“Categories of cross-cultural cognition and the African condition” – E Biakolo

Statement of the question:

Biakolo (2002: 38) identifies a problem. That is, he realises that a critical question was how the Western World thought about the “other”. The “other”, in this case, was the non-Caucasian races. Since the fifteenth century, the Western World has come into contact with these non-Caucasian races, and tried to make sense of the people that seemed so foreign to them.

Biakolo’s investigation thus serves two purposes. Firstly, he wants to present and analyse the descriptions provided by the Western world in order to make sense of the non-Caucasian races. Secondly, Biakolo wants to determine whether the answers provided by the Western world are useful to illuminate and understand the African condition. “Cross-cultural cognition” is understood as the question about the meaning and function of knowledge, in this case, across Western and African cultures and the subsequent ideas about the “African condition”.

Thesis to be defended

Western cross-cultural paradigms provide no key to understanding and knowing the African past and present. Instead, they have served the colonisation of Africa well and continue to ensure the exploitation of Africa.

Approach and method

Biakolo’s approach is to study specific texts attributed to particular thinkers from the Western world. The author identifies the categories of cognition that each thinker or group of thinkers are associated with. Five categories are identified: savage vs civilised; pre-logical vs logical; perceptual vs conceptual; oral vs written; religious vs scientific.

Then the study proceeds to show how and why the specific texts are interconnected, even if they deal with different categories of cognition or knowledge.

(a) Savage vs civilised

Biakolo submits that before Lévy-Bruhl, the division between savage and civilised was the dominant Western paradigm in understanding the “other”. The African was seen as “savage” and the Westerner as “civilised”. The savage African was seen as unable to have individual genius, whereas the civilised Westerner was capable of possessing individual genius. In 1871 Henry Morgan even went as far as designating different levels of savagery (Lower Savagery, Middle Savagery, Upper Savagery, Lower Barbarism, Upper Barbarism and Civilisation). The only society that attained the level of “civilisation” in this framework was the Euro-American society, attributed to their ability of writing and a phonetic alphabet (Biakolo 2002:38).

The debate that supported the above assertion was that between the monogenists and the polygenists. The story of creation according to the Christian Bible was the basis for the debate.
The monogenists argued that “god” created only one race, and that only this race was truly human. The polygenists argued that if “god” created many races, then all the other races were not given the same soul.\(^1\) One implication is that other races were inferior to Westerners. Another is that, because of their inferiority based on their sub-humanity, it was rational and justified to treat those races as subhuman beings – for example, by colonising and enslaving them. When he appeared on the scene, Lévy-Bruhl made a paradigm shift by introducing the categories of “pre-logical” and “logical” (Biakolo 2002:39).

(b) Pre-logical vs logical

Lévy-Bruhl focused on what he called the psychological foundations of primitive culture, and this marked a turning point in the understanding of the “other”. He was not freed completely from the ideology of inferior versus superior human beings because he also regarded the “other” as “undeveloped people”. He described these peoples’ material culture and way of life as manifestations of the “pre-logical mentality”: a mentality which does not have a logical character (Biakolo 2002:39). Instead, it is a mentality which simply associates one thing with another, even when associations are logically impossible. This mentality is thus the mentality of “participation” in being. It is incapable of standing back and looking logically at being from a distance. According to Lévy-Bruhl it is precisely the indifference to logic of the “underdeveloped peoples”, their submission to the “law of participation” which must now be used as the key to understanding these peoples. Also, for Lévy-Bruhl, the family, kinship relations and mode of production in societies of the “underdeveloped peoples” was just the material expressions of the group’s mentality rather than the individual. Lévy-Bruhl, as summarised by Biakolo (2002:40), thought that:

*Primitive culture is participated in collectively, it is a shared reality. The idea of individual, and, by implication, dissident, grasp or assessment of reality, individual creativity, and so on, runs counter to the ethos of primitive culture.*

In the light of the above, Biakolo (2002:40) observes that taking the cue from Lévy-Bruhl’s theory, the French created two types of African. One was elevated to civilisation through assimilation into French culture and the other was abandoned at the level of the savage. Nonetheless the state had to deal with the “savage” as well. The British, on the other hand, relying on functionalist anthropology, allowed the Africans some degree of independence provided this was exercised according to the precepts and within the parameters determined by the British “master”. Biakolo described this as the situation of “cultural conquest”. He then suggests it succeeded to some extent because the natives’ religion was replaced with the conqueror’s religion and the entire educational system of the conquered was pushed aside and ignored. The result was that accepting the religion and the education of the conqueror became the prerequisite for entry into political and social life (Biakolo 2002:41).

\(^1\) See the subheading “Spiritual racism” in section 1.2 of the essay “The struggle for reason in Africa” (2002).
(c) Perceptual vs conceptual

Claude Lévi-Strauss introduced the categories, “perceptual” and “conceptual” as a response to Lévy-Bruhl. His purpose was to show that the “primitive mind” was logical and that its conceptual schemes were structured in orderly fashion. For Lévi-Strauss the “primitive mind” was “magical” whereas that of the “civilised” Westerner was “scientific”. According to Biakolo, ...

Lévi-Strauss argued, however, that primitive man [sic] had a genuine scientific spirit and logical-categorical abilities, as can be seen in his [sic] nominal and classificatory systems and his myths. He admits that these modes of knowledge-acquisition are not necessarily the reserve of any one culture. Yet, fundamental differences exist between civilized and primitive cultures” (Biakolo 2002:41).

The difference is that mythical thought borrows from a diversity of sources whenever it expresses itself. The point is that the sources are limited and mythical thought has to rely only on them because it cannot conceive or contrive alternatives (Biakolo 2002:41). Lévi-Strauss calls the process the “bricolage”. Bricolage is a thought pattern which conserves knowledge by means of the reorganisation of what is already known. Thus it remains perceptual. By contrast, the conceptual method of knowledge acquisition and construction opens up new possibilities of knowledge by extension and renewal.

Biakolo (2002:41) then makes the following critical remark: Lévi-Strauss’s reluctance “to identify any culture with a mythical or scientific spirit poses a problem and not merely a moral one”. The structuralist thesis is that all life and culture present themselves in binary form. The thesis has a clear universalist thrust – “all”. Yet it is circumscribed and limited only to individuals within cultures. Why is the binarism not extended among cultures as well? If the extension is allowed, then it will be seen that all forms of the organisation and articulation of knowledge are binary. This in effect means that knowledge is tied to place and race (Biakolo 2002:41–42).

On this basis Lévi-Strauss may be described as an adherent of the binary view of racial and cultural forms of knowledge. Furthermore, Biakolo (2002:42) tests the claim that myth and science are dichotomous orders. The test is focused on the relationship between the dichotomous orders. Is the relationship to be characterised as a subordinate or a superordinate one? This question serves to show that “the selection of the terms of a paradigm are coloured ideologically” (Biakolo 2002:42).

(d) Oral vs written

Some scholars argue that Western civilisation owes its origin to writing. Without the invention of writing there could not have been Western civilisation. Writing, as a new method of communication, had some consequences. Before the invention of writing, humans relied on speech. Time was an important point of reference in the sense that speech was often linked to a
particular event or events. However, this linkage with regard to events that had already happened relied exclusively on memory. There was thus a living interconnection of time and memory. With the introduction of writing, a shift occurred. Memory was no longer very important because what had to be remembered was readily available in the form of writing. The ability to retrieve the memorable in turn demanded a focus on the space occupied by the written word. It thus displaced the focus on the event in relation to time. How knowledge was presented after the invention of writing differed from that of knowledge presentation through the spoken word (Biakolo 2002:42).

Due to the primary focus on the event, the oral word often took the form of a story, a descriptive narrative of the event. No doubt analysis and interpretation of the event occurred, but these were – in general – not as pronounced as the narration itself. Oral cultures then leaned towards tradition and conservativism: traditional in the sense that they are conveyed from one generation to the other and conservative in the sense that what is conveyed by tradition remains almost unchanged over a long period of time. Thus oral cultures are participative. Following the invention of writing, presentation of written knowledge was dominated by description, definition and analysis, according to Biakolo (2002:42). Discussions based on this model of knowledge presentation tend to be abstract. They are more the expression of an individual than a communal understanding of issues.

Biakolo (2002:43) then proceeds to question the above in the light of some scholars’ arguments. One of his questions reads as follows: The writing of history takes into account a number of factors in the reconstruction of the past. Yet in this case the argument is that only one item – writing – is the cause of Western civilisation. Is this claim not rather odd from the historiographical point of view? Another question is: It is commonly assumed that we owe the alphabet to the Greeks. However, studies by Gelb have demonstrated that this assumption is invalid. Biakolo (2002:43) argues also that if writing is the basis of civilisation then those who belong to the mind-set of the written civilisation are precluded from having access to oral consciousness. Do they not remain trapped in the culture of writing without the possibility of stepping out of it?

Furthermore, Biakolo (2002:44–45) notes that the distinction between orality and literacy (the written word) has been elaborated on in such a manner that only the literary has been elevated to the status of “science” and civilisation. Contrary to this position, Biakolo argues, that there is no scientific basis for the claim that writing is the essence of culture. Therefore the distinction between the written and the spoken word should not be exaggerated.

(e) Religious vs scientific

Here Biakolo (2002:45) focuses on the question: May we say “primitive thought” is rational at all? Three positions are distinguishable: (1) “primitive thought” is irrational, illogical and unscientific, (2) “primitive thought” is rational and logical but not scientific, or, alternatively, it
is rational but illogical and unscientific, and (3) “primitive thought” is as rational as scientific thought within its own cultural context. Biakolo (2002:45) suggests that Robin Horton takes all three positions into account in his works. Even though Horton holds that African traditional thought and scientific thought are analogous, one crucial distinction remains, which is the closedness of African thought which “neither understands nor tolerates alternative thought” (Biakolo 2002:46). As such, African thought is still perceived to be lacking in logic and philosophy.

Biakolo then urges us to consider the criteria of science (2002:46). He is critical of the seemingly “objective” rules that scientists abide by. Even the Popperian solution to the problem of science falls short of satisfactory (Biakolo 2002:46). It seems that “the very foundations of scientific and logical rationality turn out to be no more than intuition or convention” (Biakolo 2002:46).

Biakolo concludes that in the final analysis “science” is no more than a human convention. In the language of postmodern philosophy, science may be described as faith, a grand belief in a particular model of knowledge construction and presentation.

Conclusion

Biakolo has considered the arguments for and against the five categories. (Please note here Biakolo’s uneasy shift from “category” to “paradigm”, creating the impression that the two are synonymous. They are not synonyms and he appears to be aware of this, though his usage suggests the opposite.) He concludes that the “cross-cultural paradigms” are actually obscure efforts to come to grips with the African condition. They provide no access to understanding either the past or the present of Africa. They have served great uses in the colonisation and exploitation of Africa, as Mudimbe suggests. But they provide no key to the knowledge of Africa. On the contrary, their perpetuation merely serves to repeat the outdated myth of Africa as the “white man’s burden”. It is important to note that Biakolo arrives at this conclusion on the basis of the following procedure: He presents Westerners’ arguments with regard to their understanding of the cognitive potentialities of the “other”, in this case the African. He has, presumably as an African, shown the strengths and weaknesses of these arguments. In doing so, the voice of the African was articulated by him only, despite his mention of Mudimbe. He refers to the “African condition” without actually describing and explaining what this condition means. Therefore it is doubtful whether his conclusion is entirely sustainable. But remember that Biakolo’s aim was to identify Western ways of knowing and interpreting the “other” – in this case the African.