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## Changing theory is a necessary humanising act

Reviewing Dilip Menon (ed). *Changing Theory: Concepts from the Global South*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press.

This book is one of the most extensive undertakings that demonstrate innovative, complex, and creative ways of theorising from the South. It is an edited collection of twenty essays from more than twenty contributors who come from different disciplines such as anthropology, political sciences, history, media studies and communication, philosophy. The methods employed by the authors are deeply eclectic, experimental, and interdisciplinary.

I see this pioneering work as a bold endeavour that takes its cue from Frantz Fanon's provocation in the last chapter of his canonical *The Wretched of the Earth*, addressing those engaged in the struggle for the emancipation of [black] humanity to 'turn over a new leaf...[ and to] work out new concepts and try to set afoot a new man' [sic] (Fanon 1961: 300). This provocation was a call to delink, from among other things, the epistemological framework of the west, and to foreground the global south concepts and theories in how we think of humanity and the world. This is of course considering the historical and continuing dehumanisation of the global South.

To be sure here, global South for Menon – as he draws from the work of the pioneering sociologist, Boaventura de Sousa Santos – is 'epistemological rather than a geographical south' (Menon 2022: 2). As humanities and arts in higher education – particularly in South Africa – are trying to find

ways of healing from the coloniality of knowledge, this collection is an excellent contribution that demonstrates many ways of humanising ourselves. This book builds on scholarship that places African categories at the centre of research such as the work of scholars like Oyeronke Oyewumi who have cast a spotlight on Yoruba kinship and social stratification concepts to challenge Western theories of gender – particularly her pioneering book, *The Invention of Women* published in 1997.

Quite different from post-colonial theory's approach, *Changing Theory* is not preoccupied with just the critique of the Eurocentric paradigm of thought and its occlusions but demonstrates practical ways of thinking from the global South. Through this enterprise, many of the essays in this edited volume show the limits of singular trajectories of thought and being, the role of dictionaries in flattening global south concepts, the epistemic erasure facilitated by translation and standardisation of African languages by the missionaries and European linguists. Through showing the violence and putting it into a conversation with global south concepts, this work truly demonstrates the “pluriversal” ways of thinking and being (de Sousa Santos 2014).

The starting point for most of the essays is the global South. To echo Jay Ke-Schutte, starting from the global South ‘disrupts, complicates, diversify, and provincialize’ encounters between ‘the West and its Others’. For example, the essay by Noha Fikry looks at the concept *tabiyya*, translated as nurturing, teaching or education, and the rearing of animals on one's rooftop. Employing a deeply ethnographic methodological approach, this study looks into how this concept is mobilised by the ordinary people in Egypt, specifically women, as it is they who rear the chickens. Through a carefully considered approach and narratives from women in a rural community in Egypt, Fikry makes it clear that the epistemologies embedded in this concept imply not just the practise of nurturing or teaching, but the value of understanding food that is rooted in an intimate human-animal relation of nurturance, feeding, and discipline. This essay puts the labour of theorising from global South concepts in practise, as opposed to the practise of using global south as the laboratory to extract data and using Northern theory for interpretation. It deviates from the translation of concepts to global North equivalents nor relies on dictionaries for standard definitions. Pointing to the dangers of translations, Mahmood Kooria, writing on Marumakkattayam, argues that ‘definitions and translations of particular words and related concepts have been instrumental in the colonial and post-colonial patriarchal systems to subjugate the matrilineal, and matrilocal praxis’ (Menon 2022: 11).

Many essays in this book unearth the global South epistemologies to a considerable degree, but other essays do not foreground such concepts, but

rather put more emphasis on the post-colonial theory approaches: such as showing the western occlusions and shortcomings. Edwin Etieyibo's essay on the concept *logic* for example challenges the 'relativity' of logic by analysing the contributions of African philosophers in the field of logic. In other words, this essay challenges the universalization of European theory of what is and what is not logic by taking African contexts seriously. This essay does a beautiful job in reviewing scholarship on logic, considering the different scholarly currents and camps and African philosophies demonstrates trivalent or polyvalent logic that goes beyond the dichotomy of true or false logic. Etieyibo pays attention to the dynamism of logic as reflected in African languages, especially among Alcholi people of Uganda. The main argument by the author is that African ontology does not subscribe to binaries or taking reality as simply a contestation between two being or substance or stuffs and its logic reflects this ontology (Menon 2022:77). This essay, however, does not engage a global South concept/s, but instead relies on secondary scholarship that deal with more than one concept from different contexts. The risks of not focusing on one concept or context is that the arguments can be general, teleological and lack historical specificity. While it is important to engage and to be critical of western concepts, to foreground them as our starting point can trap one into the epistemic horizons of the western concepts.

Out of twenty essays, there are about five that consider concepts that come from the African continent, and three from South Africa. As a project conceptualised and published in the African 'south', it is deeply dissatisfying that there are only marginal essays that consider concepts that emanate from this geographic part of the South. As much as the global South we are talking about here is not necessarily geographic, the urgency of the voices, relevance, and importance knowledges of the people from the African continent should have been foregrounded more than they currently are in *Changing Theory*. If the argument is that there was lack of response from the continent to the call, then this calls for deep introspection on why this is the case, especially given the historical fact that Africa has been the most erased and silenced in the discursive and theoretical areas.

One of the essays from the African continent is that by John Wright and Cynthia Kros – Izithunguthu. It is a focused and detailed account not only on a concept, but the historical conditions of the production of that account. These two historians look at the meaning-making of the concept *isithunguthu* through a deep textual analysis of an account by Thununu kaNonjiya Gcabashe, a knowledgeable African elder about the Zulu kingship, recorded by James Stuart, a missionary turned magistrate in early twentieth century colonial Natal.

Wright and Kros' essay probes the interests of the two interlocutors and how they shape the account in a particular way. Stuart's interest, for example, into where the concept *isithunguthu* was used, was to utilise these conversations towards the kind of knowledge that could inform better colonial policy making (Menon 2020:101). It is important to underscore the fact that Wright and Kros don't frame African intellectuals, whether Christian or otherwise, as 'sources', but rather as interlocutors or discussants with the white missionaries who were doing the research on them. Through looking at African intellectuals in this way, we understand them not only as 'atavistic relayers of oral tradition' but as thinkers engaged in public intellectual life (Cowling and Hamilton 2020). Beyond the two protagonists in this account, Kros and Wright also look at how other texts such as early dictionaries, including AT Bryant's Zulu-English dictionary as well as Bishop Colenso's English-Zulu dictionary, defined this concept to see how it resounded in other contexts around that same period.

By focusing carefully on just one account, and the factors that shaped it, Wright, and Kros, unearth meaning-making through this concept in a way that is deeply contextual. The focused nature of this particular essay makes it a critical methodological intervention in studying concepts from the global south. One of the dangers of tracing a biography of concepts is to focus on many texts or ethnographic accounts without exhausting the possibilities of a single account and their discursive potency. What Wright and Kros have demonstrated in this essay is that one can start from a very small account, exhaust its analysis, and move on to other accounts. The work of humanising the global South should be carefully done and be innovative.

My own dissertation, in progress, employs this approach. I trace the biography of political authority concepts – that of *umbuso* ('home') is at the centre of the enquiry – focusing on a south-east African region, known as the Eastern Cape province in South Africa today. Similar to Hlonipha Mokoena's work such as her seminal Magma Fuze: The Making of a *Kholwa* Intellectual, I foreground African intellectuals' archival sources recuperated from the vernacular press in the early nineteenth and twentieth centuries, transcribed oral disquisitions of Africans by their missionary interlocutors, commissioned reports, and creative texts of African writers, all of which, circulated for public consumption in these eras. My methodological approach extends Wright and Kros' parameters which pays attention to the context surrounding the production of the records in which these concepts emanate – the political and epistemological context of the time. My work also considers the intellectual inheritances of the African recorder, in which 'home' is conceptualised as an institution of knowledge, and the networks into which these recorders tapped. I also pay attention to the semantic density of the concept *umbuso* and related concepts by breaking down their morphological

composition. Lastly, I focus on the complex conceptual structures in every account, as well as the movement of the concept across discursive fields in the same period (including dictionaries and their contemporaries).

I highlight my methodological framework here, not only because it has strong resonances with Wright, Kros and Mokoena's approaches. I mention it to show the complexity and creativity to be appreciated in this developing field. Perhaps the advantage of undertaking work in this field is the room for experimentation and yet care, in undertaking this work. Bhekizwe Peterson has highlighted the importance of Black Humanities in research in a decolonising university in South Africa. By Black Humanities, Peterson meant foregrounding philosophical thought of the century or so *before* colonialism – and to trace their shoots of continuity in the early colonial era in methodologically illuminating ways. This volume is exemplary in this call, and does so in beautiful ways, not without limitations which I have mentioned. It urgently needs to be included in the humanities curriculum of our universities.

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