due to its theory dependency to other social science disciplines in general and political science in particular. Political science is regarded as the oldest of the social science disciplines and has given birth to Public Administration. Political science is viewed as a science of form and principles of civil government and the manner of its intervention in public and private affairs and politics (Coetzee, 1988: 88). It is concerned with a systematic analysis of government, its processes, and forms of organisation, institutions and purposes (*Ibid*). Despite the relationship between politics and Public Administration, there was a period commonly known as Politics-Administration Dichotomy (1887-1926) which became a key strategy during the epistemological period to separate politics and administration functions of government as a strategy for promoting efficiency and effectiveness (Mafunisa, 2003: 87-88; Basheka, 2012: 35-41). The "divorce" between the two disciplines as Basheka (2012: 44) explains only materialised during the Era of Challenge (1938-1947).

Woodrow 'Wilsonian' dichotomy and depoliticised bureaucracy models

Making reference to Public Administration without mentioning politics is somehow very unusual. According to Tahmusebi and Musevi (2011: 30), the issue of politics-administration dichotomy in the

field of public administration has had 'strange history' for over a century. Waldo (1987) as quoted in Tahmusebi and Musevi (2011) explains that the reason why the debate on the discourse of politics-administration dichotomy continues to be in major debate forums in the field of public administration is that the two are naturally interrelated. Using a metaphor, Dahlström (2014: 321) simply explains this relation in alluding that politics is the mind while administration is the body of government. This relationship is therefore at the heart of government. The use of the word dichotomy in the relationship suggests the rift and ill-health that exist between politics and administration. However, Dahlström (2014: 321) suggests that where possible, harmony must be forged between politics and administration.

Politics-administration dichotomy is often associated with the former President of the United States of America, Woodrow Wilson. In a nutshell, his article titled 'The study of Administration' Wilson said that:

The field of administration is a field of business. It is removed from the hurry and strife of politics..... Administration lies outside the proper sphere of politics. Administrative questions are not political questions. Although politics sets the tasks for administration, it should not be suffered to manipulate its offices (Tahmusebi & Musevi, 2011: 131).

It can be analysed from Wilson's assertions that his idea of separating politics and administration was out of good intentions. Government leaders around the world today are accused of politicising state institutions for personal enrichment which Wilson warned against. In a South African context for instance, the relationship between politics and administration is viewed as interface. This relates to attempting to draw a thin line between administrative and political functions without each interfering with the other. Both politics and administration must in their pursuit of promoting efficiency and effectiveness in government administration perform their separate functions which after all contribute to the same objective. This type of a relationship can simply be understood as what Mafunisa (2003) refers to as the complementarity model of describing and understanding the relationship between politics and administration. He argues that the model is a combination of both the dichotomy or depoliticised bureaucracy model and the politicised bureaucracy model.

A complementary relationship implies separate parts and distinctness while the emphasis is on how each contributes to the whole (Mafunisa, 2003: 89). No matter the model used to analyse politics-administration relations, a government concern would have to adopt what suits them taking into account the existence of both politics and administration. A challenge confronting most governments with relations between politics and administration is the fact that the systems are structured hierarchically with subordination to politics a prerequisite. This makes these administrations more prone to political interference and the institutionalisation of state machines. This type of an arrangement on close examination would appear to be a politicised bureaucracy model. The politicised bureaucracy model argues that political office-bearers have a mandate to control the public service including government administrative appointments (Mafunisa, 2003: 88-89). However, it remains to be seen whether the relationship or politics-administration dichotomy debate in Public Administration will ever be laid to rest. Perhaps it is this kind of squabbles, misconceptions and unresolved discourses

that the state of public administration in Africa is not improving. One is tempted to ask, whether it is about time Africa has public administration of its own based on African conceptualisation. The focus of the paper is now turned to assessing the feasibility of 'Africa's Public Administration'. The paper does this using the lenses of Afrocentricity.

Afrocentrism and African Public Administration

Afrocentricity materialised as a theory of knowledge for social change in 1980 under the stewardship of Molefi Kete Asante's systematic challenge to Western epistemology. The basis for Asante's challenge was from a notion that perspectives on knowledge require African *location* as a methodological approach (Bakari, 1997). It is therefore confirmed that Afrocentrism is not a mission of replacing "white knowledge" by "black knowledge". However, it calls for an epistemological position that places African scholarship experiences inside Africa epitomes framed by African codes, paradigms, symbols, motifs and myths. In the words of Bakari (1997), the understanding of Afrocentricity and its epistemology is more likely to lead to student development which is culturally relevant, thereby useful to African students and be predominant to Western epistemology. Afrocentrism has not been without criticisms. It is viewed as a transformative project rather than theory (Tillotson, 2011). The movement associated with Afrocentrism directs its activities towards achieving the particular end of ensuring the African culture, heritage, history, and the contribution to world civilization and scholarship are reflected in the curricular on every level of academic instruction (Chukwuokolo, 2009). This type of theorisation and progressive thinking will definitely, truly and rightly advocate for Public Administration that reflects the African being.

There is a tendency to associate public administration with Western epistemology. Who said public administration was not there before the European powers came to colonise Africa? Although Maserumule (2014: 439) acknowledges the insufficiency of documentation of African epistemology in general and Public Administration in particular, it does not suggest the discipline and practice is new or at least came post-colonialism in Africa. According to Basheka (2012: 29), there were sound administrative principles to justify the existence of governance in Africa during the ancient and medieval periods (pre-colonisation). For example, African people from all corners of the continent joined together through confederation for purposes of commerce or defence, developed African empires, kingdoms, and chieftaincies (Kisangani, n.d). Hierarchical societies for instance performed functions such as tax collections, and compelling people to abide by the rules among other functions (*Ibid*). Therefore, the mere fact that all these administrative processes are not historicised and codified is insufficient to negate the fact that Africa has its own epistemological standing particularly in the field of public administration. Limited literature for the building and development of African epistemology and Public Administration confirms that pre-colonial Africa accomplished areas such as tax administrations, grievance handling, arts and crafts, commerce and trade (Basheka, 2012: 30) which in a contemporary Africa is hailed and glorified, modernised, decorated and being associated with western epistemology. It is therefore incumbent upon African scholars to contextualise and package in writing their own knowledge including indigenous knowledge systems, something which

Maserumule (2014: 439) explains “have knowledge of our own to frame our thinking and imagination of the future of the continent”.

In a verge to wake up from the death of Western coloniality particularly in knowledge generation, public administration practice in Africa has been subjected to various reforms from the 1960s (Olowu, 2014: 544). Western management consultants offered advice on how to make administration more attuned to the needs of politico-socio-economic development, borrowing the best practices from developed societies (*Ibid*). Perhaps this was a mistake to start with. In pursuit of administrative efficiency, public administration is warned that such efficiency must be backed up by consciously-held values (Basheka, 2012: 47). Once again we are warned that Western imposition i.e. “borrowing bestpractice” must be shaped by African theory (Nixon, 1004: 28). As is always the case with West, African civil servants were paid to adopt new principles and procedures which exacerbated the collapse of African public administration.

The quest for African epistemology

Epistemology is a branch of philosophy which investigates the origin, nature, grounds, limitations, criteria or validity of knowledge and with perception or understanding and the processes people use to acquire and value knowledge (Coetzee, 1988: 51; Kaputa, 2011: 67; Ndubisi, 2014: 32). According to the Merriam Dictionary (online), epistemology is the study of theory especially with reference to its limits and validity. In simple terms, epistemology is the pursuit of the truth of knowledge. One may be tempted to ask this question; what constitute the ‘truth’ in knowledge? Positivists and empiricists may ignorantly jump into answering that the truth of knowledge can be determined by research instruments subjected to facts for testing. Others scholars such as Ndubisi (2014) may argue differently that forms of knowledge in African epistemology such as perceptual knowledge, common sense knowledge, old age knowledge, inferential knowledge, mystical knowledge and oral knowledge may not necessarily be validated through research instruments, as one might not be in a position to provide evidence for such. In this pursuit of attempting to conceptualise epistemology the focus is now turned into African epistemology.

In their article titled; *is there an ‘African’ epistemology*, Airoboman and Asekhauno (2012) seem to hesitantly deny the existence of African epistemology which to them is just a notion of “culture-dependent epistemology”. It is argued that this type of theorisation is based on wrong epistemic premises. African epistemology is slammed for being mutt, too simplistic, commonplace, and grieving of “epistemic nitty-gritty”. In an Afrocentric perspective, this type of insulting and myopic conceptualisation must be out rightly rejected as the proponents of Afrocentrism do not advocate replacing Eurocentrism but rather framing African knowledge by an African frame for the sake of the future of the continent. This article argues that the promotion as Kaputa (2011: 67) correctly explains, failure to develop epistemology in African Education may harshly judge indigenouse people to perpetual domination by foreign cultures resulting in indigenouse cultural dissonance producing

psychological trauma to society. By this, Kaputa clearly calls for the decolonisation of an 'African-mind' perpetuated by Western epistemology.

Let us attempt to place this in context. According to Udefi (2014: 108), African epistemology can be understood as using African categories and concepts as provided by the African cultural experience without recourse for Western conceptual framework. This is what Airoboman and Asekhaono (2012: 13) mischievously refer to as the "idea of African peculiar epistemology". According to Ani (2013: 304-305), African epistemology is accused for being a communal venture that denies individuals the ability to reason and come up with knowledge that is influenced by society and irrationality of community rather than relying on scientific tradition and analytical techniques that may be subjected to analytical scrutiny. This type of analogy is biased notwithstanding the fact that not all knowledge is scientifically produced. As argued before, knowledge which is the basis for epistemology and consequently African epistemology is not only reliant on the truth validated through methodologies but what kind of a truth it produces. This type of analysis can also be accepted by those who ascribe to positivism and empiricism in that unscientifically tested knowledge is not knowledge. There are not enough facts to support the rejection of African epistemology which is simply laughed-off for its potential to decolonise and liberate Africans from the chains of Western epistemology.

According to Bakari (1997), African epistemology dates back as far as 4000 Before the Common Era. However, such knowledge is not sufficiently documented (Maserumule, 2014: 439). Thus, African epistemology placed emphasis on ethics, morality, spirituality, symbols, science, self-awareness, and traditions.

Maserumule and Vil-Nkomo (2014: 445) contend that:

Perhaps this question is pedantic, for, its answer had long been implicated in the body of African scholarship, which remains largely in the margin in the mainstream history of science. As we contend with the challenges of Africa's development in the 21st century, the decolonisation of knowledge is increasingly becoming an exigency. It is important for our universities to become African universities rather than simply universities in Africa. It would be helpful for the counter-decolonisation narratives to familiarise themselves with the rich body of literature on African historiography.....

The above utterances are supported by Ani (2013: 295) who underscores the importance of African epistemology in saying that; 'a better decolonization of the continent can be achieved with the transformation of the mind-set of Africans to appreciate their indigenous form of knowledge and incorporate it in contemporary education and epistemological discourses. Conversely, Africans favour pedagogies and epistemologies that produce alienated Africans who hate the Africa that produced them and like the West that reject them (Maserumule & Vil-Nkomo, 2015: 445). This in the words of Maserumule (2014: 440) is chasing the gods that are not our own.

Conclusion

This article attempted to zoom into the discourse of African epistemology using an Afrocentric perspective while the public administration discipline is a case study. This is one of the heated

debates in modern scholarship which will probably not end today or in a decade to come. From engagement with various literature sources, African scholars demonstrate readiness to advocate and contribute to the knowledge hub of the discourse of African epistemology. However, there are few writers who are of the view that the debate is merely for transformational purposes rather than theory building as the reliance on culture, to them is insufficient for theorisation. The lack of knowledge validity instruments also formed a basis for the critique. However, this is a clear indication of positivism and empiricism paradigms subscribers at the expense for a search for the African knowledge built on 'truth'. African Public Administration for these reasons succumbs to the criticisms for the lack of African theories, let alone its own theories due to the eclectic nature and the relationship it has with political science and other social science disciplines. In conclusion, it is clear that African knowledge sector according to Kaputa (2011: 67), continues to be guided by inappropriate knowledge systems and proceeds to submit what it terms, appropriate epistemology in African education. It is therefore recommended that African scholars with strong convictions and love for their continent propagate for African scholarship and African knowledge outside the parameters of Western mainstream discourse.

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