
Diahara Traoré

Centre de recherche interdisciplinaire sur la justice
intersectionnelle, la décolonisation et l'équité (CRI-JaDE)

BEYOND THE COGNITIVE EMPIRE:

*Mobilizing African Epistemologies in
Ethnographical Research*

Intro

Brief Overview of the Imperative:

Restoring the role of colonialism in African studies

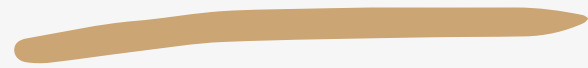
Central Issue

Knowledge construction on Africa rooted in consumption and exploitation

Madjinze-Ma-Kombile and Koumba (2023), Crul et al. (2018), Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2021)



Intro (cont'd)



- Persistence of exoticism and extractivism in development sociology and African studies
- Legitimacy of Western universities in knowledge production
- Challenge to Western researchers' legitimacy and methodologies
- Call for collective examination of intellectual posture and production



Questioning

the Usefulness of Western Theories



Research Focus:

- Religious and spiritual practices in sub-Saharan African communities in Quebec
- Ethnographic fieldwork (2008-2010; 2014; 2019) in mosques, homes, and associations
- Initial Use of Western Functionalism and Structuralism

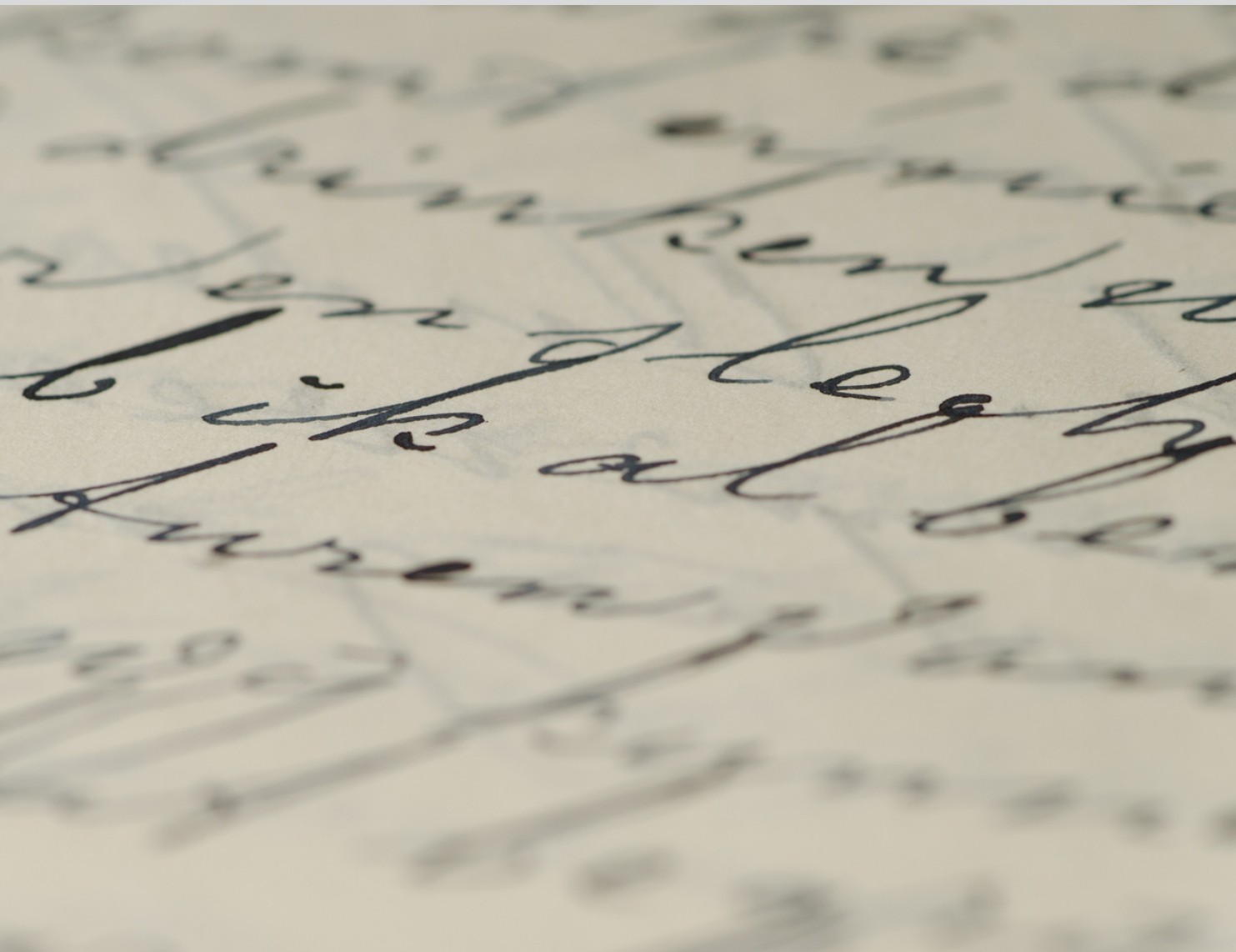
Challenges Faced:

- Obsession with Text and Classification
- The non-scientificity of spirituality



Obsession

with Text and Classification



Difficulties in considering orality and transmission of knowledge



Rethinking conventional research methods to include different forms of knowledge transmission

Western obsession with classification and categorization versus African ways of thinking



Non-

Scientificity

of Spirituality

Echoes from Afro-
descendant academic
symposium
(James, 2018)



Challenge:

Translating non-Western spirituality into Western scientific analysis

Need:

Need for a holistic methodological framework

Important:

Importance of understanding and respecting local knowledge

Limited recognition:

Limited recognition of spirituality, religion, and rituals in Quebec academia

Inequality of epistemologies:

Fundamental questions about the inequality of epistemologies



Challenging the Cognitive Empire



Definition of cognitive empire:

Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1986); Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2021)

Detonation of cultural bombs, removal of previous knowledge

Options faced by traditional knowledge: ecocide, ghettoization, hierarchization



Limitations of privileging scientific knowledge in capitalist society



Citation

First, ecocide – where nature and a people, along with the system of knowledge that accompanies them, is either eliminated or museumized. Second, the knowledge can be ghettoized and considered as unofficial or illegal through certain forms of intellectual apartheid. The third option is to hierarchize knowledges. In this, the traditional domain is labelled the lesser form and can at best exist as marginal knowledges practiced within the informal economy. Expert knowledge, by contrast, is always treated as scientific knowledge. Sometimes the hierarchy becomes a temporary circle and local knowledge is seen as an ‘ethno-science’, an act of ‘make do’, or what Levi Strauss calls bricolage. The pragmatic possibilities are acknowledged but the theoretical possibilities are truncated. The bricoleur still belongs to a lesser cognitive world.

-- Shiv Visvanathan, “The Search for Cognitive Justice” (2009).

Adopting an Afrocentric methodology



Proposal: The “Geography of Legitimacy” (Traoré, 2024)



Integration of different disciplinary perspectives in research on Africans in Quebec

Afrocentric Approach: Dimensions by Molefi Kete Asante (2017)

Embracing transdisciplinary methodologies for a holistic approach



Conclusion



Challenging the Cognitive Empire

Choosing to cross boundaries : across disciplines

Denouncing the “geography of legitimacy”

Proposing Afrocentricity as methodology

Acknowledgment of the need for a shift in intellectual posture and production