



African Epistemology and Culture: Creating a Sustainable Development

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Abstract. The paper examines the relevance of African epistemology and culture as a panacea for sustainable development. African epistemology is a cultural epistemology that originates from African philosophy which includes the African conception of the nature of knowledge the justification of knowledge and epistemic claims. The paper argues that Colonialism stimulated positive and negative changes in Africa. The promotion and propagation of western culture dates back to the era of colonialism. Colonial rule was an imposition that unleashed deadly blow on African culture. The paper points out that the influence of western culture has caused certain customs and beliefs to be discarded or modified, at the same time it has caused others to be retained by one level of society while on another level new alternatives are being accepted. This was achieved through an establishment of schools, which curricula were tailored to achieve the goals of the colonizer, rather than trained the colonized. African cosmos became a victim of extraneous ideology which it has continue to grapple with. The paper concludes that knowledge is crucial to human survival and flourishing, African culture is embedded in strong epistemic considerations. African epistemology is an important component of culture. The problem of underdevelopment in Africa is not due to lack of natural and human resources but that of undermining her cultural heritage.

Keywords: African epistemology, Culture, Indigenous knowledge, Ubuntu.

1. Introduction

African epistemology is a branch of African philosophy. African philosophy is a peculiar philosophy which is different from the western philosophy. African philosophy refers to a philosophy that critically presents African world view. It could be done either by an African or a non-African. African epistemology is the African theory of knowledge. African epistemology, in particular, is Africa's own way of carrying out its inquiries into the nature, scope and limit of human knowledge (Ozumba, 2001: 158).

Our cultural heritage is very rich. In an Ubuntu paradigm, knowledge is thought not be generated and validated by individuals or through conventional scientific process but through communal discourse. However, meaningful development must be seen as a response to the totality context of a given community, such as the worldview, the thought structures, pattern of meaning, and the basic epistemological, and cultural convictions of the community. African indigenous knowledge and cultural education is functional in nature because the knowledge, skills and values that are imparted have direct relevant to the socio-economic activities of an individual, the learners learn the skills that were for immediate and long-term activities geared towards bringing up the child to become a functional adult. (Achuonye, 2004:85). The essence of this basic epistemological and cultural education can be seen in the impact of group consciousness and relation to the earth.

The quest for knowledge about reality is a universal human need which also include African continent. The crucial questions are: Is it true that African epistemology and culture are factors in development? What about the industrial process? Is there any role for African epistemology and culture left outside the little world of a person's private life? The truth of the matter is that a meaningful development strategy depends upon an adequate understanding of the interplay and interaction of all the factors that influence the responses of a specific group of people to development activities. Within communities there is an interdependency that is supported by values such as generosity, compassion, reciprocity, cooperation, solidarity, that are related to the liberal principles of human rights that are embodied within the philosophy of inclusive education. These values are at the heart of Ubuntu as a philosophy of life. Ubuntu embraces a culture in which moral values, human needs, interests and dignity of individuals are prioritized. (Ani, 2013:3). Ubuntu is presented as an epistemology for the understanding and promotion of inclusive practices in African education.

The paper argues that development must be seen as a response to the total context of a given community. African Epistemology and culture are deep-rooted in Africa. It has Africa at its foundation and it covers and involves everything that is knowable and the forms through which knowledge be attained in Africa. Western epistemology does not take cognizance of traditional African cultural and religious beliefs that inform indigenous knowledge systems. It does not acknowledge the fact that knowledge is derived from various sources in African tradition. Paradoxically the philosophy of Ubuntu underpins the value of respect, collectivism, social cohesion, and respect for life and nature.

2. African Epistemology in a Global Context

African epistemology emerges from the existence of African philosophy. African epistemology like African philosophy deals with issues about Africa. African epistemology engages with the nature and concept of knowledge, and the limit of human knowledge. Epistemology is construed as the study of theories about the nature and scope of knowledge, the evaluation of the pre suppositions and basis of the knowledge, and the scrutiny of knowledge claim (Kaphagawani and Malherbe, 2002:220). African epistemology includes the African conception of nature of knowledge, the ways in which knowledge could be gain, the ways in which one can justify an epistemic claim, and the role that knowledge plays in human existence. The protagonists of African epistemology, like Placide Tempels, Leopold Sedar Senghor, Innocent Onyewuenye, Christopher Anyanwu and others based their argument for a distinctive or unique African epistemology on the premise or proposition that all races are gifted with a unique nature and ways of knowing things. African epistemology includes African myths, folkways, proverbs and language (Ozumba, 2001:172).

African epistemology is a discourse of the knowledge attitudes of Africans in terms of their cognitive relations with the world around them. This is influenced by their broader understanding or conception of reality, cultural practices and beliefs, customs and precepts of the culture in focus. This is different from philosophy of culture that refers to the use of the tools of philosophy, such as conceptual and critical analysis, to critically reflect on the beliefs and precepts, suppositions and assumptions, of a culture. However, western philosophers tend to consider knowledge to be strongly tied to a universal truth. Western philosophers such as Rene Descartes, Francis Bacon, Augustus Comte, David Hume, John Locke, and Bishop Berkeley, have all sought to attain absolute

certainty in knowledge. In their quest for certainty, they adjudged 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. 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.

There are varied forms of knowledge in African epistemology, which include perceptual knowledge, old age knowledge, common sense knowledge, inferential knowledge, mystical knowledge, oral tradition, intuitive knowledge, religious knowledge, and mythological knowledge. 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. The western education which the colonial masters introduced into Africa was not according to the needs and aspirations of the people.

African indigenous knowledge and cultural education stresses on the acquisition of practical skills, beliefs, values, traditions and elements and culture of the people from one generation to the other. African indigenous education is a training allegiance, mutual interest and interdependence, the content of which is the community's values, beliefs, traditions and vocations which have been cherished and practiced over generations. It involves the transmission of the societal values, skills, cultural traditions, norms and values of a tribe to the tribal members of a given society from generation to generation. (Mushi, 2009:39). The participation and efforts of individuals in society also contribute to the derivation of knowledge in its social dimension as well. Indigenous African knowledge is not based or derivative from individuals alone but it is 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. In African epistemology there is an intimate ontological bond and relationship between every being. (Tempels, 1959:41). 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. However, 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. (Tempels, 1959:42). 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. In the vision of totality, Africans conceive reality to be in harmony, 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/she seeks wisdom of life and this wisdom is achieved via a multidimensional approach to life. In the epistemic experience of Africans, religion provides a room for the transcendental being that sheds more light on material existence and experiences. African epistemology tied to religion fulfills that quest by its reference to supernatural beings. (Gyekye, 1987:8). 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). (Tempels, 1959:48). African epistemology is different from the western because it has its own logic and sets of rules to follow. Underdevelopment, poverty, political instability and conflict that constitute the current reality of the continent create difficulties for Africans to promulgate their epistemological views as assertively. 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.

3. The Concept of African Culture

The term culture has been given various definitions by different scholars from different disciplines. African continent has various major ethnic groups with distinct cultural values, most of the cultural value's centers on the family and ethnic group. Culture can be defined as the people's way of life, it consists of all ideas and objectives of a given set of people, guiding the individuals' life individually and collectively, these includes arts, beliefs, customs, inventions, language, technology and traditions (Bohanah, 1981:942). It can also be referred to as the way a group of people live, the foods they eat, how they dress, the language or languages they speak, their political, social and economic institutions, their religion, arts and craft, music and dance, as well as their oral literature, such as poetry and story telling (Perbi, 1999:29). It is the integrated system of learned behaviour patterns which

are characteristics of the members of the society, and which are result of biological inheritance, and the way of life of an entire society. Wiredu opines that:

No society could survive for any length of time without basing a large part of its daily activities on beliefs derived from the evidence. You cannot farm without some rationally based knowledge of soils, seeds and climate; and no society can achieve any reasonable degree of harmony in human relations without the basic ability to assess claims and allegations by the methods of objective investigation. (1980: 42).

Culture varies from society to society, also values. African cultural environment is characterized by some unique values that are different from Europe, America, and other parts of the world. People are not born with culture but rather are born into a culture which they have to learn. Culture is shared, it is through culture that people in a given society are said to share common behavior and ways of thinking, language and dressing. Culture is adaptive, culture enables the human society to survive in changing material environments. Culture is symbolic, this is the abstract ways of referring to, and understanding ideas, objects, feelings or behavior, the ability to communicate with symbols using language. It is socially inherited. It acts to unify and to order experience, so that its members perceive what it takes for there to be organization and consistency. In this respect it provides a "world-view" that offers us orienting conceptions of reality. It gives people group identification, as it builds on shared historical experience, creating a collective cultural identity. It tells its members what to do, thereby creating a voice of prescriptive authority. Hallen argues that it is possible even in the contexts of a single world-view to have significant critical and reflective powers. This is well captured in his argument as quoted below:

It may well be the case that many societies that are classified as 'traditional' contain different and competitive ideological groups that are normally kept in relative balance. Some of these group, are in a position to develop significant and rival powers of critical awareness. (1996; 222).

Culture represents values as a systematic set of ideas and a single coherent statement. It provides the basis for commitment, priority, and choice, thereby imparting direction to group development and behavior. Indeed, it acts to limit the parameters of change and to pattern the behavior of its members. In this way culture helps to initiate and to authorize its own creation. It provides for the creation of shared symbols and meanings. It is therefore, the primary creative force of collective consciousness, and it is that

which makes it possible to construct national consciousness. Invention, discovery and diffusion are some of the ways by which a culture can change or grow. Invention, for instance, involves the recombination of existing cultural elements to fashion new things. Ogburn argues that:

The rate of invention within a society is a function of the size of the existing culture base. The culture base or the cultural elements, objects, traits and knowledge available in all sections of the pre- 1600 African society were limited in types and variation. Thus, few inventions which could profoundly alter the culture could take place. Most appliances and utensils used then were made of wood, as metal was not a commonly known cultural element of the people. (1922: 200).

Culture is an instrument for making cooperation natural. Its success depends on the extent to which it is allowed to be self-authenticating. Though it allows internal discussion. The principles of decision in discussions are themselves provided by the culture, by uniting the people in common beliefs and attitudes. It creates the basis for the formulation of a common destiny and cooperation in pursuing it. Culture incorporates the values of the people, respect for human person over and above material things is very crucial in African culture. Culture embraces a wide range of human phenomena, material achievements and norms, beliefs, feelings, manners, morals and so on. It is the patterned way of life shared by a particular group of people that claim to share a single origin or descent. It is the totality of the way of life evolved by a people in their attempts to meet the challenge of living in their environment, which gives order and meaning to their social, political, economic, aesthetic and religious norms thus distinguishing a people from their neighbors. (Bello, 1991: 189). Culture serves to distinguish a people from others, and Aziza asserts that:

Culture refers to the totality of the pattern of behaviour of a particular group of people. It includes everything that makes them distinct from any other group of people for instance, their greeting habits, dressing, social norms and taboos, food, songs and dance patterns, rites of passages from birth, through marriage to death, traditional occupations, religious as well as philosophical beliefs. (2001: 31)

Culture is passed on from generation to generation. The acquisition of culture is a result of the socialization process. Explaining how culture is passed on as a generational heritage, Fafunwa writes that:

The child just grows into and within the cultural heritage of his people. He imbibes it. Culture, in traditional society, is not taught; it is caught. The child

observes, imbibes and mimics the action of his elders and siblings. He watches the naming ceremonies, religious services, marriage rituals, funeral obsequies. He witnesses the coronation of a king or chief, the annual yam festival, the annual dance and acrobatic displays of guilds and age groups or his relations in the activities. The child in a traditional society cannot escape his cultural and physical environments. (1974: 48).

The main components of culture are norms and values. Norms are the expectations of what define what is acceptable or required in a social institution. Values on the other hand are standards set by a society which should serve as guides to what is right and proper for people in that society. These values then become the basis of judgements people make as to what is desirable, correct and good as well as what is undesirable, incorrect and bad.

4. Reviving and Popularizing African Epistemology and Cultural Values

Africa needs to revive and popularize her indigenous knowledge and cultural values in order to develop her local industrialization and local potentials. Reviving and popularizing African epistemology refers to the philosophies that include the indigenous knowledge, indigenous here refers to the root of things, something natural to a culture. African indigenous education is a training allegiance, mutual interest and interdependence, the consent of which is the community's values, beliefs, traditions and vocations which have been cherished and practiced over generations. (Agbondah, 2002:116). African indigenous knowledge and cultural education involves transmission of the societal values skills, beliefs and traditions from generation to generation. The call for the revival of African epistemology is much linked to the need to heed the call of African renaissance, in educational discourse, African renaissance is founded on the perception that overall character of much educational theory and practice is overwhelming either European or Eurocentric. Much of what is taken for education in Africa is in fact not African, but a reflection of Europe in Africa. The African epistemology embedded in African philosophy and the spirit of African renaissance is crucial for development and learning in Africa. African epistemology, should be conserved and respected, since it represents the accumulated wisdom of generation of people living in a particular community or context, African epistemology embodies a different and distinctly African mode of thought that might be useful in view of the failure of most current methodologies of development. African epistemology provides a means

and process for the articulation of what local people know while involving in the creation of the knowledge required for development. Seepe argues that:

Africanization and the promotion of indigenous knowledge demands a re-examination of history, the interrogation of cultural symbols and the reconfiguration of models of intellectual emulation. This process cannot be achieved without critiquing, engaging and analyzing values, assumptions, ideologies and interests embedded and reflected in the bodies of knowledge in the institutions of learning. A radical restructuring of education in Africa which makes education relevant to African challenges cannot be complete without significant and serious consideration of the contribution of indigenous knowledge systems. This is an educational challenge to all Africans who aspire for the Africanization of knowledge. (2004:10).

As coloniality persist at the corridor of power, at institutions and in the society. People are not born with culture but rather are born into a culture which they have to learn. Culture is shared it is through culture that people in a given society are said to share common behavior and ways of thinking, language and dressing. Culture is adaptive, it enables the human society to survive in changing material environments on the other hand African culture can contribute to socio – economic growth and sustainable development in Africa. One of the stumbling blocks to sustainable development in African epistemology and culture identified by Gyeke is that of the manner in which knowledge of external world has been acquired. He argues that:

Unlike in science, knowledge acquisition was not based on experimentation but was personalized through a strong element of secrecy. This resulted in such knowledge not being made available for further objective, public scrutiny and analysis in order to verify its conclusions. This veil of secrecy around it, Gyeke argues, results in the possessed knowledge simply vanishing on the death of its bearers. He illustrates this point by making specific reference to the knowledge of potencies of herbs and other medicinal plants possessed by African traditional healers. Considering this knowledge as the most secretive of them all, he argues even if the claims made by African medicine men and women of having discovered cures for deadly diseases could be substantiated scientifically, those claims cannot be pursued for verification, since their knowledge-claims were esoteric and personal. (1997: 29).

The desire to make knowledge of the external world personal has been the characteristic attitude of our

traditional healers. In the past, all such possibly credible claims to knowledge of medicinal plants just evaporated on the death of the traditional healer or priest. And science, including the science of medicine, stagnated. This point was also echoed in Wiredu's comparative analysis of the African (traditional/folk) thought and the Western (traditional/folk) thought systems. Wiredu is of the opinion that:

Any culture and/or thought system which is both non- scientific and non-literate (be it Western or African), is seriously handicapped. This, he argues, is so since scientific methods can only occur where there is a recording of precise measurements, calculations, and observational data i.e. where there is what he calls the scientific spirit and/or the spirit of rational inquiry (1980:41).

However rational knowledge is not the preserve of the modern West just in the same way as superstition is not peculiar to Africans, the fact is that Africa lags behind the West in terms of the degree to which the scientific spirit and the rational spirit of inquiry has been developed. For Africa to develop the spirit of rational inquiry in all spheres of thought and belief, Africans should urgently rid themselves of those backward aspects of customs and only retain the progressive ones essential for and relevant to development. Despite this lag in the spirit of rational inquiry in Africa when compared with the West, there is within the traditional African thinking some presence of the principle of rational evidence.

Technology is meant to only resolve practical problems of survival, necessitate an urgent need for change in such attitude towards knowledge. Such a change in attitude would make the possessed knowledge of technology exoteric and accessible to the public for scrutiny, thus releasing knowledge from mysticism or spirituality. For Gyeke, the significance of such scrutiny lies in the fact that it could result in the existing knowledge being rejected or amended or confirmed. The growing contact between people with different cultural experiences owing to movements around the globe under globalization, has an impact that changes the previously self-contained national cultures. Hence, it would be misleading to treat culture/s within complex differentiated societies as simply homogenous and coherent. This process of change undergone by national cultures has been described by Hannerz and others as “creolization” and that it results in creole cultures i.e. those cultures that draw from two or more widely different historical sources (Hannerz, 1997: 14).

There are vital points and issues that need careful consideration when exploring the socio-economic role of African epistemology and cultures in the contemporary era of globalization, it however elicited a response which led to counter arguments that challenge and, in some cases, dismiss those arguments expressed in it. Counter arguments have also exposed some serious conceptual problems and dangers in this perspective's assertion that unlike the Western knowledge systems, African traditional cultures and knowledge systems are pervasively mystical, nostalgic and lack dynamism (i.e. discourage any deviation from original, authentic past) as well as scientific and conceptual content, and in turn impede progress.

This view is premised on Tempels' perception of the Bantu mentality as captured in the expression the source is pure, but waters are polluted (a quote from Eboussi in Makang, 1997: 326). Informed by this perception and his Bantu ontology, Makang argues that Tempels' went on to draw distinctions between what he called the "bush people" or "authentic Bantu" and the "Europeanized Bantu" or "modern Bantu". In that distinction, Tempels considered the "Modern Bantu" as those Africans who have been corrupted by European materialism and lost their authenticity and the sense, the old, ageless, wisdom of the ancestors as well as everything stable in Bantu tradition. In contrast, the "bush people" are, for Tempel, the real authentic Bantu as they are not spoiled by European modernity and are vital in preserving the authentic Bantu culture (Makang, 1997: 327). It was, however, noted from the above review that this shift in interest in the indigenous African cultures and thought systems did not proceed without debate. The resultant debate is characterized by two main contrasting perspectives, which use mainly comparative analysis whereby African indigenous knowledge and cultures were compared and contrasted with those in the West, in effort to examine and determine the role and the relevance of African cultures and thought to societal development and progress.

5. African Epistemology, Culture and Sustainable Development

The term African epistemology is often understood as the way in which the African understood conceptualizes, interprets and apprehends reality within the context of African cultural and collective experience. (Udefi, 2014:108). Epistemological concepts can be interpreted using African categories and concepts as provided by the African cultural experience without a recourse to western or alien

conceptual framework. African epistemology deals with what the African means and understand when he makes a knowledge claim. This consists of how the African sees or talks about reality. Concerning how the African sees and talks about reality, there are several elements in the mind of Africa that govern how humans behave with regard to reality: the practicality of wholism, the prevalence of poly-consciousness, the idea of inclusiveness, the unity of worlds, and the value of personal relationships. These constitute the element of the African mind. They frame the African conception of reality, and they are the basis on which cognitive claims are made by the African. From the earliest times there was an underlining commonality in the African apprehension of the universe, environment, society, and the divine. This is because while the self remains real and the material is concrete for the African, both the self and the material however remain interwoven by custom and tradition with the latter based upon human correlativity.

It is obvious from the above that African society is in general, humanistically communalistic in nature. Africa has something very important to contribute to the change of heart that is need for the Africa's socio-economic and political development. The African social philosophy Ubuntu, which is a way of being, a code of ethics, is deeply embedded in African indigenous knowledge and culture. The underlying values of this extraordinary philosophy seek to honor the dignity of each person and are concerned with the development and maintenances of mutually affirming and enhancing relationships. Ubuntu acknowledges among other things that some African political leaders have chosen to betray many of the very philosophical and humanitarian principles on which African culture is based. People in the west, for whatever reason, receive negative and limited information through the media- images of ethnic wars, dictatorships, and famine, so the potential contribution of African values is often lost in these images. However, if the spirit of Ubuntu is taken seriously it could influence and change relationships between nations. Ubuntu is the capacity in African indigenous knowledge and culture to express compassion, reciprocity, dignity, harmony and humanity in the interests of building and maintaining a sustainable socio-economic and political development, with justice and mutual caring. Ubuntu is consciousness of our natural desire to affirm our fellow human beings and to work and act towards each other with the communal good in the forefront of our minds.

The concept of *Ubuntu* originates from two sets of languages: the Sesotho languages which include the Sepedi, Setswana and (Southern)Sesotho languages.

In these languages, the concept of *Ubuntu* is known as *Botho*. Another set of languages in which the term *Ubuntu* is found is the Nguni languages including isiZulu, isiXhosa, isiNdebele, isiSwati and some other languages from sub-Saharan Africa (Norren, 2014:256). The concept of *Ubuntu*, as an expression of African way of life speak about “humanness” or “person-hood” in African point of view. *Ubuntu* expresses the African people’s life of compassion, hospitality, reciprocity, mutuality, and dignity which make them live a life of collectivity and relatedness. Human being only discovers full personality and human wholeness in a group of relationships because in relationship there is “both an end and an entity”. Whatever happens to an individual happens to the whole group and whatever happens to the whole group, happens to the individual.

6. Conclusion

It is pertinent to conclude that Africa must develop beyond the contemporary obstructive shackles and the glaring chains of the western world as well as the existing momentous vicious circle of underdevelopment. It is unfortunate that everyone now looks at western cultures and civilization and considered them alone as bearers of real authentic cultural and political framework and true civilization. if this continues in Africa there will be a resultant loss in authenticity and the African values that *Ubuntu* encapsulates. There is a clarion call for a complimentary mental re-conversion or rebirth to cleanse not just the continent but also the psyche of every African of the unpatriotic ideologies that a lack of the spirit of *Ubuntu* presents. African epistemology and culture are the most valuable and precious wealth that need to be harnessed and tailored towards African sustainable development. Sustainable socio-economic development can only be achieved through the conscious and continued effort at promoting African indigenous knowledge and cultural value

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