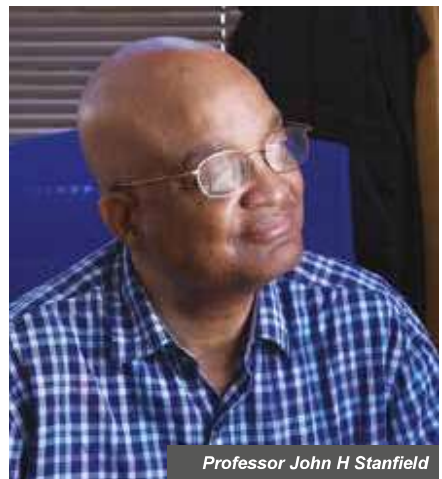


TAKING CONTROL OF OUR OWN: Global recognition for African knowledge

In conversation with Professor John H Stanfield



Professor John H Stanfield

The time is now

Africans on the continent must begin to more vigorously find their own voices and raise them in the most powerful corridors of global public policy-oriented social sciences and humanities knowledge creation, production, and applications.

In this critical sense, it is *time* for continental Africans to organise, mobilise, institutionalise and transform to do their own thing. They should be heard and listened to and respected as global knowledge brokers.

It is high time Africans in policy-oriented sciences and humanities have their theories and concepts globally embraced and utilised for the betterment of humankind. This advocacy points to knowledge transformation being hotly discussed these days in African public spheres, such as decolonisation, indigenisation, and liberation of African knowledge in the policy sciences and humanities.

Lived experiences in knowledge production

Even more important than crucial intellectual and technical know-how is that African state and civil society policy-making leaders must begin to

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create sustainable knowledge reward infrastructures far more aggressively and utilise their own national – and, more importantly – continent-wide criteria to establish norms and legitimacy for the acknowledgement of sciences and humanities.

Such ‘home rooted’ knowledge creation and reward infrastructures would more adequately fit the lived experiences of government and civil society leaders and everyday citizens and residents. To do otherwise is to continue the well-sustained imperialist and colonial knowledge creation, production, and utilisation legacy.

This legacy of imperialist knowledge imposition involves using Western-derived knowledge, which may or may not be entirely relevant, and tends to ignore human and material resources of social sciences and other sciences and humanities knowledge production in their own lands or in other areas of the continent.

Learning from other continents

This speaks of the urgent need for African state and civil society (e.g. university, media, faith, corporate) policy-making leaders in sciences (behavioural, physical and social) and humanities to investigate, as models of inspiration and strategic planning, the fascinating digital age innovations of their Asian and Latin American peer leaders.

These Asian and Latin American policy-making leaders in the sciences and humanities, in the government and civil society alike, are harnessing emerging global digital-age information

technologies to establish and globally integrate their own national, regional and continental peer-review norms and resources into mainstream knowledge accumulating and citation indexes, such as journals and publishing houses.

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Through these bold moves, Latin-American knowledge producers and brokers, in the sciences and humanities especially, are moving from being the excluded and the peripheral to becoming core sustainable global knowledge brokers. They are doing so while maintaining the cultural identity basis of their local cultures, nations, regions and continent and enriching the core global webs of sciences and humanities knowledge accumulation and citation with needed diversity and inclusion.

The time is ripe for continental Africans to also embark on this digital age trail. Traditional pockets and systems of Western resistance to non-Western ways of viewing the world are increasingly effectively challenged. This is more than apparent in the ‘critiques from the south’, indigenous knowledge and

dialogues of knowledge diversity and inclusiveness being displayed as themes at major annual conferences worldwide. This is also apparent at African social sciences, humanities, area studies and interdisciplinary associations.

The same goes for special editions of flagship disciplinary and interdisciplinary journals, which attempt to diversify their ways of thinking and making their interpretations of humanity more inclusive.

Much of this push has to do with the changing demographics of scholars with policy clout within and outside academic venues. It also stems from sciences and humanities policy thought-leaders, no matter their demographic background, who realise the world needs the most relevant knowledge possible to address the chronic quality of life challenges in nations and in the general world, which no longer fit into the Western frame of reference, no matter how well intended.

The above points to the need for African points of view in sciences and humanities to be globally accepted and cited across the continent rather than external knowledge accumulation and citation structures. The burning question is ‘how?’.

How do we shift knowledge legitimacy?

The most compelling reason why this is the time for African social researchers to get mobilised and move assertively on this matter of shifting knowledge legitimacy from outside to inside the continent, arises from the 25-years open access and digitalisation movements.

These movements are dramatically transforming how we human beings do business as knowledge creators and preservers. Both movements have found their way into the hearts of the most elite academic and non-academic public policy design and implementation circles in the world.

They have allowed populations, networks, institutions, and communities historically excluded or marginalised, to astutely formulate strategies in creating their own open access with peer-review



criteria and digital platforms. And in so doing, African scientists have begun to penetrate and become integrated into main global knowledge aggregation, dissemination and citation.

The most powerful inspiration for Africans to follow the same path is SciELO (Scientific Electronic Library Online), the South American sciences source aggregator and citation index originating from Brazil.

SciELO, established in 1997 through a partnership between the Sao Paulo Research Foundation and the Latin American Centre for Information in the Health Sciences, is by 2017, with at least 1 million hits, well integrated into so-called mainstream global citation indexes, journals and books, readily ignored or overshadowed by North American and European domination

SciELO as a movement has become the decolonising knowledge backbone for the distinguished 2017 annual Latin American Studies Conference that will focus on ‘Dialogues of Knowledge’, reflecting the shift of the demographics of membership from outside the region to within growing global legitimacy of South-South interpretations of realities, especially about their own region.

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Africans can similarly organise and mobilise to build an African, peer-reviewed, open access and citation index platform for the sciences and humanities. For the sake of the argument, let's call it AfriKNOW.

It can be built through the continent's official regional organisations, public and private university libraries, and science and technology ministries, sciences and humanities associations and continent-wide organisations (the African Union).

In building AfriKNOW, collaborative partnerships can be drawn from emerging non-profit sectors and university offices on the continent, focused on intellectual property issues and using digital knowledge processing and storage to mine and to archive indigenous knowledge and vetted Western and Eastern outsider knowledge.

Such partners could include: OPEN AIR, American University in Cairo's Access to Knowledge for Development Centre and Kenyan Strathmore University's Centre for Intellectual Property and Information Technology Law.

A serious weakness in Latin America's SciELO is its dependence on government (public funds), making it vulnerable to regime changes and to politicisation. To avoid this, the AfriKNOW emphasis would be on seeking future endowment, building funds through individual donors and socially responsible corporations, mainly on the continent but also worldwide. However, AfriKNOW advocates would certainly lobby African heads of state and their ministers of science and technology for public sector funding.

AfriKNOW speaks of a vital aspect of building sustainable African democracies and could be incubated in a research programme of the HSRC, led by a team of established and emerging researchers within and outside HSRC. Let's get moving!

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