

## African Indigenous Knowledge Systems On The Brink

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### Abstract

As questions of African identity continue to bother African nationalists and scholars, the dialectic process continues to generate further areas of concern, amidst progress proceeding from the course of providing viable solutions. To evolve a comprehensive story of African identity, African indigenous knowledge must be adequately addressed and placed. Every human culture embodies characteristics, values and practices specific to it. The knowledge of such aspects of culture is essential for its existence, preservation and generational transmissions. Thus, the loss of such knowledge not only leads to cultural erosion, but more fundamentally punctures the basic identity of a people. It is against this backdrop that the present reflection centers on African indigenous knowledge systems with a view to determining their place in the African post colonial and neo-colonial time. To what extent has African indigenous knowledge survived the wakes of modernity, imperialism and globalization? With the critical tools of philosophy, it is actually discovered that African indigenous knowledge systems are on the threshold of undesirable possibilities. Viable recommendations towards revamping the systems are aimed towards a more holistic approach to the lingering problem of African identity.

### Introduction

As the world glory in the achievements of science and technology as well as the successes of globalization, Africa is still adjudged a developing nation as contained in the global scale of development. The question of whether the idea of development is approached from the integral perspective has been the worry of many African scholars as they continue to reflect on the basis of the judgment. Apart from some North African societies, which are of Arabic descent, the Africans of the pre- colonial time existed within an undiluted African culture. The economic, socio-political and religious existences of the time were organically African. The socio-political system was communalism and the religion, African Traditional Religion (ATR). Morten Nielsen noted that:

Pre-colonial African societies were of a highly varied nature. They could be either stateless, state run or kingdoms, but most were founded on the principles of [communalism](#) in that they were self-governing, autonomous entities, and in that all members took part, directly or indirectly, in the daily running of the tribe. Land was held commonly and could not be bought or sold, although other things, such as cattle, were owned individually. In those societies that were not stateless, the chiefs ran the daily affairs of the tribe together with one or more councils. These councils simultaneously informed the chief, checked

his powers and made policy by reaching unanimous decisions. If unanimity was not reached, a village assembly would be called to debate the issue and majority ruling would now apply. The chief would listen silently to all queries during such meetings and every male adult was free to criticize him. The role of the chief during such meetings was to sum up what had been said and attempt to form some consensus among the diverse opinions. Hence the chief did not rule or dictate but led by consensus. Many tribes, especially those that were stateless, had no central authority and no class system, and many of those that did could depose a chief that was thought to have abused his power. An overarching feature of pre-colonial Africa was that its societies were not designed to be the all-powerful entities that they are today, hence the abundance of **confederation**-type societies.<sup>1</sup>

In that organic setting, African indigenous knowledge formed a vital aspect of a stable African cultural identity.

### **What is Indigenous Knowledge?**

The rising scholarly interests in and divergent approach to the idea of indigenous knowledge divest it of a single definition. According to the research report of World Bank Group (WBG) on sub-saharan Africa, “The increasing attention indigenous knowledge is receiving by academia and the development institutions has not yet led to a unanimous perception of the concept of indigenous knowledge.”<sup>2</sup> It reflects that Warren and Flavier present typical definitions which state that:

Indigenous knowledge (IK) is the local knowledge – knowledge that is unique to a given culture or society. IK contrasts with the international knowledge system generated by universities, research institutions and private firms. It is the basis for local-level decision making in agriculture, health care, food preparation, education, natural-resource management, and a host of other activities in rural communities.

Indigenous Knowledge is (...) the information base for a society, which facilitates communication and decision-making. Indigenous information systems are dynamic, and are continually influenced by internal creativity and experimentation as well as by contact with external systems.<sup>3</sup>

Apart from these definitions, the idea of indigenous knowledge has come to assume various nuances from divergent approaches. They include as articulated by Ellen and Harris, “...indigenous technical knowledge (ITK)’, ethno ecology, ‘local knowledge’, ‘folk knowledge’, ‘traditional knowledge’, ‘traditional environmental (or ecological) knowledge (TEK)’, ‘people’s science’”<sup>4</sup>

### **African Indigenous Knowledge Systems**

From antiquity, Africa possesses rich cultural content that constitute a huge body of indigenous knowledge. It is at, the first instance, the epistemic expression of the African view of reality together with their world view. Existence and survival within the African society depended hugely on the know *what*, *why* and *how* of the socio-political, economic and religious aspects of culture. In Africa, “Indigenous knowledge is part of the lives of the rural poor; their livelihood depends almost entirely on specific skills and

knowledge essential for their survival.”<sup>5</sup> (The World Bank Group) African indigenous knowledge in the areas of language, religion, agriculture, health care, economics, is crucial to the development process of the African nation. According to the report of NEPAD’s African Ministerial Council on Science and Technology:

Africa has a relatively rich body of indigenous knowledge and related technologies. This is embodied in the continent’s cultural and ecological diversities and has been used by the African people for thousands of years to solve specific developmental and environmental problems. Indigenous knowledge and technologies play major roles in biodiversity conservation, sustainable use and prospecting. In addition, their contributions to increasing food production, fighting HIV/AIDS and other diseases, and stemming environmental degradation are considerable.<sup>6</sup>

African philosophy constitutes a body of knowledge indigenous to Africa. Being in themselves materials for philosophy, African indigenous knowledge systems form a vital aspect of African epistemology. It would amount to absurdity to proffer a comprehensive account of African ontology if it is not known. Hence African approach to the issues of reality depend considerably on the extent the materials of knowledge are available. In the pre-colonial time, indigenous knowledge ensured the preservation of African identity. In the socio-political sector, communalism is specific to Africa.

African Traditional Religion (ATR) was the African indigenous religion. African economy thrived on indigenous technologies, agriculture and local market systems. Walter Rodney succinctly averred that, “The art of Egypt, the Sudan and Ethiopia was known to the rest of the world of an early date.”<sup>7</sup> The knowledge of African traditional medicine ensured the health of the people. Africans have specific modes of dressing and fashion as well as unique forms of entertainment. African women assiduously taught their daughters African delicacies. African indigenous languages were the modes of communication. Indigenous knowledge also sprouted in natural endowments and talents believed to be bestowed by the gods.

In Southeastern Nigeria, the health of Igbo traditional society lies in the supernatural knowledge of roots and herbs. The custodians of Medicare are native doctors and herbalists chosen by the gods who endow them with the extraordinary knowledge. Through *afa* (consultation with the gods), they diagnose illnesses and prescribe required medications to patients. Apart from the area of health, show of ingenuity in any sphere of life is regarded as special endowment by the gods. In other words, the gods play pivotal roles in Igbo indigenous knowledge. Nwonwu sustained this view in his statement that, “Indigenous knowledge among traditional people is regarded as a gift from the gods.”<sup>8</sup>

Ability to speak one’s native language is a show of the reality and knowledge of the language. Africa is a multi-ethnic/ multi-lingual continent, with each ethnic group containing sub-dialectic lingual makeup. Mastery of native idiomatic expressions is uncommon knowledge and is taken as native wisdom. Among the Igbo people, idioms *ilu*(idioms) are the ingredient with which *Ndigbo* gobble words. The male folk are known with knowledge of skills in farming, hunting, arts, music as well as other forms of entertainment like wrestling. The females are characterized mainly by native fashion and culinary skills. Thus, the knowledge of these vital contents of African culture not only ensures its preservation, but maintained African identity.

### **Factors Militating against African Indigenous Knowledge**

This is conceived against the backdrop of the drastic decline of African indigenous knowledge in the contemporary time. The level of decline is at alarming rate that suggests the possibility of risking the extinction of much indigenous knowledge. Several factors are identifiable as responsible for this down turn.

### **Colonialism**

The effect of colonialism on Africa is one subject that has assumed a very broad concern for African scholars. The effect takes much drastic nature on the area of African indigenous knowledge. African colonialism remains a phenomenon that basically considered Africa as a continent unworthy of independent existence. It came with mechanisms generally repressive of African cultural contents. Rodney posited that, "European and Africans themselves in the colonial period lacked due regard for the unique African culture."<sup>9</sup> (Rodney 2005, 38) That may not just be a good account of the situation. With wide coercive apparatus, many aspects of African culture and practices, that constitute African indigenous knowledge, considered barbaric, received the colonialists' sledge hammer. They strived, with various mechanisms, for effacing the organic African mindset and to entrench a western thinking pattern favourable for their western cultural imposition. Without an effective resistance, Africa was gradually captured into the subservience of the colonial concept. Colonial governments were very undemocratic.

Colonial governments did not allow popular participation. Decisions and policies were made with little or no input from the African peoples. Even in the case where decisions or policies may have benefited some people, they were still un-democratic since there were no mechanisms for the people to officially express their opinions.<sup>10</sup>

Africans were made to accept the western culture as superior and ideal, while theirs were to be relegated. With time, due to growing interest in and relish of western knowledge and culture, the African man began to lose interest in the knowledge that defines his organic identity. The submission is without prejudice to the place of culture contact as a veritable tool for the development of any society. The fact is that the negative effect of African colonialism overrides the positive. Leander Heldring and James A. Robinson posit that:

To judge the impact of colonialism on development in Africa simply by looking at outcomes during the colonial period is a conceptual mistake. Post-independence Africa looked nothing like it would have done in the absence of colonialism. Indeed, in most cases post-independence economic decline in Africa can be explicitly attributed to colonialism because the types of mechanisms that led to this decline were creations of colonial society.<sup>11</sup>

### **Modernity and Globalization**

The lingering effect of African colonialism took another dimension in the wake of modernity and globalization. With the colonial touch together with the experiences of slave trade, Africa emerged with a wide exposure not only to the western world but also

to modernity. Modernity takes a subtle synonym for westernization. In the piece *Writing Africa*, “Ofentimes, modernity can be read as Western, progressive, white; tradition as African, outdated, black.”<sup>12</sup> Without much hesitation, Africa joined the band wagon of enthronement of modern science and technology against local knowledge, products and services now regarded as irrational, sub-standard and undesirable. African traditional practices receive wide range of modern polemics as archaism, animism, superstition and barbarism.

How would indigenous knowledge thrive in such environment? African embrace of modernity contains unchecked replacement of traditional values with modern ones with severe consequences on indigenous knowledge. People have become more interested in modern things, so they are no longer interested in local ones because they are considered as either counterproductive or anti progressive. In the world where the level of development is measured by the level of technological advancement, Africa is still developing or even under- developed, hence it is striving to meet up with global challenges. In the world in which Africa is still struggling with the obvious reality of racial discrimination of all forms, lesser attention is accorded to indigenous knowledge. The truth is that modernism has a major consequence on African Indigenous knowledge systems. The World Bank Group for Sub-Saharan Africa remarks that:

Today, many indigenous knowledge systems are at risk of becoming extinct because of rapidly changing natural environments and fast pacing economic, political, and cultural changes on a global scale. Practices vanish, as they become inappropriate for new challenges or because they adapt too slowly. However, many practices disappear only because of the intrusion of foreign technologies or development concepts that promise short-term gains or solutions to problems without being capable of sustaining them. The tragedy of the impending disappearance of indigenous knowledge is most obvious to those who have developed it and make a living through it. But the implication for others can be detrimental as well, when skills, technologies, artifacts, problem solving strategies and expertise are lost.<sup>13</sup>

Further effect is, according to [Kofi Akosah-Sarpong](#) that, “In today’s Africa, one of the rapidly urbanizing regions in the world, traditional practices such puberty rites are getting low: but deadly modern diseases such as HIV/AIDS are getting high.”<sup>14</sup> Efforts to retain indigenous knowledge are met with catastrophic criticisms even among fellow Africans. The confinement of African traditional artifacts to museums is symbolic of the gradual confinement of African indigenous knowledge to the womb of history.

The reality of globalization further bastardizes the life of African indigenous knowledge. In the present era of ICT, the world has graduated to a global village. Global interaction is much easier. Western technology is getting globalized to the extent of bringing about the gradual erosion of African expertise. In her article, “Rethinking ‘Tradition vs. Modernity’: The Social Construction Of The ‘Hiv/Aids Crisis’ In Africa”, Helen Lauer conceived that:

... Africans’ epistemic and cultural advantages remain suppressed under the influence of received global stereotypes which are reinforced through mainstream media, depicting Africans as trapped or severely

handicapped by traditional beliefs and values, rendering them unfit to negotiate the challenges of the modern world.<sup>15</sup>

Reporting on the plights of indigenous people in the era of globalization, International Forum on Globalization (IGF) reports that:

Indigenous people throughout the world sit on the "frontlines" of globalization's expansion; they occupy the last pristine places on earth, where resources are still abundant: forests, minerals, water, and genetic diversity. All are ferociously sought by global corporations, trying to push traditional societies off their lands. New advances in technology, the reorientation toward export-led development, and the imperatives of pleasing global financial markets are all driving forces in the extermination of countless native communities which stand in their way... The reality remains that without rapid action, these native communities may be wiped out, taking with them vast indigenous knowledge, rich culture and traditions, and any hope of preserving the natural world, and a simpler, more holistic way of life for future generations.<sup>16</sup>

### **Neo-colonialism and Imperialism**

Coined by Ghanaian president [Kwame Nkrumah](#), *Neo-colonialism* describes: "... the socio-economic and political control that can be exercised economically, linguistically, and [culturally](#), whereby [promotion of the culture](#) of the neo-colonist country facilitates the [cultural assimilation](#) of the colonized people and thus opens the national economy to the multinational corporations of the neo-colonial country."<sup>17</sup> The subtle super-impression of foreign socio-political, economic and cultural values through various forms of international policies adversely affects the life of indigenous knowledge. Undue and progressive cultural assimilation of western driven values weaken the implementation of policies intended to safeguard the rights of indigenous knowledge holders. Thus, indigenous knowledge and technologies are not adequately promoted and protected in most African countries.

### **The Indispensability of Indigenous Knowledge**

Decline in African indigenous knowledge has left Africa more culturally impoverished and porous to the exploitations of other cultures. On the developmental front, considerable loss of indigenous knowledge remains an ineluctable factor responsible for African developmental retardation. World Bank had remarked that:

In the emerging global knowledge economy, a country's ability to build and mobilize knowledge capital is equally essential for sustainable development as the availability of physical and financial capital. The basic component of any country's knowledge system is its indigenous knowledge. It encompasses the skills, experiences and insights of people, applied to maintain or improve their livelihood.<sup>18</sup>

The passage of indigenous knowledge down from generation to generation aids and ensures the knowledge and sustenance of African culture. Apart from the issue of culture, indigenous knowledge enables African adaptation and attunement with their natural environment. For instance, traditional pastoralists are guardians of [biological diversity](#). "Indigenous knowledge is also the social capital of the poor, their main asset to invest in the struggle for survival, to produce food, to provide for shelter or to achieve control of

their own lives.”<sup>19</sup> Indigenous knowledge is an indispensable ingredient in the current quest for African identity.

Language is a very crucial aspect of culture for being the primary medium of cultural identity. Although Africa has no central language, diverse African nationalities are language specific. Thus, the ability to speak one’s indigenous language remains a basic mark of cultural identity. The preservation of a people’s linguistic and idiomatic expressions lies within the sphere of indigenous language. Consequently, the knowledge of indigenous language is a principal aspect of African indigenous knowledge systems.

It is important to note that the consideration here is neither intended as a negation of modernity nor to undermine of the role of globalization in African development. Definitely, cross cultural contact is an essential factor for societal development. The argument is that Africans are to approach these realities without prejudice to their cultural identity. Kwame Gyekye had challenged the notion that, “... modernity for Africa must be equated with Western values and institutions, arguing instead that African modernity must be forged creatively within the furnace of Africa’s many-sided cultural experience.”<sup>20</sup>

### **Measures towards the Preservation of African Indigenous Knowledge Systems**

The avoidance of the growing decline in African indigenous knowledge requires workable measures. Some individual Africans have insisted on deploying indigenous knowledge in the affairs of life. Advocacies and promulgations for the promotion and protection of indigenous knowledge are ongoing in many African countries. According to NEPAD report:

African leaders have recognized and stressed the importance of protecting and promoting indigenous knowledge and technologies to solve specific problems and improve the continent’s economies. Paragraphs 140 and 141 of the NEPAD framework document are devoted to the protection and promotion of indigenous knowledge and related technological innovations. Paragraph 140 states: "Culture is an integral part of development efforts of the continent. Consequently, it is essential to protect and effectively utilize indigenous knowledge ... and share this knowledge for the benefit of humankind ... special attention [will be given to] the protection and nurturing of indigenous knowledge ... inventions, ... and all other tradition- based innovations and creations."<sup>21</sup>

Further measures have been suggested to include:

#### **A. Development of an African Databank on Indigenous Knowledge and Technologies**

Auditing, documenting and supporting research are some the ways of protecting and promoting the use of indigenous knowledge and technologies. Once the knowledge and technologies are in the public domain, it is relatively difficult for corporate actors and individuals to misappropriate them and unfairly or illegally acquire intellectual property rights. This proposed project will focus on establishing an African Indigenous Knowledge and Technologies Bank. This will be a source of information on various forms of knowledge and technologies held and used by traditional and/or local African communities.

Specific actions of the project will include:

- ›Preparation of comprehensive guidelines and methodologies for auditing and documenting indigenous knowledge and technologies. The guidelines and methodologies will be based on good practices from around the world.
- ›Development of a common protocol for provision to, and access and use of knowledge and technologies in the proposed bank. This will be mechanism to ensure that countries and institutions participating in the project share benefits in a fair and equitable manner.
- ›Training courses on auditing, collection and documentation of indigenous knowledge and technologies will be offered by identified institutions and experts.
- ›Establishment of a virtual e-bank of indigenous knowledge and technologies will be explored.
- ›Consideration will be given to establishing a network of national indigenous knowledge documentation centres.

### **B. Promoting the Integration of Indigenous Knowledge and Practices in Education Curriculum**

The erosion of African indigenous knowledge base is largely associated with the absence of mechanisms to ensure that the knowledge and related practices are passed on from one generation to generation. Often old generations are dying without endowing new ones with the wealth of information and skills on the use and management of African ecological and agricultural systems. This threatens the future cultural well being of African communities.

This proposed project aims at promoting education on African indigenous knowledge systems in schools and institutions of higher learning. It will facilitate the integration of indigenous knowledge issues into curriculum and related teaching methodologies.

Specific actions to further develop and implement this project will include:

- ›Reviewing the indigenous knowledge content of current curricula of African education systems, and identification of international good practices of integration indigenous knowledge issues into formal education;
- ›African workshops for educational systems to consider proposals on how best to integrate indigenous knowledge into the curricula and teaching practices. The workshops will focus on and be guided by international good practices; and
- ›Development and promotion of an African body of methodology and guidelines for integrating indigenous knowledge systems into formal education and training.<sup>22</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Scholarly attempts directed at issues surrounding the problem of African culture and identity ought to take into cognizance questions of African indigenous knowledge to be comprehensive. Efforts have been made in this piece to address critical issues revolving around African indigenous knowledge systems. It has been submitted that the African cultural contents which grossly constitutes the curriculum of African indigenous knowledge ensured African development before the colonial contact. The post colonial dilution of African culture carries with it a gradual devaluation of indigenous knowledge to the detriment of Africa. To avoid a possible coup de grace, Afro-centric studies must

steadily create measures directed towards revamping, protection and preservation of African indigenous knowledge.

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