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Appraisal of African Epistemology in the Global System

Ndubuisi Christian Ani

Abstract

Prior to colonialism, Africans as every other people with common identity and culture had their peculiar way of attaining knowledge and confronting life issues. However, with the dawn of western expansionism, western-oriented mode of behaviour and knowledge acquisition became objectified and universalized. Consequently, any form of knowledge that did not conform to the western model was deemed irrational and unworthy of scholarship. Since the ostensible decolonization of the continent after independence, education in Africa remains western oriented. Outsiders, as well as some Africans, dismiss African-oriented epistemology as being unscientific and delusory. Albeit the debasement of African epistemology has become somewhat obsolete, mainstream epistemological considerations rely hugely on western oriented and universalized form of knowledge acquisition. Beyond the purported ‘unscientific’ nature of African epistemology, this research underscores that powerful nations delineate what constitute valid knowledge worthy of pursuit and what is not. Beside its holistic nature, the intuitive, religious and mythological perspectives in the consideration of African epistemology are justified and deserving to be considered in contemporary education system and epistemological discourses. Any attempt at considering knowledge under the lens of western-oriented epistemology alone, is a procrustean reductionism. A better decolonization of the continent can be achieved with the transformation of the mindset of Africans to appreciate their indigenous form of knowledge and incorporate it in contemporary education and epistemological discourses. Additionally, Africans ought to develop their socio-economic and political system to give the continent a reasonable power-base to assert itself and its epistemological views in the global system.

Keywords: African epistemology, Western epistemology, rationality, intuition, myth, religious knowledge

0. Introduction

It is rather unfortunate that contemporary epistemological¹ discourses rarely capture the plural indigenous knowledge systems which had made meaning to individuals, peoples as well as cultural groups in the past. These indigenous knowledge systems continue to make profound meaning to people in the face of the limitations of mainstream scientific epistemological traditions. Although it shares commonalities with other non-African people, African indigenous knowledge in particular, continues to have profound and meaningful bearing on the lives, behaviour and thinking of people of African descent. Yet, in the academia and epistemological discourses, African-oriented knowledge systems are deemed unworthy of academic considerations – if not by design, then by default. African indigenous forms of knowledge acquisition (with its commonalities and particularities) have virtually been dislodged for a strictly western-oriented² scientific form of knowledge acquisition in the continent. The denigration of African-oriented epistemology in contemporary academic considerations in Africa is consequent from a long history of racial debasement of the humanity and rationality of Africans as well as the historical western superiority context.

Munyadrazi Mawere (2011:1) notes that,

there is monumental literature by philosophers like David Hume,

¹ Epistemology is construed as ‘the study of theories about the nature and scope of knowledge, the evaluation of the presuppositions and basis of knowledge, and the scrutiny of knowledge claims’ (Kaphagawani & Malherbe 2002:220).

² A dominant epistemological tradition espoused by western powers which regard scientific methods as the genuine and universal means of knowledge acquisition. Although virtually every culture has scientific means of knowledge acquisition, science is not considered by some indigenous knowledge systems (especially African indigenous knowledge systems) as the only genuine means of knowledge acquisition.

George W.F. Hegel, Immanuel Kant, Lucien Levy-Bruhl and Diedrich Westermann that describe Africans as ‘tabula rasa’, a people with no reason/rationality; hence without a history and worse still philosophy.

In the context of the colonial relationship between Africa and the west, African epistemology was degradingly deemed irrational and unscientific because it was allegedly opined to be muddled with emotions, religious beliefs, intuitions and myths (Hallen 2004:29; Laleye 2002:87). The superiority context of western colonial powers meant that they were unwilling to find meaning in the ideas, values and systems that run athwart to theirs. In line with the educational legacy imposed on the continent, African-oriented knowledge systems and values were regarded as unworthy of academic pursuit – except for studies by some anthropologists, colonial officials and mission-oriented personnel from mission organisations. The majority of these people regarded African knowledge systems as of a lesser form and not important for the developing of an Africa-based modern knowledge system.

Apart from the denigration of African indigenous knowledge, debates on the validity of African epistemological views were shrouded by underlying impressions of the inferiority of African minds. Western philosophers had been sceptical about the existence, if not certain of the absence, of rationality and reflective thought in African minds (Odhiambo 2010:9). Besides the role of slave trade and colonialism in institutionalizing the inferiority of Africans, the works of renowned European academic thinkers such as that of Immanuel Kant and David Hume, among many others, reinforced the idea of the inferiority of African minds and serviced Western expansionist agenda. In his *Essay ‘Of National Characters’* (1776:152), Hume (1997:33) in a footnote states, ‘I am apt to suspect the Negroes and in general all other species of men (for there are four or five different kinds) to be naturally inferior to the whites’. While referring to a statement made by a Negro carpenter, Kant (1997:57) in his *On National Characteristics* (1724) avers, ‘this fellow was quite black from head to foot, a clear proof that what he said was stupid’. This judgement was made not in assessment of the value of the Negro’s statement but based on his colour. For Kant, blacks are inherently stupid or rather irrational. Such claims provided theoretical groundings and justification for the subjugation, exploitation,

oppression and ill-treatment of Africans who were construed to be less human than their Western counterparts.

This research notes from the outset that the use of the terms *African* and *Western* is not used in a racial sense. As noted by Ron Mallon (2006:529), the fact that racial essences do not exist is an ontological consensus. In his essay, 'Race, Culture, Identity: Misunderstood Connections' (1994), Anthony Kwame Appiah frees us from the shackles of racial distinctions. As a racial skeptic, Appiah (1994:64) contends that race does not exist because racial terms and concepts fail to describe or refer to anything real. For Appiah, since racial identities, terms and concepts are derivative of the false conception of racial essences, it follows that they are false as well. It becomes corollary to argue that racial identities, terms and concepts be abrogated in the understanding and activities of society (Mallon 2006:529). Nonetheless, there exist groups of people with shared culture, historical experience, believe and value system, etc. Far from racializing the terms *African* and *western*, this study contends that the cultural, historical and geographical background of Africans, Westerners and people of other different regions have led to variances in epistemological views.

Against this backdrop, the research aims at appraising African-oriented epistemology in the global system dominated by western-oriented³ epistemological views. Although science is also considered as a means of knowledge acquisition in Africa, it does not account as the only valid and genuine means of knowledge acquisition as propagated by the western tradition. African indigenous knowledge systems have a multifaceted means of acquiring knowledge (Kaphagawani & Malherbe 2002). This study contends with the African-oriented principles and forms of knowledge acquisition such as the intuitive, religious and mythological means, which are easily dismissed in mainstream western epistemological discourses. Albeit sharing common traits with other forms of knowledge, African indigenous forms of knowledge acquisition – with its particularities – ought to be considered seriously in the academic and epistemological milieu. This will go a long way in promoting the values entrenched in African indigenous

³ The use of western-oriented scientific epistemology is meant to denote that the scientific epistemology which has become the mainstream epistemological tradition has resulted from the western objectification and universalization of scientific form of knowledge.

knowledge systems which has been marginalized in mainstream epistemological debates.

The first section of this article engages African epistemology in crises. It examines whether there are divergent rationalities about how things ought to be amongst peoples. It goes further to explore the bearing of power relations on the constitution of what is valid knowledge and what is not. The second section considers the nature of African-oriented epistemology. The third section examines some perspectives in the consideration of African epistemology such as the intuitive, religious and mythological perspectives⁴. The fourth section culminates the study with recommendations for the appraisal of African epistemology in the global system.

1.0 African Epistemology in Crisis

Over the years, Western philosophers tend to consider knowledge to be strongly tied to a universal truth. Western philosophers such as René Descartes, Francis Bacon, Augustus Comte, David Hume, John Locke, Bishop George Berkeley, etc. have all sought to attain absolute certainty in knowledge. In their obsession for absolute certainty, they adjudge whatever they ‘clearly’ conceive as knowledge or the right means of attaining knowledge to be indubitable and universal truth. Significantly, the deep seated quest in western philosophers for certainty was realized with the scientific revolution in the seventeenth century CE. The heralds of the emerging science such as Francis Bacon (1561-1626), Sir Isaac Newton (1643-1727), Pierre Simon de Laplace (1749-1827)⁵, etc. laid great stress on observation, experiments and mathematical reasoning as the right means of obtaining information about reality (Copleston 1963:89). Science yielded

⁴ This study observes that the foregoing perspectives of African epistemology share common traits with non-African indigenous epistemologies. Yet, such commonalities are varied in the African context. The study aims therefore to ensure that African epistemology (with its commonalities and particularities) is incorporated in the academic and epistemological discourses in Africa as well as the globe.

⁵ Pierre Simon de Laplace (1749-1827) acclaimed that the ‘universe is deterministic’ and that scientific laws could help us ‘predict everything that would happen in the universe including human behavior’ (Hawking 1988:53).

(and continues to yield) tremendous effect in our world. An intellectual fanaticism grew in the western world acclaiming science as having utmost authority in the interpretations of life over other forms of interpretations such as philosophical, religious, mythical, spiritual, humanistic and social (Franz 1953:822). If we are to attain any true knowledge at all, the scientific method of inquiry is considered the only means of attaining genuine knowledge and the best way of explaining reality meaningfully.

Albeit the foregoing *scientistic* view has been criticized severally in the face of scientific limitations, this view continues to hold subtle and implicit sway in western epistemological and academic discourses. Via western expansionism, scientific epistemological and academic traditions have been imposed and universalized as the proper means of attaining valid knowledge. Any form of knowledge that does not conform to scientific standards is considered delusory and unworthy of consideration in the academic milieu. With the colonial relationship between Africans and Westerners in particular, Western-driven scientific epistemology came to predominate the education and epistemological discourses in Africa as well as the globe. Traditional African view and rationality regarding what constitute adequate knowledge became dislodged for that prescribed by western powers.

Interestingly, Stephen Theron (1995:16) in his 1995 work entitled *Africa, Philosophy and the Western Tradition*, contends that rationality and spirituality is common to humans but westerners developed this tradition first. Hence, it is their (westerners) prerogative to share those riches with others (Theron 1995:26). Such western supremacist view was confidently surmised by Hume (1997:33) as follows:

There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation. No ingenious manufactures amongst them, no arts, no sciences.

As insisted by Theron (1995:27), Westerners ‘having a variety of gifts’ must help others in ‘the dissemination and appropriation of philosophical and scientific culture’. Thus, Africans, as well as other people with non-western views, should strive to adopt and imbibe the prototypic western way of life

and scientific epistemological views⁶. For Theron, western rationality, views and judgments are supreme and universal.

Studies have shown however that rationality is many-sided (Nel 2005; Gyekye 1987; Langdon 2009; Foucault 1977; etc.). While grappling with the fact that there are plural and divergent views about issues between peoples, Kwame Gyekye (1987:25) holds aptly that rationality is essentially a cultural phenomenon that reflects the cultural experience and background of people. Despite the rigorous efforts of reasoning made in the hope of arriving at a single answer that everyone will resonate with, rational discourses end up creating different possible answers that may be incommensurable with each other. As noted by Hofstede (1980:25), culture is ‘the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one human group from another’. People who belong to a cultural group perceive the world in a certain way that may be different from the worldview of others and their peculiar worldview binds them together. Yet, no culture can claim superiority over another (Browaays & Price 2008:10).

In tandem with Gyekye (1987), reasoning, knowledge, attitudes, behaviours and living standards are determined by the socio-cultural milieu, environmental background, and the specific period of time and space in which people live in. Thus, ‘the philosophy of an individual thinker’ cannot be divorced ‘from the ideas current among the people’ (Gyekye 1987:25)⁷.

People have a predilection to consider or interpret things in different ways according to their cultural, religious, emotional, educational and epochal background in such a way that their conclusions may be entirely different from the conclusions of people of a different background confronted with similar issues⁸. Relativist as it is, the complexity of the universe could

⁶ Although, non-westerners resonate with scientific epistemology, Westerners – in a bid to highlight their supremacist ideologies – tend to focus on scientific form of knowledge acquisition as the only valid means of acquiring knowledge thereby debasing other ways of acquiring knowledge.

⁷ For instance, a Christian may view reality from a different spiritual perspective from a Muslim or a pagan given their different spiritual tenets and convictions. The difference in perception and worldview also affect one’s reasoning with regards to issues of life.

⁸ Hence, although epistemology is about the study of knowledge, the means by which people derive knowledge vary from one milieu to another.

hardly be explicable from an absolute paradigm. Wiredu (2004:13) argues that the advantage of relativism is that it entertains differences between cultures but it does not remain there because it provides grounds for dialogues between them. Hence, on what basis should western rationality and views be objectified and universalized to the detriment of the rationality and views of non-westerners? In this regard it is important to note that culture inevitably articulates with knowledge. The question is whether this is acknowledged and accommodated or not⁹.

Michel Montaigne (2013) maintains that clinging tenaciously to one's views while ignoring that of others is being irrational. Marie-Joelle Browaeys and Roger Price (2008:9) note that 'each society defines its own norms and the ways in which they are realized'. Every culture has the right to conceive the world in its own image (Wiredu 1980:60). Although African epistemology reckons with the scientific means of knowing, it does not consider scientific methods to be the only valid and reliable means of knowledge acquisition. Based on what yardstick should western view of what should constitute a valid epistemology enjoy monopoly and universality at the expense of the African one?

In a world characterized by power relations, Foucault aptly contends that power makes absolute knowledge. For Foucault:

Truth is a thing of this world. 'Truth' is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which induce and which extend it (Foucault 1977:131-132).

Whatever is seen as an absolute truth is a social construct determined by powerful and influential people (Foucault 1977:131). Using their resources e.g. wealth, ideas with universalizing tendencies, and technologies, few people (in this study, the Western academy) who wield power and influence over other people coerce them to accept their views and rationality as true. In accord with Dare Arowolo (2010:1) 'colonialism, slave trade and

⁹ Philip Nel (2005:8) in line with Edward Wadie Said, notes that 'rationality and truth are related to local conditions and are culture-bound, and it is a myth that truth claimed by the Western world is free from preconditions, historical locality, and non-political'.

missionaries are the bastions of Western civilization and culture in Africa'. Intentionally and unintentionally, colonialism and western civilization suppressed African ways of life and thought processes. Marais Rogas (1994) argues that the colonialists did not only find raw materials in lands, they also found raw materials in human beings who they could impose their structures and ideologies on. African ways of life and epistemological views became considered as archaic, obsolete, primitive, savage and unworthy of academic pursuit. Colonially imposed western systems gradually permeated the socio-economic and political aspects of Africa¹⁰.

In line with Martin Odei Ajei (2007:112), 'western science has portrayed itself as the only universally valid framework for the explanation and prediction of natural and social phenomena'. Any form of knowledge that does not meet the standards of science is deemed irrational, nonsensical and unworthy of being referred to as knowledge at all. Despite the supposed decolonization of the continent in post-colonial Africa, African education systems remain largely modelled and dependent on western systems of education that are largely informed by western-based scientific methodologies. As products of western education, some post-colonial African scholars deem African rationality and knowledge systems as primitive, superstitious, and unacceptable. Besides, the strict western mode of censorship in the education sector forces African scholars to write scholarly works in tandem with mainstream western-oriented epistemologies (Mawere 2011:2). One has to be nurtured in western education and epistemologies to survive and fit in the western imposed political, economic and social system. Subsequent sections shall discuss African epistemology emphasizing the limits of western scientifically-based epistemology.

2.0 African Epistemology in Context

Bert Hamminga (2005:57) is instructive in noting that the African epistemological view is immediately social. In African epistemology, an individual is insufficient to attain knowledge alone without doing so in a social context (Ajei 2007:191). Ernest A. Ruch (1984:47) notes that the

¹⁰ For Theron (1995:12) the rest of humanity are mere users and beneficiaries of the '... Western movement of technology, natural and social science, philosophy and, even or especially, religion ...'.

African Knower thinks in, for and through his/her society. Via one's participation in the social context, one knows. In this respect, knowledge comes as a given via tradition, ancestors and heritage. Here, the acquisition of knowledge becomes a 'we' enterprise (Hamminga 2005:58). In the western system on the other hand, knowledge is predominantly an individual quest. The individual sets oneself apart and analyzes objects independently.

African epistemology is often indicted for being a communal venture that denies individuals the ability to reason and come up with knowledge that is uninfluenced by society and the irrationality of the community. However, western epistemology, steeped in the scientific tradition as noted by Theron (1995:16), is oblivious that one is inevitably influenced by societal factors in one's interpretations and judgements of reality. Francis Bacon envisioned a science that derives its knowledge and its explanation of reality solely from empirical observation without speculations and social influences (Sahakian 1968:125). In tandem with Francis Bacon, logical positivists claim that scientists approach nature with an innocent and uncorrupted eye devoid of background assumptions before making theories in a bid to understand and explain reality.

However, Sandra Hardings à la Thomas Kuhn (1922-1996) and Paul Feyerabend (1924-1994) contends that scientific theories are socially constructed and ordered (Ajei 2007:112; Kuhn 1962:53). The problems and things that need focus in our environments, e.g. the problems of cancer, HIV/AIDS, security, etc., and our attempt to solve those problems, determine and direct scientific observations. Anthony O'Hear (1989:16) insists that we cannot make any observation without some unverified point of view or some ideas concerning the nature of what we are observing. A scientist making observations would ignore some facts because he or she inevitably has some idea of what kind of thing he or she wants to observe. So, scientific judgments about reality inevitably reflect the background myths, biases, beliefs, values and imaginations of the people who engage in the observation of reality. African epistemology is not faced with the challenge involved in the denial of societal influence in one's knowledge and interpretation of things. The participation and efforts of Individuals in society also contribute to the derivation of knowledge in its social dimension as well. Zulu M. Itibari (2006:37) rightly observes that Indigenous African knowledge is not based or derivative from individuals alone but it is a communal or collective understanding and rationalization of community. Such collective

understanding emphasizes the dialectics, cooperation and togetherness involved in knowledge acquisition as against the individualistic or rather self-glorifying means that ignores the social element in acquiring knowledge.

Placide Tempels (1959:40) contends that in African epistemology, there is an intimate ontological bond and relationship between every being. Tempels (1959:41) posits that the African view of a *world of forces (beings)* is like ‘a spider’s web of which no single thread can be caused to vibrate without shaking the whole network’. Hence, African-oriented knowledge is derivative from a chain of relationships. Like a spider’s web, the knowledge of one aspect of reality is intertwined with the knowledge of other aspects (Onyewuenyi 1991; Tempels 1959:41) ¹¹. Ruch (1984:36) affirms that in African epistemology, knowledge is an integrative grasp of reality. It entails the recognition that the whole universe is a single whole. Every aspect of reality is interdependent on each other. Thus, in the vision of totality, Africans conceive reality to be in harmony. According to Ruch (1984), an African seeks the order that ought to be in the universe and uses his/her findings to give meaning to his/her existence and the existence of the whole of reality. In this respect, African epistemology takes on a holistic approach that encompasses experiential, rational, religious, intuitive, symbolic, mythical, and emotional aspects of reality.

Western epistemological tradition is prominent for being technical and analytical in such a way that our world outlook is subjected to systematic scrutiny through rigorous rational analytic methods (Wiredu 1991:87). Westerners contend with reality by making methodological, mathematical and logical formations that aid scholars to differentiate between what is rational, empirical or mystical. Sogolo (2002:264) argues that Westerners have only managed to bypass, ‘not resolve’, the problem of the one and many by only comprehending reality fragmentarily. Reflective of René Descartes’ works, westerners abstract and fragment mind and body, spirit and material, etc. to acquire ‘indubitable’ knowledge. Yet, as argued by Ajei (2007:190),

¹¹ Placide Tempels’s *Bantu Philosophy* is seminal as it sparked the debates and interests on the existence and nature of African philosophy (Odhiambo 2010:26). However, Tempels’ work *Bantu Philosophy* is also criticized – mainly for being a study to aid westerners in their efforts and strategies to civilize and Christianize Africans who were still considered savage and primitive (Odhiambo 2010:26).

western fragmentation of knowledge has yielded unnecessary distinctions in reality. It has created distinctions between objectivism and subjectivism, rationalism and empiricism. In such dichotomized epistemological system, human beings are separated from nature. Humans become objective analysers of nature. The disconnection between humans and other parts of nature has led humans to act as superiors and exploiters of nature.

However, in African-oriented epistemology, such dichotomy rarely exists. Reflective of its holistic nature, there is no such division as rationalism and empiricism, subjectivism and objectivism, secular and the supernatural among many other western-driven dichotomies (Ajei 2007:190). Humans and nature are inextricable in such a way that we (humans) cannot know the object (nature) if detached (Ajei 2007:191). This connected form of knowledge is a knowledge that is conscious of the hierarchy, interaction and cohesion of things (Odhiambo 2010; Tempels 1959:48). One identifies and respects the position and role of various forces in the universe. Tempels (1995:47) emphasizes that true wisdom for Africans lies in ontological knowledge, the discernment of the nature of forces and their reciprocal relationship. Thus, in an intrinsic relationship with human forces and with all other forces, the knowing person does not isolate other facets of reality in trying to make meaning of things¹².

In African epistemology, knowledge has an intrinsic link with wisdom. The African knower does not only seek a science of reality – a pragmatist knowledge of how to address particular issues. Rather, he or she seeks wisdom of life and this wisdom is achieved via a multidimensional approach to life (Ruch 1984:46). Given the holistic and complex nature of

¹² African epistemological tradition faces the challenge of being more critical so as to ensure that African epistemological claims are subject to improvement in line with contemporary social, economic and political circumstances. Trends in African philosophy such as philosophic sagacity as propagated by Odera Oruka, Hermeneutic philosophy espoused by Tsenay Serequeherhan as well as professional philosophy advocated by Paulin Hountondji have emerged to emphasize and improve on the critical aspect of African epistemology as against the trend of ethno-philosophy which tends to uphold uncritical traditional views. As argued by Wiredu (1980:x), as social circumstances change so too must people's philosophy and outlook in life undergo critical evaluation and transition.

knowledge, ancestors¹³ and elders are deemed repositories of knowledge. As noted by Tempels (1959:48), wisdom for Africans is a practical and experiential one that gives consideration to age. In a special way, Africans accord proper knowledge, which is holistic in nature, to elders. It will be a misconception to think that all elders are wise given that there are some elders who are not seen as custodians of knowledge and they are not consulted. But on a general basis, elders have gone through different stages of life and they have experienced life at a broader scale than the young.

This does not entail that young people cannot know as people could learn via formal education and the study and experience of phenomena. Rather, knowledge and wisdom for Africans go hand in hand. The accord of proper knowledge to elders only implies that the young can hardly comprehend the proper interaction and cohesion of things given their limited stage of life and experiences even though they (young people as well as any person) can know about how to handle some particular situations. Onyewuenyi (1991:43) observes that 'there are many talents and clever skills that remain far short of wisdom'. It is in recognition of the complexity of African epistemology that Ruch (1984:27) maintains that philosophizing is the interest of few people (elders) with intuitive sights and rational stamina to probe deeper into challenging problems. This people (elders) who are the repositories of knowledge serve the needs of others – the masses of people – in the overall human quest to attain deeper knowledge of reality¹⁴. If the ancestors and elders have lived long then it follows that they must have known a lot in the course of their existence. Such considerations serve as the basis of inquiry for scholars of philosophic sagacity, a trend in African philosophy which examines the insights of wise elders. Wise elders¹⁵ do not only derive knowledge from experience or serve as custodians of knowledge

¹³ Ancestors provide a knowledge link between the living and the dead.

¹⁴ However, some superior knowledge is bequeathed to some members of the community for the special purposes in the community e.g. the knowledge of traditional healers (Tempels 1959:56).

¹⁵ To accord proper knowledge to elders is an in-built mechanism of ensuring a broad dimension to knowledge; emphasizing on-going stride towards the attainment of knowledge which goes beyond technical know-how and limited comprehensions; and a way of ensuring the harmonious and united progression of the community under the guidance of experienced minds.

from one generation to another. They also criticize, reject, add and/or modify traditional ideas (Wiredu 1980:21). In his works, Odera Oruka (1983) identified intelligent and adventurous-minded sages that do not only disseminate critical traditional ideas but also proffer recommendations on how to improve them. The knowledge of the elders guides and directs the affairs of the community.

In terms of accessibility and education, Gyekye (1987:13) contends that philosophical thought in Africa is reflected in the practices, oral literature and minds of the people, and not the minds and practices of a few. This is because knowledge and wisdom is circulated in African societies via rituals, proverbs, myths, folktales, folk songs, moral values, beliefs, customs, traditions music, art symbols, institutions and practices of the people (Gyekye 1987:13; Itibari 2006:36). These provide a multidimensional background for the acquisition of knowledge. Such multipronged approach to education aids one to develop wisdom of life that does not only concentrate on studying a given phenomenon at the expense of other important areas of knowing.

It is disturbing that in our contemporary Westernized-world, people tend to be satisfied with only acquiring knowledge about specific aspects of life while being terribly under-informed and immature in terms of other areas of study and development. Such practice, rooted in Western job-oriented approach debases the quality of human life and reduces humans to machines that are meant to only fill in particular gaps of knowledge and expertise at the expense of a holistic human development (Ajei 2007). Taking a cue from African system of education, specialization in one aspect of life does not preclude one from a thorough grounding in other facets of life as well. Here, for instance, one who is focusing on the study of physics is not only assessed by his/her ability in that field alone but also in respect to other aspects of life such as the psychological, political, social and moral aspects.

3.0 Perspectives on African Epistemology

Despite its holistic and integrative nature, African epistemology can be considered from different dimensions. I shall discuss three of the different dimensions to African epistemology: the intuitive, religious and mythological aspects of African epistemology.

3.1 Intuitive Knowledge

Ruch (1984:46) argues that African indigenous knowledge ‘does not follow the fragmenting activity of abstractive knowledge, its contact with the real is more immediate and involves the whole man (sic.) and not only his intellect’. In other words, the African knows through all his/her faculties; senses, emotions and intellect. Consistent with Nasseem ‘b Zubairi (1991:1), knowledge, for Africans, is a ‘co-operation of all human faculties and experiences’, a global reaction. In African epistemology, knowledge is not considered in terms of the traditional western notion of mind’s conformity to reality or the Kantian notion of reality conforming to mind. Rather, in African epistemology, knowledge is a co-operation of all human faculties and experiences, a co-operation that does not just consider one’s immediate experience but one that goes beyond that to consider one’s experience in its entirety. Thus, at the same time, an African sees, feels, imagines, reasons, thinks and intuitively. Everything comes together in a single whole in African thought. Thus, in one act of intuition, one grasps the totality of reality.

3.2 Religious Knowledge

According to Stephen Ellis and Gerrie ter Haar (2007:387), ‘religion in ... Africa is best considered as a belief in the existence of an invisible world, distinct but not separate from the visible one’. In the socio-political and economic mindset of a holistic knower, religion is not divorced from one’s epistemic vision. Via religious prism, Africans make sense of existence (Ellis & ter Haar 2007:387). In the epistemic experience of Africans, religion provides a room for the transcendental being that sheds more light on material existence and experiences of humans. Given that philosophy is a quest for ultimate existence, African epistemology tied to religion fulfils that quest by its reference to supernatural beings (Gyekye 1987:8). Tempels (1959:48) notes that God, who is wisdom and knowledge in itself endows human beings with the power to know. Here, divine beings are actively engaged in the epistemic experience of humans as they directly or indirectly reveal things to human beings in their experiences (dreams and life experiences).

Wiredu (1980:38) notes that ‘the ubiquity of references to gods and all sorts of spirits in traditional African explanations of things’ perplexes western epistemological thinkers. Yet, it is true that one cannot claim that

because ‘something cannot be seen, it therefore does not exist’ (Ellis & ter Haar, 2007:387). Levy Jaki (2000:19) asserts that ‘human knowledge comes from two realms, quantities and non-quantities, and these two realms are irreducible to one another’. It is a plus that African epistemology strives to know by noting the intrinsic relationship between the quantitative (material) and non-quantitative (spiritual) aspects of reality. For Africans, there is no dichotomy between the secular and the spiritual world. According to Wiredu (1980:41), the western belief in abstract entities is ‘no better than the traditional African belief in ancestor spirits’. In western-oriented scientific epistemology, it is only a matter of belief and probability that the experiment conducted today will yield the same result another day. John Polkinghorne (1996:6) contends that there is no cogent reason to hold tenaciously that past experience would guide future behaviour. The sun may have risen today but it is not enough to argue that since the sun rose today, it will rise tomorrow. Suffice it to contend that in science, it is only a matter of hope and belief to posit that the natural phenomena that gave rise to a certain event or result will do so in the future. Thus, western-driven science makes sense of reality based on belief just as in religious knowledge.

In Africa, physical phenomena are understood in conjunction with the belief in the spiritual. Illness, for instance, is not just a mere material or physical issue. Illness for an African denotes a lack of well-being in the physical, mental and spiritual as well as the personal and social aspects of reality that affects a person, family, community etc. For the fact that beings inevitably influence each other, Africans believe that things do not just happen without the influence of another force (Hamminga 2005:58). Any mishap or disorder in the nature of things can be traced to one’s relationship with the ancestors, other human beings or even to one’s personal morality. Thus, to restore and maintain a well-being, one ought to ensure right relationships with the ancestral, spiritual, and natural worlds (Martin 2008:219). Denise Martin (2008:221) notes that ‘a Yoruba diagnosis of illness (*arun*), would include divination to inquire whether any potential spiritual causes are responsible for the ailment’ so that they can be addressed in the treatment and healing processes. Thus, medical examination in Africa involves a multidimensional approach. The African knower does not engage in a reductionist approach to physical sicknesses as spiritual factors can affect the material and vice versa. Nevertheless, there is a tendency for African traditional healers to focus so much on the spiritual dimension given the

belief that the spiritual could override material efforts. Such limitation as observed by Wiredu (1980:12) has led to the failure of traditional African culture to pay closer attention to medical and technological advancements because physical issues tend to be spiritualized easily. Beyond the foregoing limitation, the principle underlying African epistemological investigation provides ground for the consideration of the spiritual in conjunction with the physical aspect which predominate contemporary medical examinations.

3.3 Mythological Knowledge

In tandem with Ruch (1984:27), Africans contend with life questions – questions about their origin, nature and destiny – and try to interpret and make sense of their existence via mythical consciousness. Ruch (1984:35) defines myth as ‘a complex set of signs, both verbal and gestural, which aim at accounting for some of the most fundamental problems of life and existence’. He argues that the rationality of,

the myth bypasses the abstract conceptualization of experience by symbolically expressing the totality of an existential situation which speaks from and to the whole person, body and soul, intellect, emotions and desires (1984:39).

Myths symbolically express deep issues that lie beyond the comprehension of human minds (Gyekye 1987:15). Myths negotiate between material and supernatural existence thereby satisfying the physical and spiritual elements in the human desire to know. Via myth, Africans deal with the issues of eschatology, origin, Sup-reme Being, evil, providence, nature of reality, life, stages of life, death, etc.

That myth is ‘unscientific’ does not mean that it is inferior to scientific knowledge. Western-oriented science often prides itself as being logical and productive of certain knowledge. However, it fails to note that it has only ended up producing more myths in its attempts to explain reality. Scientific endeavours seeking to explain the origin of the universe without first-hand experience, takes the place of myths. The scientific view of the universe as a machine or as a product of chance is nothing but an imaginative

vision of reality. Moreover, the scientific big bang theory and the evolution theory is a continuation of the mythical or imaginative quest of the ancient philosophers to discover the basic stuff out of which everything was made. Using concrete realities and anthropomorphically comprehensible elements, science seeks to explain deep issues.

Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) argues aptly that the beginning of the universe can only be comprehended by revelation or belief (cited in Jaki 2000:103). Science cannot demonstrate the transition from non-existence to the existence of the atom that exploded during the big bang. The comprehension of the origin of the universe is far from scientific comprehension because scientists cannot go outside the universe to observe the whole of it and give a supreme objective and genuine knowledge about it (Jaki 2000:13). Defining the whole by the knowledge of some part of reality is inherently mythological. Thus, based on what yardstick should one myth (e.g. Western-oriented scientific myths of origin) be accepted over other myths (African-oriented myths of origin)? Though science tends to provide verifiable and exact explanations of natural phenomena, it has its limitations and imperfections as will be discussed further below.

Yet, it remains a question of how relevant and useful mythical knowledge is for Africans in the contemporary world. For Ruch (1984:45), myth is more philosophical in the sense that it transcends mere doctrine and theory and becomes a mode of life not determined by a theory but by intuitive and concrete experience of being. Myth extends its causal explanations beyond empirical data to the farthest metaphysical causes. Through myth, the African accesses the region of reality that lies beyond the reach of science. Myth gives humans the reason for hoping when it seems that all hope is lost based on rational or scientific judgement. Thus, labouring on concrete and spiritual dimensions of life, myths satisfy the desires of the masses to know.

Given the inability of western-oriented scientific logic and rationality to comprehend the mythical, religious and intuitive nature of African epistemology, African philosophy is often dismissed as subjective and uncertain. However, western-oriented science cannot claim dogmatic and certain knowledge. In its quest to solve the problems that had challenged it over the years, science has changed its concepts over time. For instance, the mechanical or absolute conception of reality in classical science was abandoned for the theory of relativity in modern science. Many concepts of classical science like atom, mass, force, etc. have undergone piece-meal

revision in such a way that their present-day conception is incompatible with prior ones. Thus, it is possible that the scientific assumptions of present scientists will be falsified in future by other findings. If scientific theories of the past have been discovered to be mistaken and have been abandoned in the past, it is most likely that the present theories may be discovered to be mistaken and abandoned in the future¹⁶ (Audi 2003:263).

To claim the perfection of science or the conclusiveness of scientific findings is to thwart its efforts in making further inquiries about nature. In this respect, science cannot claim dogmatic, certain and irrefutable knowledge (Jaki 2000:5). Here, science happens to be a field of knowledge struggling to comprehend reality for pragmatic purposes. Thus, why must every other form of knowledge conform to the scientific mode of knowing that is not objective and flawless as depicted? It is no doubt that scientific ventures have led to numerous advances in our contemporary epoch and have shed light and at times shattered our uncritical views about reality as well as things that we readily attribute to supernatural forces. Yet, it is important to note the limitations of scientific based knowledge, which somewhat reinforces the imperative for considering other forms of knowledge that complements or reinforces it. Knowledge should not be limited to the theoretical, scientific and individualistic mode of philosophizing in the West (Ellis & ter Haar 2007:386). Nkurunziza (2007) insists that African epistemology ‘cannot be transformed to fit in with western forms of logic because it has its own logic and its own set of rules to follow’.

4.0 Recommendations and Conclusions

Thus far, this study has engaged with African epistemology in the context of the mainstream western-driven scientific epistemology. Beyond the purported ‘unscientific’ nature of African-oriented epistemology, the power-knowledge nexus relations play a crucial role in determining what constitute valid knowledge and what is not. Via western expansionism, western powers have objectified and universalized scientific epistemology in such a way that other forms of epistemology are considered delusory and irrational. Nevertheless,

¹⁶ Foucault (1966) contends that knowledge means different things from culture to culture and epoch to epoch. There is no external position of certainty, no universal understanding that is beyond history and society.

the research has argued that African-driven epistemology has its authentic logic and set of rules that cannot be subordinated to or transformed to fit in the narrow western-oriented scientific forms of logic and rules. Any attempt at considering knowledge under the lens of western-oriented scientific epistemology alone is a procrustean reductionism.

Underdevelopment, poverty, political instability and conflict that constitute the current reality of the continent create difficulties for Africans to promulgate their epistemological views assertively. Despite the purported decolonization of the continent, foreign objectified models continue to inform and dominate the lifestyle, education and governance system in Africa. The Akans of Ghana and Ivory Coast have a saying noting that ‘the hand that begs is always beneath that which gives’ (Ajei 2007:200). Given African dependency on foreign aid, assistance and affirmation, Africans are unable to assert their ideologies and values in the globe. Africans continue to fail in making effective contributions to global debates – as well as making strategic changes in the continent – due to the predominance of Eurocentric ideas that dictate how things ought to be.

It is against this distorted and ungrounded reality of Africans that W.E.B. du Bois (2007:12) insists, in his *The Conversation of Races*, that Africans should strive to enhance their mode of existence. Far from essentializing the African, the foregoing phrase enjoins Africans, like every other people with a common culture and belief system, to promote their values and ideologies in a plural and globalizing world. This would ensure that African ideologies and values, as well as their notion of what epistemology should be, are not subsumed by the views, ideologies and values of others. Independence, self-rule and self-determination entails the contextualization of the socio-economic, political and education system of the continent to suit the condition of the continent and to assert African ideologies in domestic and global debates. In the context of cultural pluralism, it is procrustean to hold tenaciously that one cultural-oriented epistemological system is universal and objective. Africans are constantly challenged to be subjects of history not objects merely trailing the dictates of foreign powers or a globalization that is predominated by western thought processes, worldview and values.

Due to western education systems, Africans tend to view education as impossible without adhering to the western model of education. African states depend on western curricula, methodologies and ideas to run its

education institutions while marginalizing their epistemological system (Itibari 2003:38). The trailing of western dictates and modes of existence have created many African schizophrenics who fail to reconcile indigenous value systems and foreign values. For instance, the monopoly of western education systems has produced African graduates that fail to reconcile the academia and other aspects of life given the fragmentary and job-orientated western system of education. African students experience disintegration due to the divide between the narrow foreign education system and the indigenous reality and values of the continent. In an attempt to cope with the situation, some scholars merely seek skills and qualification papers for employment purposes while neglecting other aspects of life such as spiritual and moral formation. Yet, in traditional African society, education is an all-inclusive and integrative experience.

Thus, Africans need to decolonize their minds from western objectifications and universalizations by appreciating their indigenous values and systems. In line with Hegel, Hans-Georg Gadamer (1975:15) maintains that ‘a people gives itself its existence It works out from itself and thus exteriorises what it is in itself’. This underscores that people shape themselves, articulate their differences and externalize their values and norms in a pluralistic world. A Swahili proverb states that ‘when you want peanuts, get yourself a roasting pan’ (Ajei 2007:200). Thus, it is imperative for Africans to develop their socio-political and economic system so as to give the continent a reasonable power-base to assert itself and its epistemological views in the global system. The development referred here does not necessarily mean that which is defined based solely on the standards of dominant powers. Rather, it is a development that captures the interests, values and goals of a group people.

George J. Sefa Dei and Marlon Simmons (2009:16) observe that the current use of the term *development* is anchored in ‘economic, technological and material constraints and possibilities, with little emphasis on the spiritual, emotional and social-cultural dimensions’¹⁷. Undoubtedly, economic,

¹⁷ Wiredu (1980:43) argues that ‘technological sophistication is only an aspect, and that not the core, or development’. According to Dei and Simmons (2009:16) ‘development must be about how local peoples are using their own creativity and resourcefulness to respond to major economic and ecological stressors’.

technological and material based development has led to huge advances that make our lives and work much easier. Over the years however, developments based on such mainstream emphasis have led to disastrous consequences such as ecological destruction and global warming consequent from industrial revolution; mass killings and genocides consequent from the production of weapons of mass destruction; the attenuation of the value of human life given the over reliance on technology; deep-rooted corruption and killings in the quest for wealth accumulation; etc. However, in line with Dei and Simmons (2009), discussions about development ought to be holistic to guard against evil outcomes in other spheres of life. In its emphasis on the holistic, African-oriented epistemology has a lot to ensure the holistic development of the continent as well as the globe. For Ajei (2007:11), development should be about ‘... the preservation and improvement of human dignity and welfare ...’.

To consolidate and propagate African values, Africans need to step out of their dependencies and work out things for themselves. This entails a political will and dedication to the progress and growth of the continent. Africans ought to acknowledge that African-oriented epistemology and education system are vital, valuable and worthy of academic pursuit. In the contemporary era, traditional African values and systems of the past needs to be negotiated with present global and domestic realities of the continent. This is not about jettisoning foreign ideologies, values and systems or returning back to a purported ‘essential’ African way of life in the past. Rather, it is about bringing alive the worthy principles and values of Africans in the contemporary era. Rooted in the communal-mindedness of Africans, indigenous African principles and values are to be confidently and boldly put to synergistic negotiation with other principles and values. Here, African scholars are encouraged to explore, critique and elicit indigenous values and systems that ought to be promulgated in the present-day continent as well as in global issues.

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