



Surpassing the Spectre of Impossibility: Ideational Impoverishment and the Quest for Sustainable Rural Learning Ecologies in Africa

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Abstract

The idea of sustainable rural learning ecologies in Africa apparently constitutes a contradiction in terms. Renowned for its provincialism, rural Africa seems to represent the opposite of the ideal setting for sustainable learning ecologies, which cultivate open, questioning and investigative spirits while fostering the acquisition of knowledge and skills. This rural landscape that is often seen as the den of parochialism is the outcome of colonial and postcolonial policies and processes of ideational impoverishment; the contrived nature of what we have come to see as the rural open space for creating and perpetuating sustainable rural learning ecologies. Pursued as a forward-looking project, the deliberate creation of sustainable rural learning ecologies is warranted by peculiarities that position rural spheres as ideal domains for cutting-edge learning on some of the most important questions in an Africa undergoing rapid transformation.

Résumé

L'idée des environnements d'apprentissage ruraux durables en Afrique constitue apparemment une contradiction dans les termes. Réputé pour son provincialisme, le milieu rural africain semble représenter l'opposé de l'endroit idéal pour les environnements d'apprentissage durables, qui cultivent l'esprit ouvert, le sens du questionnement et de l'investigation, tout

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en favorisant l'acquisition de connaissances et de compétences. Ce paysage rural qui est souvent considéré comme le repaire de l'esprit de clocher est le résultat des politiques et des processus coloniaux et postcoloniaux d'appauvrissement idéal; la nature artificielle de ce que nous percevons comme milieu rural ouvre un espace pour la création et la perpétuation des environnements d'apprentissage ruraux durables. Qualifié de projet d'avenir, la création délibérée d'environnements d'apprentissage ruraux est justifiée par des particularités qui présentent les sphères rurales comme des domaines idéales pour l'apprentissage de pointe sur certaines des questions les plus importantes dans une Afrique en mutation rapide.

Introduction

The idea of sustainable rural learning ecologies in Africa apparently constitutes a contradiction in terms. The rural has over time come to be synonymous in the minds of many with provincialism (Isaacman 1990: 48; Binns 1987: 77; Uzzell 1979: 333–34) and tradition understood as the repetition over time of frozen cultural traits. Spaces characterized by such ideational impoverishment cannot constitute sustainable learning ecologies. This is because learning involves the cultivation of an open, questioning and investigative spirit as well as the acquisition of knowledge and skills, and requires mental outlooks characterized by openness that are very different from those that we have come to associate with rural zones in Africa.

If rural areas have come to represent the epitome of ecologies antithetical to learning, we have to understand this as the fruition of elaborate colonial and postcolonial state policies and practices. Colonial administrations invested greatly in constructing rural communities as zones of unadulterated tradition (Mamdani 1996: 81). These were opposed to urban areas understood as zones of modernity where Africans tended to become 'deracinated' (Dougan 2004: 34–36). Further, even these rural zones of tradition were compartmentalized as closed ethnic reserves (Mamdani 1996). Postcolonial authorities often built on this ethnicization of rural territories, with the dawn of democratization processes in the 1990s only intensifying this cultivation and exploitation of parochialism (Geschiere and Nyamnjoh 2000).

Understanding ideational poverty as a *contrived* condition opens up possibilities for the deliberate crafting of sustainable rural learning ecologies. If rural zones could be deliberately crafted as ecologies that are directly antithetical to learning, purposely-guided action can go towards creating sustainable rural learning economies. This effort has to go beyond recapturing rural pasts of openness to involve challenging the exploitative and discriminative underbelly that tainted rural incorporative processes. Finally, sustainable rural learning ecologies will only stand out as uniquely privileged learning environments

if they are rooted in the reflexive exercise of considering what it means to be 'rural' in a changing Africa.

The difficult task of engineering sustainable rural learning ecologies is warranted by the peculiar advantages rural spheres in today's Africa possess as potential centres of cutting-edge innovative research and learning that can help birth the Africa we want. Rural zones are the epicentres of some of the most important phenomena that concern research in the social and natural sciences. These range from struggles over land rights and natural resource exploitation to epidemics and infrastructural development. Also, the greater material needs of rural environments furnish excellent opportunities for socially responsible applied learning.

The Spectre of Impossibility

Modern schooling in Africa is unfortunately too often trapped in the cocoon of knowledge acquisition through instruction. Here, the known is passed on from teachers to students through processes of instruction that are at once hierarchical and mediated by distance between active teachers imparting knowledge and passive students learning/receiving such knowledge. Added to this has often been the temptation to confine learning to the acquisition of 'practical skills' (Mkandawire 2011: 15).

Steeped in the continent's colonial history and often twinned with universities in the colonial metropolis (Assie-Lumumba 2006: 31; Olukoshi 2006: 537), it is unsurprising that institutions of higher education in Africa tended to replicate the hierarchies and distancing that characterized many of their 'parent' universities in the global North as well as the colonial environment in which they were born and had to operate (Aina 2010: 29–30). While cloaked in discourses about the need to equip Africans with the practical skills needed to take over governing responsibilities, the insistence on the teaching of 'practical skill' during this period partly served a more sinister end. It sought to direct Africans away from processes of contemplation that sometimes tended to lead to them questioning the fundamental injustices of colonial systems (Assie-Lumumba 2006: 33).

A lot has been said about continuities between colonial systems and post-colonial regimes in Africa (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013) and the field of higher education is one area in which these continuities are evident. As in colonial times, states' insistence in education policy on the acquisition of practical skills was portrayed as necessary for the imperative of development. Knowledge for knowledge's sake was seen as a luxury that African countries that had to 'catch-up' could not afford to invest in. These policies skewed support in favour of those disciplines seen as 'practical' and 'useful' and sometimes

led to the closure of departments seen as less useful (Mkandawire 2011: 15; Assie-Lumumba 2006: 45; Zeleza 1992: 12). As in the colonial era, the politics behind this skewing and closures went beyond making sure universities served the 'needs' of countries to reinforcing authoritarian political interests. Disciplines seen as subversive of established authority in a time of civilian and military authoritarianism, which was deeply hostile to reflection and critical thought, were the ones that often fell under the axe (Assie-Lumumba 2006: 80).

If the state in both its colonial and postcolonial forms has tended to privilege learning as the acquisition of practical skills through instruction, the market has been no kinder to more participatory and reflective modes of learning. Liberalization processes across Africa since the 1980s have pushed many public universities into treating education as just another service on the market. What sells is seen as what should be produced. 'Practical' courses that are seen as offering the greatest chances of immediate employment in economies characterized by high levels of unemployment have gained increasing ascendancy. Departments and courses that do not sell have often been starved of support (Olukoshi 2006: 538; Assie-Lumumba 2006: 80). Where they have survived, some of these more reflective courses have been increasingly framed as handmaidens to, and minor elements of, larger market-favoured programmes in management, economics, information and communication technology, and so on. This has meant their being shorn of the contemplative elements that are core to them. 'Crass vocationalization' is how Mamdani has rightly labelled this process (2007: 54).

The growth of student populations in many public universities, often unmet with significant increases in the facilities and staffing of these institutions, has further promoted the flight from critical reflective activity. Declining support for universities was partly the result of World Bank insistence on the focus of funds on primary education on account of what they saw as its greater dividends (Mkandawire 2011: 15; Mamdani 1993: 10). Large classes have resulted in the further minimization of participatory approaches to teaching and the privileging of objective type questions even in courses in Philosophy (Mamdani 2007: 147–75).

Dynamics in public universities have to be seen, in some ways, as efforts at maintaining their dominance in the face of competition from private universities that have mushroomed across the continent after the liberalization of economies. Rising in number, many of these private institutions have come to typify a radical market approach to education. They often display unabashed market orientations in the choice, design and delivery of courses with little regard for basic research or courses in the humanities and social sciences that focus on critical reflection on social phenomena (Effah 2006: 68–69; Aina 2010: 29; Assie-Lumumba 2006: 106–7).

In the world of donor funding there has been a related emphasis on ‘policy research’ at the cost of basic research. These studies and the ‘consultancy reports’ that result from them are often driven by very specific policy questions and needs, are short-term in character and often lacking in scholarly rigour. Donors and some in the policy industry often cite the same need to ‘address practical questions’ and ‘show tangible results’ for resources (Olukoshi 2006: 541; Zeleza 1992: 23) in tones that have sometimes assumed a totalitarian hue that tends to delegitimize basic research as useless or at best unnecessary.

The fact that many of such consultancy reports draw heavily from basic research (sometimes without proper citations), are extremely presentist and lacking in fundamental insights is not emphasized (Mkandawire 2011: 23). Also neglected is the fact that even basic research done without policy or applied use in mind can, down the road, impact on policy and lead to real world applications. The utility of basic research in the formal educational system is also often elided.

Contrary to this emphasis on learning as the acquisition of the known, here I employ learning to mean something that goes far beyond the acquisition of knowledge and practical skills. Understood in the sense of the term ‘cultivation,’ it means above all else the acquisition of the propensity and skills to learn. It involves the acquisition of an interest in the world and the ability to notice interesting patterns in the mundane as well as the development of the propensity to be puzzled by aspects of what normally passes as usual and normal. It also includes cultivating the ability to frame investigable questions out of these puzzles and to investigate these through systematic research.

Understood as the cultivation of these deep faculties, learning is anchored in the willingness to live in an unstable world where much *could be unknown*. It is a costly psychological exercise that involves the ability to entertain and even embrace uncertainty. It diverges markedly from sheltering in the safety of tradition. Tradition involves the comfort of ostensibly reproducing known worlds repeatedly (Gyekye 1997: 219). It involves the safety of repetition. Learning as used here requires the scholar to continually destabilize her world by repeatedly raising fundamental questions about it. This understanding of the process of learning is best captured in the thoughts of the Council for Academic Freedom and Democracy on the mission of academic institutions:

[ext] Whatever else they may be designed to do, academic institutions of all kinds and at all levels must be critical. They must be committed to re-examining accepted knowledge, assumptions and practices. It is their job, whatever other jobs they have, to nurse skepticism and to apply it to established beliefs and the present order of things. Education

and research must be intellectually and socially dangerous (quoted in Ali 1994: 110). [ends]

As an exercise that goes beyond the rote acquisition of the known to involve cultivation of the willingness and ability to escape tradition and to reflect on and rethink modes of being, learning tends to require all that rural environments have come to be seen to lack. Rural spaces are seen as the epitomes of ideational poverty in being closed and impervious to new ideas and outside influences. At one level, this closedness is the characteristic of systems. The rural has been portrayed as the preserve of tradition since the era of colonization (Mamdani undated: 7–8; Bryceson 1997: 9). Defined as ‘that which is handed down from the past [and] has endured through generations’ (Gyekye 1997: 219), tradition represents the repetition of the known and the *reenactment* of well-worn scripts. It denotes a bulwark against the new and the ‘strange’. Seen in this light, the rural stands out as the opposite of what the urban has come to be associated with: ‘modernization, social progress and cultural innovation’ (Yankson and Bertrand 2012). The work of scholars like Ekeh (1975) have not succeeded in exploding the pervasive equation of ‘rural’ with ‘traditional’ and ‘urban’ with ‘modern’.

Rural provincialism is also a matter of individual traits. Rural residents are often portrayed as closed-minded. This goes beyond the fact that they are not exposed to new ideas to the stronger claim about their unwillingness and lack of capacity to open up to new things (Hugo, Champion and Lattes 2003: 279) as well as their lack of capacity for higher-level intellectual thought (Scott 1985: 308; 1990: 136–82).

If learning is about openness to questioning the fundamental bases of society and of our existence, it is not difficult to see how it is counter-intuitive to place the rural and the process of learning side by side.

Contrived Impoverishment: The Rural Moral Bias in Africa

Much has been written about the urban bias in Africa where, as the seat of colonial administrations and home of important sections of European communities that were located in the colonies, cities received more than their fair share of investment in services relative to rural areas. Roads, running water, electricity grids, health facilities and good schools were often disproportionately concentrated in urban areas, with some rural areas that proved particularly economically profitable to colonial administrations following suit (Konadu-Agyeman and Shabaya 2005: 133). Even as postcolonial states have done more to bring services to constituencies beyond those served during the colonial period, their policies have been characterized by the same bias towards urban areas that was observable under colonial rule. Economic

investment, education, health, electrification and transport infrastructure are all areas in which rural areas lag significantly behind their urban counterparts (Konadu-Agyeman and Shabaya 2005: 134–40). Rural-urban disparities in Africa often make for gruelling reading, with Brookfield noting how ‘growth rates are low, land degradation is widespread, and poverty remains rampant’ in rural areas (Brookfield 2006: 229).

Some have highlighted issues of corruption and limited state capacity for planning to explain this phenomenon (van de Walle 1989; Konadu-Agyeman and Shabaya 2005). The predominant explanation, however, focuses on the relative mobilizational capacity or urban constituencies relative to rural ones (Bates 1984; Wiseman 1986: 510; Scott 1985). Import-substitution industrialization models that also tended to favour urban areas are partly to blame (Nafziger 1988: 147–49).

Worthy of note though is the fact that this material bias in favour of urban constituencies has consistently gone along with a second and countervailing bias. That is the moral bias in favour of rural areas. The reinvention of the rural past was an elaborate activity that posited a dichotomy between rural areas that were portrayed as spaces of pure and authentic traditions and cultures and urban spaces that were seen as zones of mixture, pollution and cultural decay (Dougan 2004: 33–36). This dichotomy was an explicitly moral one where the good (for which read ‘submissive’) African was often portrayed as someone who had stuck to her rural traditions and had escaped the contamination of foreign influences (Bryceson 1997: 9; Mamdani 1996: 81–82). She was opposed to the ‘deracinated’ African, very often of the urban milieu, who was seen as ‘vice incarnate’ (Wyse 1989: 46). The fact that this ran counter to the narrative of the colonizing mission as an effort to civilize Africans by moving them from the ‘darkness’ of their cultures to Western ‘light’ has been noted by Assie-Lumumba (2006: 32). This valorization of rural spheres as the sites of morality is a phenomenon which has characterized discourse and practice beyond the African context (Cronon 1991).

It is in this context that we have to understand the rural milieu as the epitome of the environment that *cannot* sustain learning ecologies as contrived in the double sense of the word. It does not represent the ‘natural’ state of the rural or of rural life as it has always been. It is the effect of deliberate colonial and postcolonial state policies and activities. But it is contrived in another sense. Making the rural was about remaking the past just as it was about building a future. The two moves were intimately connected and the reinvention of a ‘rural past’ served the future-oriented goal of creating understandings of rural (and by implication, urban) spheres that would fit into colonial logics of control and appropriation.

Cultural elaboration in rural settings was defined essentially as a practice in repetition. Ideational impoverishment here took both vertical and horizontal forms. Dynamism understood as a vertical process in which cultures got to surpass themselves was imagined out of existence and rural cultural elaboration came to take the form of the elaboration of traditions that were uncontaminated by external influences. The fact that these narratives were challenged by dynamism in rural practices and outlooks that sometimes matched urban ones was often noted by scholars and colonial administrators alike. One way in which this 'problem' of rural dynamism and change was dealt with was by layering change with narratives and assumptions of perpetual stability (Tenga 1987: 39–40). Another way of dealing with these inconvenient deviations was to portray them as evidence of the impact of corruptive influences on these pristine traditions. People had temporarily (and regrettably) lost their way and colonial authorities sometimes then assumed the role of 'correcting' these deviations by returning people to 'their' traditions (Mamdani 1996: 81–82).

This process of restoring traditions sometimes took the form of seeking to arrest the evolutions through official policies and practices. In Ghana rapid transformations in rural land tenure arrangements were the target of such efforts in the first half of the twentieth century. The advent of cocoa cultivation and mineral prospection in the Gold Coast colony had led to the increasing commercialization of land, the individualization of land rights, the formalization of transactions through documents and speculation on land in rural areas in Akyem Abuakwa (Addo-Fening 1980). Most of this went counter to the colonial lore on 'African land tenure systems', which portrayed them as communal, with chiefs holding managerial interest in land. These chiefs were said to give usufruct rights to users in transactions that were free of monetary exchanges as well as formal documentation (Onoma 2009). The West African Lands Committee, which conducted investigations into these matters, saw through this narrative and detailed the rapid evolution towards more individualized and formalized transactions taking place. When it recommended the formal recognition of individual rights, this was rejected out of hand by Governor Clifford of the Gold Coast, who was wary of eliminating a key tool that chiefs used to control commoners on behalf of the colonial government (Onoma 2009).

Congeaing traditions in the face of transformations was not the sole weapon deployed in the remaking of the rural past. Sometimes, the elements of the past to be congealed were themselves the product of colonial fabrication. The colonial authorities sometimes made up the 'eternal' traditions that they then went on to safeguard against 'contamination' by external influences. There is a lot of evidence of 'invention' by colonial authorities as they sought

to impose and institutionalize control and authority. Victorian norms of the status and role of women, gender relations and sexuality were often as much to 'credit' for colonial discourses on African traditions as the lived realities of these societies (Oyewumi 1997). There was also the unwarranted generalization of observations from parts of the continent due to the vital role of certain colonial administrators like Lord Lugard who acted as norm entrepreneurs within colonial empires (Mamdani 1996: 44–81).

Ideational impoverishment also took a vertical form in which the colonial enterprise reinforced the idea of rural areas as closed spaces by imagining them as ethnic enclaves. Dynamism understood as processes of borrowing, of mixture and of hybridization became unimaginable. Each rural community was not only the space of unadulterated traditions, but was also the preserve of only one such tradition. Territories were often carved up into ethnic homelands that created autochthones and 'strangers'. The lines between these groups were inscribed in narratives of blood and ancient origins that gave little credence to residence and process as means of acquiring citizenship (Mamdani 2005: 6; 1998; Wright 1991: 73–75).

It is imperative to underscore the creative character of this exercise. The colonial authorities often fashioned legible spaces instead of just mapping them. There are instances where this process of creation involved the physical removal and (re)settlement of people as was seen with the forced removals in South Africa (Hallet 1984). The Bantustans in South Africa are excellent examples of this process of separation. In many areas in Africa, these 'histories' of separation were often simply 'legislated' or written into being even in the face of many facts to the contrary.

Mapping activities and anthropological studies by colonial officials and researchers very often revealed the extent to which this exercise of creating closed pure communities was contrived. Jacques Germain, an assistant to the *Commandant de Cercle* of N'Zérékoré Cercle in the Forest Region of Guinea, carried out research in that area in 1946 and 1947. It was part of the effort of the French authorities to create a 'complete inventory' that captured 'the significance of the name, constitutive clans, the origins of the clans, their totems, and the history of each village since its formation' (Germain 1984: 73). Some of the things Germain observed were rather inconvenient in light of the colonial division of the Forest Region of Guinea into neat tribal *cercles*. It was discovered that cantons often had villages made up of people who spoke languages other than the language of those to whom the canton was said to 'belong'. Worse still, villages often had people of different cultural and linguistic backgrounds living side by side. Political entities were generally multi-ethnic. There was active ongoing mixture of groups. Identities were dynamic. As people moved

around they deliberately changed their identities. Violent conflicts occurred between villages dominated by different linguistic groups but these conflicts were just as likely to happen between villages dominated by the same linguistic group. A lot of violent conflicts had little to do with ethnic or 'tribal' interests and instead were fought over the private interests of leading political figures (Germain 1984: 71–77).

These 'inconvenient facts' that tend to lacerate the schema of ethnic homelands even today did little to curb the colonial appetite to invent neatly closed-off spaces. The endurance of these fabrications and their reinforcement and exploitation by postcolonial leaders is part of the reason for violent internecine conflicts in many African countries including Guinea, Liberia, Côte d'Ivoire, Kenya and the Democratic Republic of Congo. The multiplicity of processes challenging the imposition of ethnic maps on social landscapes has often not dampened enthusiasm for the intonation and deployment of ethnic logics in scholarship on, and political practice in, Africa (Onoma 2013: 134–57).

The Imperative of Sustainable Rural Learning Ecologies

Overcoming the seeming impossibility of creating and perpetuating sustainable rural learning ecologies is an imperative for the economic and hence political and social advancement of many African countries. The difficulty of the task of surpassing the spectre of impossibility is well matched by the importance of achieving that task.

A primary reason for this is the fact that the rural sphere is the site of some of the most interesting processes that draw the attention of researchers in the social and natural sciences. We cannot even begin to understand these issues without studying rural spaces and *studying in* rural areas. 'Studying rural areas' can be understood in the narrow sense of extracting data from the rural sphere during field research for analysis in urban centres of learning. But more intense relationships between the researcher and researched that I will argue for later means that continual interactions between the researcher and the phenomena studied are important both at the stage of data collection and analysis. These intimate relations that are borne of continual interactions enrich research by allowing the researcher to continually refer to and garner insights from the researched. It is partly for this reason that the actual location of centres of learning in rural areas is vital to making sense of these processes.

Agriculture is one such process. A predominantly rural phenomenon, it is responsible for 32 per cent of Africa's GDP and 65 per cent of employment on the continent (World Bank 2014). The continuing importance of agriculture to the economies of African countries points to the failure of many countries to transform their economies in the direction of manufacturing and the service

sector. Understanding how this sector is faring, the issues that affect it and its impact on society all fundamentally require research that is at least in part based in rural areas.

The related issue of land rights is another such phenomenon. Of extreme importance in a continent where people's livelihoods more often than not are tied to the land, it has become the lightning rod for tensions and internecine violence in many countries in Africa (Onoma 2009). The recent spate of land grabbing by foreign countries and multinationals across the continent has only heightened tensions around this resource (Cotula 2013). The rural location of much of this contention and violence again makes its understanding heavily dependent on research on and in rural areas.

Tied to land rights is the question of natural resource exploitation. Partnering agriculture as a key element in the heavy dependence of many African countries on trade in primary goods, natural resource exploitation is often carried out in rural areas across the continent. This includes both legal and extra-legal mineral extraction. Proper exploration of the intricacies of this sector must be at least partially based on work in rural areas.

The increasingly important issue of climate change also requires much work in rural areas for its comprehension. On account of the continent's dependence on rain-fed agriculture and its underdevelopment, climate variability is likely to heavily impact on rural livelihoods (Mongi, Majule and Lyimo 2010: 371; Mkandawire 2011: 10). Deforestation and reforestation, which are implicated in discussions around mitigation, will also require a focus on rural spheres. Because of the heavy use of wood for fuel in rural areas, adaptation and mitigation efforts that focus on introducing cleaner energy sources must also pay significant attention to rural areas. Adaptation methods whose concerns include rainwater harvesting for agriculture will also have to pay attention to the rural milieu.

Research and research institutions on health and health technology also have a lot to gain from adopting rural homes. For example many diseases assume peculiar quantitative and qualitative dimensions in rural areas on account of the greater deprivation of these rural communities (Eager 2014). This makes rural-based research on them that pays attention to their particular rural manifestations important.

The fact that this continent, despite its rapid urbanization, is still predominantly rural means that the study of life, work, leisure, family and so forth in the humanities and social sciences cannot be complete without focus on the rural realm.

The emphasis on the need to physically locate centres of learning in rural areas, in addition to orienting their work towards the rural, is partly also borne out of the significant opportunities for Socially responsible learning

that exist in rural areas. The deprivation suffered by these areas as well as their involvement in important processes unfolding on the continent mean that there are important ways in which teaching and research can respond in context-sensitive ways to the search for solutions involving rural communities (Mamdani 1993: 11–14; Mafeje 1994: 199; Ake 1994: 23; Assie-Lumumba 2006: 83; Yesufu 1973: 40).

Socially responsible learning here means that researchers do not only extract information from communities in the quest to understand them but also ‘give back’ on a quotidian basis by putting research at the service of local efforts to deal with local problems. But in talking about socially responsible learning, emphasis should be placed not only on the benefits to local communities but also on the better opportunities for learning for scholars. On one level this process of ‘giving back’ that is involved in socially responsible learning can be understood in an epistemological sense as a form of participant observation, which has been critical to ethnographic work in many disciplines in the social sciences. It can also be understood in the sense of a methodology of applied learning (Campbell, Faulkner and Pridham 2010) that gives students and faculty alike the opportunity to contextualize and better understand concepts and theories by putting them to use.

Toward Surpassing the Spectre of Impossibility

There are reasons to believe that the aspiration of sustainable rural learning economies can be realized. The contrived nature of much of the debilitating factors that render current talk of sustainable rural learning ecologies as a contradiction in terms is one reason for this. Further, the inability of colonial and postcolonial regimes to completely transform rural systems means that we can still glean undercurrents that deviate from dominant narratives about rural life, which offer bases that can be built on to realize sustainable learning ecologies.

One area in which this is evident is in the hints of openness that characterize many rural communities despite the dominant and often oppressive narrative and practice of closedness that pervades them. This is partly seen in the intense mobility that characterizes many rural zones. Crossroads like the Parrot’s Beak in the Mano River Basin, Eastern DRC and neighbouring areas in Tanzania, Rwanda, Burundi and Uganda, and the western Zambia/eastern Angola area are three examples (Onoma 2013). This phenomenon has a long history that encompassed both voluntary and forced migration (Onoma 2013). In Southern Africa, the early 1800s were similarly times of great movement, whose causes are the subject of a very lively debate (Hamilton 1995). The idea of rural dwellers as settled peasants that lack an awareness of elsewhere is more often than not a fantasy.

Importantly, this movement did not only provoke the co-existence of different cultures, it often led to intense processes of incorporation, mixture and hybridization. The areas of southwestern Uganda that came to constitute the Kingdom of Ankole under British colonialism exemplify this phenomenon. While Nkore through colonial engineering came to be known as a kingdom of the Banyankore that included Bairu cultivators and Bahima pastoralists, the story was far more complex. The people known as Bairu Banyankore constitute a mixing population that incorporates cultivators from areas such as Rwanda, Burundi, Toro, Buganda, Kigezi and northwestern Tanzania. The Bahima constituted a similarly mixing population, which incorporates pastoralists from Rwanda, Burundi, Toro and northwestern Tanzania (Onoma 2013). The fact that many of the languages spoken in this zone were similar and sometimes even mutually intelligible facilitates this process of incorporation and hybridization (Bernsten 1998: 3; Chretien 2003).

The idea of rural communities as closed ones that exemplified purity has always been a figment of the imagination of those that were often intent on using these narratives to achieve political ends (Geschiere and Nyamnjoh 2000; Jeyifo 2002: 450). The uncontaminated rural bumpkin is an imaginary character that exists only in the imagination. The guile and savvy of the peasant is the subject of an extensive literature (Moyo 2002: 2; Isaacman 1990; Scott 1990; 1985).

The openness to contamination and the willingness to entertain the displacement of 'what is', which is necessary for learning, is thus not entirely absent in the history and present realities of many rural communities. Mixture and incorporation often meant exposure to and the adoption of new political, social, economic and cultural forms through process marked by contestation. A recent example of this is seen in farmers' reactions to Africa Rice Centre videos (Mele, Wanvoeke and Zossou 2010: 416–17; Elliot 2002: 197). As Brookfield notes, farmers' 'seizure of new opportunities and adaptations of livelihood practices to meet their demands have been major elements in African rural change since even before colonialism' (Brookfield 2006: 231). As has been emphasised by many scholars, the idea of tradition as the incessant repetition of cultural forms does little justice to the deliberate and open-ended (re)production of culture that occurred in many rural areas (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1992). The authors of the African Manifesto for Science, Technology and Innovation recall long histories of innovation by African communities going back over two million years (African Technology Policy Studies Network 2010: 8–9).

The emphasis on effort, process, ingenuity and contestation in the (re)production of culture is exemplified in the discourse on autochthony, strangeness, ownership and rights. It is now widely established that many communities dis-

tinguish between autochthonous lineages who are the first comers in an area and other residents who arrived later and whose rights to land and political authority are seen as inferior to those of autochthonous lineages. But as Bledsoe, Murphy and others have noted, a literal interpretation of these terms and their inscription in blood is problematic. The term 'first comer' has to be understood as a political one that results from a process of contestation. Recent arrivals in a community could through conquest and forms of suasion redefine relationships to become 'first comers' and to significantly influence cultural forms in an area (Murphy and Bledsoe 1987: 129; McGovern 2004: 236–37). The orientation towards new ideas and the willingness to question the known, which is vital to the process of learning, is thus not entirely foreign to rural areas (Simone 2008: 80). Realizing sustainable learning ecologies will thus require building on conditions that have previously characterized rural societies.

Building on this legacy of openness and learning has to be thought of as involving more than the re-capturing of the 'past glories' of rural areas to involve ways of rendering these systems better. One way of doing this is by making power and economic resources play less of a role in the evaluation of ideas and allocation of rights. The exploitative and discriminative underbelly of processes of incorporation in many rural areas has been highlighted by this author (Onoma 2013). Reducing the extent to which the chances of incorporation of new ideas and cultural forms is influenced by the power and economic clout of those proposing them will be a step towards creating space for open scholarly debate and learning. This will include reducing noxious auras of sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, religious extremism and gerontocracy that are asphyxiating thought, research and education in many spaces of learning (Aina 2010: 30, 35).

Being of the community has to have methodological implications for researchers in sustainable rural learning ecologies. It has to mean a turn towards a more interpretivist approach to research and learning understood as a way of being in the field that transforms field research and field work into a learning exercise in more ways than one. In the positivist approach to the social scientific enterprise the author first does the work of conceptualization. Concepts developed are then put to work during field research. The initiation of field research is predicated on the completion of the process of conceptualization since a primary goal of conceptualization is the direction of the choice of places where and on which research will be conducted (Goertz 2006: 159). Field research is then followed by theorization done by the researcher based on data collected.

In the positivist approach there is a neat division of labour in which the researcher does the 'higher order' work of conceptualization and theorization.

The researched perform the 'lower order' work of providing information and only do so within the parameters already set by the researcher who is similarly left with the important task of giving theoretical meaning to information provided by the researched (Onoma forthcoming).

The interpretivist approach explodes the division of labour inherent in the positivist approach by opening up conceptualization as well as theorization to the researched. By so doing it subverts the hierarchies that this division of labour entails. The researched contribute to how the researcher goes about learning about the world by contributing to the process of conceptualization. They also contribute to the process of theorization through which meaning is given to data collected from the field (Onoma forthcoming).

This implies the abandonment of temporal frames that neatly divide the three phases of conceptualization, field research and data analysis/theorization. What we end up with is an ordering where conceptualization, field research and theorization are closely interconnected and interwoven with the researcher moving back and forth between these phases. It also transforms the researched into much more than providers of data. In allowing them into the hallowed halls of conceptualization and theorization, it recognizes their capacity to contribute valuable insights into their own existence and livelihoods, contrary to assumptions that tend to encourage scholars to often ignore what peasants think in the conduct of work on them (Isaacman 1990: 17). It encourages the sort of rooting of research in researched communities and the valorization of 'traditional' knowledge and modes of knowing that the African Manifesto for Science, Technology and Innovation advocates (African Technology Policy Studies Network 2010: 18).

This approach is more in tune with the ethnographic sensibility of committing us to better 'take into account individuals' lived experiences and how they perceive...abstractions' (Schatz 2009: 10) that social scientists frequently use in their work (Schatz 2009). It better enables us to peek 'into the underlying attitudes of citizens, into the shared (but not necessarily official) meanings they assign to phenomena' (Wedeen 2009: 85). This is particularly important when one is studying marginal and disempowered rural communities. Scott (1990; 1985) has explored the ways in which such groups create and deploy 'hidden transcripts' as they seek to deal with the structures that dominate them. A key part of the struggle to survive for these groups involves fashioning alternative concepts and meanings of concepts, and in deploying ordinary terms and concepts in ways that diverge from their use by more dominant groups (Scott 1990: 1–18). These deliberately concealed and disguised concepts, meanings and uses ensure that the problem of resonance that plagues conceptualization generally is even more severe in the study of disempowered rural communities.

Conclusion: Re-imagining the Rural

Creating and perpetuating sustainable rural learning ecologies fundamentally involves re-imagining the ‘rural’, and by implication the ‘urban’ and the spaces in-between these (Simone 1998; 2004). The rural has over time been imbued with certain significations in common and scholarly parlance. These meanings represent a stumbling block to the aspiration of sustainable rural learning ecologies. The rapid transformations that African countries and their rural countryside are experiencing represent openings for reimagining the rural and broaching the creation and perpetuation of sustainable rural learning ecologies. Sustained challenges to the rural-urban dichotomy both in its spatial and cultural senses (Hugo, Champion and Lattes 2003: 280; Rosenthal 2000: 23; Lewis and Maund 1976: 17; Kemp 1990; Stewart Jr. 1958; Murray 1987), the percolation of each of these spheres by the other (Gugler 2002; Hugo, Champion and Lattes 2003: 280) and the contrived ‘nature’ and ‘past’ of what we see as rural also offer openings for interventions towards the end of creating the sustainable rural learning ecologies to come.

Acknowledgements

I thank Emiliane Faye of CODESRIA’s Information and Documentation Centre (CODICE) for her excellent work in tracing and providing many of the materials cited in this article as well as the two reviewers for comments which have helped to improve it.

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