African Epistemology

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Paul O. Irikefe[1] (UC Irvine)

1. Introduction

African epistemology is the study of the phenomenon of knowledge from an African perspective, where this is to be understood as the perspective of the individual African philosopher rooted in a historical and cultural consciousness, or those of various African communities, or experts in those communities. In the contemporary era,[2] African epistemology involves three distinct, but interrelated projects: ethno-epistemology, analytic African epistemology, and ameliorative African epistemology. Ethno-epistemology is the study of knowledge from the perspective of particular African communities as revealed in their cultural heritage, proverbs, folklores, traditions, and practices. Analytic African epistemology involves the philosophical study of concepts, such as "knowledge," "justification," "belief" and "truth" from the African perspective, using the methods of analysis, criticism, arguments, ordinary language philosophy, and so on. And finally, ameliorative African epistemology addresses the predicament of African knowledge systems and voices in the global knowledge and credibility economy within the broader context of the problem of epistemic injustice suffered by historically marginalized groups.

2. Ethno-epistemology

African epistemology in the contemporary era emerged as a distinctive form of discourse, namely, as ethno-epistemology. Ethno-epistemology is the epistemology of a group, or more accurately, the epistemology that is mediated by group knowledge, or group beliefs. Within the African context, this is typically an ethnic group, or of African people as a collective. Historically, this African orientation in philosophy emerged as part of a broader movement (also in literature, in religion, and in anthropology) to correct certain misrepresentations of African culture and people.

For example, the African literary icon, Chinua Achebe, has drawn attention to certain negative portrayals of Africans in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, where for example, the River Congo (the second largest river in Africa) is described as a place of civilizational innocence, and posited as the antithesis of the River Thames, the latter being a place of acclaimed civilizational achievements in Conrad's telling (Achebe, 2014). Similarly, in philosophy, we find certain misrepresentations of the African personality and culture in some works of eminent Western philosophers, such as G.W.F. Hegel, David Hume, and Immanuel Kant (Eze, 1997). For instance, in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History,* Hegel writes: "The characteristic feature of the negroes is that their consciousness has not yet reached an awareness of any substantial objectivity—for example, of God or the law—in which the will of man could participate and in which he could become aware of his own being" (Hegel, 1980, pp. 110-111). And most notably, in Lucien Lévy-Bruhl's ethnography, the African personality he claimed to have studied is presented as pre-logical, unyielding to basic principles of elementary logic, such as modus ponens (Lévy-Bruhl & Clare, 2018). (Let us note, however, that in a subsequent work (Lévy-Bruhl, Leenhardt, & Rivière, 1975), he sought to soften and modify this position.)

It is against this general background that ethno-epistemology took shape as a study of the collective representations, intellectual capacities, and thinking styles of African people(s). The earliest work of this genre in the present context of our discussion was Placide Tempels' *Bantu Philosophy*. Tempels was a Belgian missionary priest, who worked among the Baluba people of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. His main thesis is that there is an ontological core in the cultural worldview of the Baluba people against which every aspect of their life can be understood, or interpreted: epistemology, ethics, politics, and various cultural practices. This central core is the

notion of vital forces, a notion he was keen to contrast with the Western concept of "being." The notion itself was due, however, to Henri Bergson (1998). Tempels, in effect, saw in Bergson's critique of the dominant model of Western rationality, which he indicates with that notion, something useful for articulating an African ontology and for contrasting that ontology with a dominant Western ontological paradigm. He says:

> When we think in terms of the concept of 'being' they use the concept of 'force'. Where we see concrete beings, they see concrete forces. When we say that 'beings' are differentiated by their essence or nature, Bantus say that 'forces' differ in their essence or nature. They hold that there is the divine force, celestial or terrestrial forces, human forces, animal forces, or mineral forces (Tempels, 1959, p. 52).

According to Tempels, this notion of "vital forces" provides the lens through which one can understand not only the Baluba people, but also African people and other traditional non-Western societies more generally.[3]

Let us examine Tempels' view more closely. First, on this view, one is constituted by relationships and relationality rather than by atomism and individualism. Second, there is the claim that this relationship is not limited to the human world, but also includes other forces as well, such as the divine forces, the celestial forces, the terrestrial forces, the human forces, the animal forces, and mineral forces. And third, there is the claim that the universe is marked by hierarchy and harmony among the forces, beginning from God, spirits, founding fathers, the dead (with their own ranking), the living (ranked by seniority), lower animals, and vegetation. Moreover, on Tempels' view, this ontological system has implications for understanding the nature and value of knowledge for the Africans.[4] Ontological knowledge, he says, is the highest level of knowledge; it is true knowledge, which is wisdom. This knowledge is "the intelligence of forces, of their hierarchy, their cohesion and their interaction" (Tempels, 1959, p. 73).

Suppose we broaden our conception of epistemology to include not just its traditional concern with doxastic states, and the question of when and whether a belief amounts to knowledge (the doxastic paradigm), but also *activities* aimed at settling questions, or of finding things out (i.e., inquiry-based epistemology) (Hookway, 2006). Then it is easy to see how Tempels' work offers us a way to understand what African epistemology amounts to. Consider what it would mean for an individual to find answers to a question in a world whose boundary is a whole universe of known, or recognized spirits, ancestors, living human beings, living-dead, and vegetative/life forces. Indeed, the range of questions that such an individual would be disposed to pose and answer would clearly not be coterminous with the range of questions that a scientifically cultivated individual in a Western culture would be disposed to pose and address. The same would go for what would pass as reasonable answers and permissible ways of arriving at these answers. Take a concrete case of this, namely, the practice of consulting Ifa´, a divinity among the Yoruba people of Western Nigeria.[5] Since the world is bounded by a hierarchy and interaction of known, or recognized forces and spirits, it would make sense for someone to consult Ifa´ in the Yoruba culture when stuck in inquiry and having exhausted all available options. Indeed, that one is stuck would be evidence that a more comprehensive inquiry is called for in such moments and in such an environment.

Now imagine someone from a different cultural background and outlook, who simply dismisses the cognitive standpoint implied in this form of inquiry. With great plausibility, we can say that such an individual would be manifesting vicious intellectual character traits. What I have in mind here are the intellectual vices manifested by two hypothetical Western individuals described by Wayne Riggs (2015), the cases of Oblivia and Smugford. Oblivia lacks sensitivity to cues that there are other cognitive standpoints, or intellectual options more broadly, that differ from her own, and so fail consistently to engage with them, even though she is willing to do so. To make this as intelligible as possible, Riggs presents the case as follows:

> Imagine that Oblivia is a stereotypical 'ugly American' who travels abroad. She sees people in other countries acting in ways that disclose values and belief systems different from her own, but she is oblivious to these disclosures. It simply fails to occur to her to explain the sometimes puzzling-to-her behavior of these other people in terms of a different belief or value system. She simply experiences them as behaving 'strangely.' Since she perceives no alternative cognitive standpoints, her willingness and ability to seriously consider such standpoints is rather moot. She will be unable to *actually* consider those standpoints because she is unaware of their existence (Riggs, 2015, p.24).

The thought is that this makes Oblivia liable to "vice charging,"[6] specifically to being charged with closed-mindedness. As for the case of Smugford, here we are to imagine someone who might be very knowledgeable and well-read, but whose cognitive filters are too demanding, such that alternative standpoints (e.g., the above inquirer engaged in Yoruba divinatory practices) never meet his or her criteria of plausibility to be given fair hearing, or consideration (Riggs, 2015). Thus, Tempels' *Bantu Philosophy* can be used to understand, as well as, to defend African epistemology against vicious ways of thinking based on intellectual ethnocentrism.

Unlike Tempels, who sought to derive African epistemology from an African ontology, Léopold Sédar Senghor sought an African way of knowing in the "physio-psychology" of Africans. In fact, he thinks that African ontology, or metaphysics depends on African epistemology and personality, and not the other way round. On this view, it is by studying that peculiar way of grasping the world that we can understand the nature of African civilization and the dynamism of their ontological system. What then is this distinctive African physio-psychology? Senghor addresses this question by arguing that the Negro is characteristically attuned to sounds, scents, rhythms, forms, and colours, and possesses synthetic reason as opposed to discursive reason. He says: "White reason is analytic through utilization: Negro reason is intuitive through participation" (Senghor, 1956, p. 52).

The Negro physio-psychology that Senghor seems to glorify would be the kind of personality expressed in the traditional African society organized around the extended family and kinship system, and which finds its concrete expression in the village system, but more importantly in African visual arts. Anyone who has lived in some of these parts of Africa would be able to appreciate where Senghor seems to be coming from—the dancing, the all-year round celebrations, the festivals, the music, and the consensus. But such features of life do not square with modern African society and the personality shaped by that society. Indeed, since Senghor sees the African personality, or for that matter, any personality as a synthesis of historical, geographical, racial, and ethnic factors, it does not seem credible to affirm a personality core, which defines one group, and sets them apart from other groups since this core would be constantly shifting and adjusting to socio-historical factors. However, it is possible to see degrees of approximations to these traits among these groups, such that the difference between the African and the Western would be one of degrees rather than of kind. The reader would do well to see Senghor's claims in this light. This qualification is meant to also apply to Tempels' account as well.

Further, Marcien Towa has criticized Senghor's work for offering an indirect defense of the intellectual ethnocentrism he apparently intends to cure (Towa, 1976), and John Mbiti has drawn attention to some factual inaccuracies of Tempels' work (Mbiti, 1990). I shall return to these problems in ethno-epistemology in the next section, and seek to offer an unproblematic rendering of the ethno-philosophical proposals. What is important to note here is that despite these reservations, Tempels' and Senghor's contributions to ethno-epistemology continue to inspire current research in the field.

For example, in line with Senghor, Donald Ude (2022) argues that a central notion found in African thought-patterns, namely, that "the individual is inextricably linked to the community, and that realities mutually impact one another is basically *a sense*, *a mode of knowing the world"* (Ude,

2022, p. 710) for the Africans (for a similar proposal, see Imafidon, 2023). One question this raises is how to conceptualize this kind of intellectual competence, or capacity. Is it a mode of knowing like visual perception, or some mysterious mode of knowing other than sense perception? The worry arises from the need not to unnecessarily posit capacities that lend support to the very stereotyping, which ethno-epistemology seeks to correct in the first place. Again, I take up these issues in the next section.

Further, in line with Tempels, a number of African philosophers have expounded on various bodies of ethno-epistemology, such as Chewa epistemology (Kaphagawani, 1998; Kaphagawani & Chidammodzi, 1983), Igbo epistemology (Udefi, 2014), African epistemology (Hamminga, 2005), Ewen and Akan epistemology (Dzobo, 2005), etc. Let us closely examine a few of these. Amaechi Udefi (2014) provides a specimen of Igbo epistemology by exploring the Igbo conception of knowledge and belief. He says that for the Igbos, a major ethnic group in Southeast Nigeria, the term "amamife" is used to refer to knowledge. Knowledge so conceived is restricted to those things, or events for which one can offer good reason, and which can be verified through sense perception and observation. Hence, when the Igbos say: *ihe mfuru na anya ma uche kwado kwa ya* (what I see with my eyes and which my mind, or consciousness supports), they are alluding to knowledge. On the other hand, the term *nchekwube,* which is the equivalent of "belief" among the Igbos is restricted to second-hand reports and testimony more generally. This deals with those things, which one accepts on the basis of faith and trust and for which there is no certainty to be obtained. However, there are grades of testimony among the Igbos according to Udefi (2014). There is common testimony, to which merely accepting, or believing would be the appropriate attitude. And there is the testimony of elders (*ndichie*), title holders (*ozo*), and native doctors (*dibie afa*), to which the attribution of knowledge would be appropriate since their testimony is considered by the community as true and reliable.

Similarly, Kaphagawani and Chidammodzi (1983) present Chewan epistemology by probing some Chewa proverbs and cultural heritage. They say:

> Chichewa, the language spoken by the Chewa people, is littered with proverbs, the messages of which are indicative of the Chewa conception of knowledge. The first and foremost is Akuluakulu…which means, literally, 'The elders are rivers where fire is extinguished'... Now the concept of knowledge starts to come to light. It is something along the lines of maximum cumulative experience, not for its own sake, but rather for practical purposes (Kaphagawani & Chidammodzi, 1983, p. 32).

Probing some more proverbs in Chichewa, Kaphagawani and Chidammodzi distinguished between two kinds of experience at issue here: temporal experience, or what one might call diachronic experience, and spatial experience, or what one might call synchronic experience. While the former takes time to acquire, the latter form of experience is possible without it, and is associated with novelty. They conclude by noting that Africans have a view of knowledge as an instrumental good and that this stands in contrast to the Western view of knowledge as a fundamental good. (It should be noted though that ordinary folks in the West might also prefer practical and instrumental knowledge, and that Kaphagawani and Chidammodzi's claim here cannot be sustained without further qualifications and research.)

Putting Ethno-Epistemology on a Firmer Footing

As both a genre of African epistemology and a method of doing African philosophy, ethno-epistemology has been accused of unanimism, overgeneralization, and lack of argument and logic. Hountondji (1996) voices the first concern when he notes that ethno-philosophy and ethno-epistemology by extension fosters the illusion "that all men and women in such societies speak with one voice and share the same opinion about all fundamental issues. This implies the rejection

of pluralism, the sweeping away of all internal contradictions and tensions, the denial of the intense intellectual life, and the extreme cultural richness associated with these societies" (Hountondji, 1996, p. 18).

Wiredu (1991) voices the second worry when he writes: "Father Tempels, for example, generalized about African philosophy with little thought of empirical warrant. If he thought that the particular Bantu people unto whom he ministered held a certain view—say, "Force is the nature of being, force is being and being is force"—he thereupon credited it to Africans in general" (Wiredu, 1991, p. 89).

And Peter Bodunrin (1991) raises the third worry when he says that, although philosophy has no agreed upon method, for anything to count as philosophy, one must do the following: (a) state one's case, or problem clearly; (b) argue for one's case, or view, that is show the philosophical community why we should accept this position, and (c) do (b) by either showing the weakness of rival views, or how one's theory solves particular problems, or advances understanding in the debate (Bodunrin, 1981, p. 172).

One consequence of these criticisms by some of the most eminent African philosophers and those earlier raised in the previous section is the uneasiness with which ethno-epistemologists ply their trade. Often, they begin, or end their work by defending themselves and offering an apology. And this typically takes the form of distancing themselves from the very ethno-epistemological method they are explicitly embracing, or endorsing, or distancing themselves from the works of their philosophical forebears, Senghor and Tempels in particular.

But these criticisms do not strike me as fair, or even cogent. The first two criticisms are intertwined since they raise the question regarding when it would be appropriate to attribute group belief, or group knowledge, where the group in question is a particular community, or Africans in general. Wiredu and Hountondji seem to be working with a model of group belief on which one may attribute group belief just in case all, or at least most members have the relevant belief. In social epistemological/ontological debate, this is called the *summative* view of group belief/knowledge (Gilbert, 1987, 2004).

But the summative view is not the only model of group belief/knowledge, and it is not even the most plausible: it fails to capture attribution of group belief, or group knowledge in cases where no members of a given group actually believes the relevant proposition and yet the attribution of group belief, or knowledge seems appropriate. The following would be such a case: for some politically expedient reasons, members of a group X express their belief *as a group* on p but no members of the group actually believe p (Bird, 2014; Gilbert, 1987).

Besides that view, there is also the *distributive view* of group knowledge, or group belief, which claims that a proposition can be the object of group belief, or group knowledge just in case it is the outcome of a process of division of epistemic labour among members of a group. With minor modifications, this seems to be the working assumption of most ethno-epistemologists, since on this view, you can attribute knowledge/belief to a group if you rely on the experts in that group, or culture, or the common wisdom of that group as enunciated in their publicly proclaimed traditions.

The third objection relies on a certain deductive model of philosophy where the philosopher is a champion of some particular claim(s), which is then defended against its rivals by advancing arguments in favour of it. However, Tempels, and to some extent, other ethno-epistemologists seem to be working with a different and yet equally cogent model of philosophy, what Timothy Williamson calls *speculative/abductive philosophy* (Williamson, 2007, 2016). This kind of philosophy involves not the presentation of some particular claim and its defense against rival views in the debate, but rather the presentation of a system of ideas from which some particular claims are made intelligible, or are derived from it; a way of doing philosophy common in analytic metaphysics and in the *abductive philosophy* of David Lewis. Consider, for example, Lewis' Humean supervenience thesis, which has received enormous attention in analytic philosophy for over three decades now. When this thesis was introduced (Lewis, 1986, pp. ix-xi), Lewis does not even argue

for it. He says: "What I want to fight are philosophical [and not empirical] arguments against Humean supervenience" (Lewis, 1986, p.xi). He seems also not to be interested in whether the thesis is true. Similarly, one might think that Tempels' proposal should not be struck down on empirical ground *à la* Mbiti (1990), or on the ground of deductive method *à la* Bodunrin (1981). Tempels and many ethno-epistemologists are engaged in the elaboration of a system of ideas among the African people they are familiar with. And attributing the relevant system is acceptable, or plausible because it yields understanding of these people and their modes of conceptualizations and inquiry.

One final problem is how we should understand ethno-epistemology in a way that is unproblematic, for example, in a way that does not suggest some mysterious capacity of knowing possessed by all Africans. In my view, an answer to this question would require us to see that there is a close connection between the brand of ethno-epistemology found in Senghor (1956) and Ude (2022), which involves the positing of some general intellectual abilities among Africans and the brand of ethno-epistemology found in Hamminga (2005), Kaphagawani (1998), and Udefi (2014), which talks about some body of knowledge.

On this proposal, in order to appreciate the distinctive way in which Africans conceive the world, there is no need to posit any unique capacities possessed by Africans since attributing such capacities, to reiterate an earlier point, would have the unintended consequence of supporting the very stereotypes that ethno-epistemologists seem eager to correct. Let us say instead that African proverbs, folklores, traditions, orality, practices, literature, and worldviews form the basis of what we should call "common knowledge" among Africans. This body of common knowledge does not have the title of *knowledge* because it is empirically, or rationally validated by each individual, but it is knowledge because it marks the collective experience of Africans about their world, which is transmitted from one generation to the next. Each generation of Africans may seek to redefine and reshape it, but their tacit acceptance of it, to start with, is the precondition for engaging in these intellectual exercises, and crucially the condition for the possibility of their self-knowledge and their understanding the world.[7]

One core feature of common knowledge, so stated, is that being so tacitly accepted, it shapes people's sensitivity to the world and disposes them to think, feel, act, and respond to that world in a unique way. In this way, African cultural heritage and African ways of knowing are one and the same thing in the sense that the former defines and constitutes the space and boundary of the latter. So understood, ethno-epistemology is non-tendentious and non-mysterious. Moreover, it plausibly constitutes the starting point of any serious engagement with African life, thought, and practices.

3. Analytic African epistemology

Analytic African epistemology pursues the traditional project of epistemology using the methods of analysis, criticism, argument, ordinary language philosophy, and the like. Examples of this includes Wiredu's defense of the claims that to be true is to be opined and to be is to be known (Wiredu, 1980), Janvid's account of testimonial justification in Yoruba epistemic practices (Janvid, 2021), and Barry and Sodipo's illuminating analysis of the terms "knows" and "belief" in Yoruba culture (Hallen & Sodipo, 1997). I would focus on the last example since it constitutes the paradigmatic form of this mode of African epistemology.

Hallen and Sodipo's Yoruba Epistemology

Hallen and Sodipo make clear that they are engaged in analytic epistemology with an African twist (Hallen & Sodipo, 1997). Hallen (2004) puts it more explicitly as follows:

> We set out to adapt the techniques of J. L. Austin's ordinary language philosophy to the African context in our studies of Yoruba discourse and thought. Briefly, this is an approach to philosophy that implores philosophers to avoid excessive armchair theorizing by studying the meanings of key terms in any natural language on the basis of the contexts in which those terms are actually used and thereby defined by ordinary, everyday speakers of that language. The presumption is that if the members of a particular language culture have taken the trouble to articulate, to verbalize differences between, for example, things they may claim to "know" as contrasted with things they may only claim to "believe," there is some point to or reason for their having made this distinction (Hallen, 2004, p. 116).

For the Yoruba people of Western Nigeria, what does this difference amount to, and what is the point of it? They answer these questions by approaching the Onisẹ̀gún, who are experts in Yoruba culture, have no knowledge of the English language, and are possibly immune from the cultural and historical encrustations of any foreign intellectual outlook. The Onisẹ̀gún explain the terms "knows" and "belief" using specific usages. With respect to "knows" (mọ̀ in Yoruba language), they make the following observation: (1) "The one you use your own eyes to see and which your *ọkọ̀n* witnesses you that it is *òótọ́* – this is the best." And (2) "It is clear in my eyes. This means I have witnessed it myself. It is *òótọ́* that he does this thing...It is clear in your eyes" (Hallen & Sodipo, 1997, p. 60). In analysing these terms, Hallen and Sodipo (1997) argue that the Onisẹ̀gún are stating two conditions that are necessary for any state to count as knowledge. The first is that it must be the outcome of visual perceptual experience. And the second is that it must be apprehended, or understood by the mind.

With respect to "belief" translated in Yoruba as *gbàgbọ́*, they say:

> What you use your eyes to see – this is not what you are told. What you are told may not be true (*òótọ́*). But if you use your own eyes to touch it, like this [gesture], you will understand (*yẹ̀*) it. You've used your own eyes to see it... If you have been noticing the behaviour (*ìwà*) of a person, we can say, "He can do a certain kind of thing." But if he has not done such a thing in [before] your eyes, you will say, "I *gbàgbọ́*". But if he has done such a thing in your eyes, you will say, "*imọ̀*." This means it is clear in your eyes... It means that your *ọkọ̀n* does not witness the thing – whether it is or is not (Hallen & Sodipo 1997, 64–65).

Gbàgbọ́ includes oral tradition, and the realm of testimony (textbook information, information transmitted by teachers, or received from others). On this view, all of these belong to the category of *gbàgbọ́,* which is hearing and accepting what one hears. They do not rise to the level of *ìmọ*, which is knowledge. On the basis of this, Hallen & Sodipo (1997) argue that the African (Yoruba) concept of knowledge is remarkably different from the Western concept of knowledge on which testimony counts as knowledge.

This is a curious result because traditional African societies dating back to Ancient Egypt consider oral tradition as a source of knowledge, indeed a source of *sacred* knowledge, the highest form of knowledge. The account also leads to the paradoxical conclusion that before the age of writing, a Yoruba person did not and cannot be said to *know* his or her age because this is typically transmitted by testimony. Rather, during that era they merely accepted such information (Irikefe, 2021).

A third problem, if one accepts the account, is that one would be hard-pressed to explain other behavioural tendencies and dispositions of the Yorubas. For example, how should we explain the practice of consulting Ifa´ among the Yorubas done when a child is born, when

someone is embarking on a new venture, and when there is some mysterious illness? Since this mode of inquiry is informed by the thought that *Ifa´* has unsurpassable knowledge and wisdom, which can guide one's action and conduct in such special moments, and since this knowledge and wisdom can only be transmitted through the *babaláwo* (i.e., the *Ifa* traditional priest/expert) by testimony, it is not clear that people can ever know in such circumstances. And if they cannot know because of the mediation of testimony, how should we explain their acting like people who knew in such circumstances—seen by what they are prepared to do with such information, the risk they are prepared to take, the assertions they are prepared to make, their staking their minds in certain way to their neighbours and children when in such cognitive states, and so on?

What I am hinting at here is that the practice of applying the term "knows" goes beyond what one may find felicitous, or cogent, or informative to say in a given occasion. To get at the rule implied by our applying the term "knows" in various circumstances, a rule that is both concise and informative—part of what conceptualization of a phenomenon amounts to—requires going beyond such data. By "beyond" I do not mean that one simply sets the data aside. Rather, I mean that one needs to put such data into a broader explanatory perspective by taking into account other practices like divination.

For example, given the fact I just hinted at about the practice of divination, the account might be more cogent if the authors considered alternative explanations of the relevant data from the Onisẹ̀gún. In this regard, consider the following plausible alternative explanation: the Onisẹ̀gún are not offering some necessary conditions of knowledge, but merely indicating a spectrum for the attribution of knowledge in which the highest degree of it is *imọ̀*, and *gbàgbọ́* merely approximates it, for they say: "The one you use your own eyes to see and which your *ọ̀kọ̀n* witnesses you that it is *òótọ́* – this is the best" (Hallen & Sodipo, 1997). The word "best" here supports the idea of being of the highest kind, or the exemplar of a kind. Moreover, if we adopt this alternative explanation, we thereby avoid all the aforementioned worries (Irikefe, 2021).

Notice too that this way of thinking about philosophical data and the analytic project holds a general lesson for the practice of African philosophy. We need to factor in the broader context of human utterances and recognize that terms of philosophical interest like "knows," "belief," and "understand" are multi-track dispositional terms in the sense that what they amount to are not fully disclosed to us by some given utterances, but by the wider practices and attitudes that we are engaged in when in such mental states.

3. Ameliorative African Epistemology

We live in an imperfect world. Ameliorative African epistemology begins from that premise and asks how we might correct for this with the overall aim of enabling and fostering a more just world in our intellectual practices. The imperfection in question here is the injustice in our global epistemic practices suffered by Africans and other marginalized groups, in particular from slavery, colonialism, and coloniality.

It is important to note here that understanding the nature of this injustice requires thinking of African epistemology as part of a global discourse of Subaltern and Southern epistemology (Santos, 2013, 2018). Indeed, it is precisely this broader discourse that forms the background against which contemporary African epistemologists have proceeded to make their proposals, as will be seen shortly. Thus, as part of this stage setting, I shall include in this section works of Latin American and Southern epistemologists, who have done remarkable scholarship on this subject. These thinkers include Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2013, 2018), Ramón Grosfoguel (2007, 2013), Anibal Quijano (2000), and Walter Mignolo (2002, 2009), to mention but a few.

The experience of slavery and colonialism brought a great deal of intellectual harm and wrong to the African continent and its peoples. Grosfoguel (2013), drawing from Santos (2013), argues that the slavery of Africans in the Long 16th century (i.e., the period from 1450 to 1650)

was one of the four epistemicides that led to the modern structure of knowledge in Westernized universities, where the canon of thought in every discipline is laid down by a tiny portion of the world in the West.[8] Speaking of these epistemicides, or the exterminations of knowledges, and ways of knowing, he writes:

> Africans in the Americas were forbidden from thinking, praying or practicing their cosmologies, knowledges and world views. They were submitted to a regime of epistemic racism that forbade their autonomous knowledge production. Epistemic inferiority was a crucial argument used to claim biological social inferiority below the line of the human. The racist idea in late 16th century was that "Negroes lack intelligence" which turned in the 20th century to "Negroes have low IQ levels" (Grosfoguel, 2013, p. 84).

The form of injustice that Grosfoguel addresses here is wilful and volitional.

But there is another form of injustice that is not so because it is just a consequence of introducing a radically different worldview into the intellectual space and imaginary of African people. For example, the Christian religious system brought to African shores by the missionaries was a universalistic religion: it asserted one truth, which is the truth of the Christian faith, and the Greco-Roman culture. Every deviation from this truth was presented as false, perverse, and wrong. Hence, the African worldview, which often conflicted with this system of thought (e.g., the category of the living-dead, which is not co-extensive with the category of the "saints" in Christianity is foreign to the Christian faith, but represents a visible reality for Africans, even in the contemporary era) was derided, demoted, and displaced, first by the missionaries, and later by African converts to Christianity. Part of the result of this is what Wiredu calls "colonial mentality," which he describes as the infelicity of mind among Africans to undervalue their system of thought and practices, and to overvalue those that come from the outside (Wiredu, 2002). This phenomenon constitutes a real psychological harm as well as an epistemic wrong.

Beyond the introduction of a new and radically different worldview to the African people, colonialism also introduced various conceptual categories for making sense of reality and experience through the imposition of the language of the colonizers, such as reality, being, existence, subjectivity, truth, fact, knowledge, opinion, substance, quality, thought, faith, doubt, reason, responsibility, punishment, and so on (Wiredu, 2002).

Finally, although we now live in a post-colonial age, Grosfoguel (2007), Quijano (2000), and Mignolo (2002, 2009) argue that we still live in "colonial situations," which they call "coloniality." Coloniality is the legacy of oppression/exploitation of subordinate racialized/ethnic groups by dominant racialized/ethnic groups in our cultural, political, sexual, epistemic, spiritual and economic relation in the present age.

Let us examine some proposals aimed at addressing this predicament. I will limit myself here only to those that are oriented towards the African dimension of this problem. The first is the program of decolonization. Wiredu (1997, 2002) proposes the program of conceptual decolonization in African philosophy, which he defines as "the elimination from our thought modes of conceptualizations that came to us through colonization and remain in our thinking owing to inertia rather than to our own reflective choices" (Wiredu, 2002, p.56). That also encapsulates the negative part of decolonization, as he understands it. The positive part of the program, he says, entails "exploiting as much as is judicious the resources of our own indigenous conceptual schemes" (Wiredu, 1996, p. 136). It is an interesting fact that a great deal of what goes on in analytic African epistemology and in ethno-epistemology is done with the motive of conceptual decolonization, since they are attempts to reveal African conceptual categories in their true colours. Wiredu himself devoted much of his scholarship in pursuit of this agenda in African philosophy more broadly (Wiredu, 1985, 1996, 2006).

The South African philosopher and epistemologist, Veli Mitova, has done extensive work on this program too. Two projects are of particular interest here: decolonizing knowledge and

decolonizing experts. She argues that epistemic decolonization is a call, first to dismantle the pretension of the Global North to objective and universal production of knowledge and the "self-arrogated hegemonic authority" that undergirds it. And second "it is a call to re-centre the knowledge enterprise onto our geo-historical here and now" (Mitova, 2020, p. 191). And the basic way to implement these calls, she argues, involves both negative and positive elements. The negative element requires the elimination from our knowledge supplies and production foreign influences that are due to the reflexes of cultural interaction and intermingling, such as the continued influence of the Western "canon" in African philosophy of education. And the positive element involves the proactive utilization of the marginalized epistemic resources, such as indigenous language and thought systems in the advancement of knowledge in various fields (Mitova, 2020).[9]

In a separate work, Mitova argues for the need to decolonize "experts" in philosophy. This is based on the observation that the experts of the marginalized, for example, the traditional healers of Southern Africa are indeed experts because they meet any reasonable criteria for counting as one, such as the competence condition and the sincerity/care condition. Further, it is based on the observation that existing accounts of experts, such as the truth-centred account (Goldman, 2001, 2018), the skill-based account and the service account (Quast, 2018a, 2018b) are unable to accommodate the insight that marginalized experts are indeed experts. A more promising and adequate account is then given, what Mitova calls "communitarian functionalism," which counts marginalized experts as experts and which avoids some other problematic features of the extant accounts. The rough idea of communitarian functionalism is that someone is an expert in a relevant domain in virtue of her role in her epistemic community and in virtue of whether she acts in an epistemically responsible manner in this role (Mitova, Forthcoming).

We can agree that decolonization is an excellent philosophical and epistemological orientation, especially in combatting the colonial mindset and mentality among Africans, and dismantling the system of oppression in our epistemic relation with the rest of the world. But here is a fundamental worry. Intellectual self-trust and confidence and other epistemic goods like credibility and esteem for our knowledge systems, supplies, and experts do not operate in a vacuum. It would be great if things were not so. However, what seems to be the case is that the epistemic goods of a group in the global chain of credibility and esteem are interlinked with other goods of that group, such as their economic and political fortunes. Thus, if a continent like Africa continues to be a place of excessive economic dependence on the economic institutions of the Global North, such as the World Bank and IMF, and places of unabating humanitarian concerns, decolonization, whether conceptual, epistemic, or even political would be undermined since we seem to project two contradicting messages, gestures, and postures in the global system that are cancelling each other out, one of independence and esteem, and one of extreme dependence and disesteem. What this means is that if decolonization is to be successful, or effective, it has to be a comprehensive phenomenon, requiring a new posture in all aspects of our relation to the world. For that to happen, all hands would need to be on deck.

Beyond decolonization, Jonathan Chimakonam (2017) has advanced conversationalism as a remedial ideology to the problem of global epistemic injustice. And he formulates its elementary rules as follows: "(1) never promote a thesis from one philosophical tradition as just and globally applicable, (2) never demote a thesis from the other philosophical tradition without prior conversational engagement, and (3) do not accept as justly formulated any thesis from any philosophical tradition whatsoever without a globalized conversational engagement" (Chimakonam, 2017, pp. 121-122). This is a promising proposal for dealing with parochialism in philosophy. The first principle rules out any uncritical acceptance of objectivity and universalism in philosophical inquiry. The second principle is equally plausible in general terms.

However, the third principle seems problematic because it claims that no philosophical thesis should be considered adequate without being the outcome of a global discourse. Surely, many philosophical debates are local, and the results of those debates are correctly formulated

because they effectively deal with those problems. To require that these theses must first be exposed to wider nodes of philosophical engagement is clearly too demanding. The second problem with the proposal is more general. Questions of justice and injustice are not appropriately attached to philosophical theses. For example, it is not clear what one might mean to say that Lewis' Humean supervenience thesis is not "justly" formulated because it is not the outcome of a global discourse. The intuition would not be natural. But one might say with great plausibility that a particular form of injustice arises in a local debate because this debate unfairly excludes other legitimate voices, say African, Asian, Latino, and so on. So, on this view, principles of epistemic justice would apply naturally to debates, people, and voices, but not to philosophical theses, which are the result of arguments, and which are assessed for plausibility, soundness, adequacy, theoretical virtues, and so on.

4. Conclusion

From the above exposition and analysis, it is clear that the field of African epistemology sustains a lively debate, which seeks either to model mainstream epistemology in hitherto dominant traditions, or else to challenge those traditions and paradigms in search of a world of global epistemic justice. Looking ahead, we can expect African epistemology to develop its own distinctive paradigms that are focussed on problems peculiar to Africa and its people, but using the best modes of conceptualizations of doing philosophy available anywhere (Irikefe, 2022; Wiredu, 1980). Here as elsewhere, one would not expect Africa to be an exception to the practice of cultural and intellectual borrowing characteristic of all philosophical traditions, including Greek philosophy itself, which owes a great deal of intellectual debt to African philosophy via its Egyptian ancestry (James, 2013).

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Notes

[1] Paul O. Irikefe is President's and Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Postdoctoral Fellow, UC Irvine

[2] African epistemology is not restricted to the contemporary era. Ancient African epistemology flowered in Egyptian mystery systems, where for example the concept of self-knowledge evolved as a key component of intellectual human flourishing (James, 2013).

[3] The case for generalizing this way is that there are similarities among traditional cultures, for example, among African cultures and peoples. For example, in all African cultures, there is a strong recognition of the living-dead, that is, those who have died in recent memory and who continue to play an active role in the day-to-day life of the communities and individuals. It is almost an article of faith across the continent. Further, this widespread belief persists despite modernization. For interesting analysis of this and more, see Mbiti (1990).

[4] This way of thinking, that is, deriving African epistemology from an African ontology has become since Tempels' work a very influential paradigm of thinking in the discipline. See for example, the recent volume by Ikhane and Ukpokolo (2023).

[5] Ifa´ is both a divinity among the Yorubas and the practice of consulting this divinity (Taiwo, 2005).

[6] For the notion of charging someone with vices (intellectual vices), see Kidd (2016).

[7] When I speak of "common knowledge" as rightly bearing the title of knowledge, I have in view a picture of knowledge defended by John McDowell, on which "positions like seeing and hearing from someone that things are thus and so are standings in the space of reasons in their own right, even though there is an irreducible element of luck, of kindness from the world, in whether one occupies them" (McDowell, 1993, p. 216).

[8] The other being against Jewish and Muslim population in the conquest of Al-Andalus, against indigenous people in the conquest of the Americas, and against women burned alive and accused of being witches in Europe.

[9] For other features of epistemic decolonization, see Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018); Pohlhaus (2020); Posholi (2020); and Tobi (2020).