

## Curiosity transcends boundaries and foments African epistemologies

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### Introduction

This paper contributes to de-centering western dominance and re-centering African Social thought. It argues that the real bedrock that is the ferment of African epistemologies is curiosity, the human person's insatiable quest for answers to eternal questions, an art which transcends boundaries, the boundaries of culture, class, race and all the social categories society has created to celebrate difference. After all the said, difference results from a tempting human desire that sets superiority against inferiority, spurred by injustices in the human community, which are in turn fuelled by all kinds of ideologies.

In his *Critique of Black Reason* (2017), Achille Mbembe argues for working against the injustices of all social ideologies. In this vein, decoloniality becomes a project of seeing oneself clearly. Writing against the epistemological compass, then, is in tune with African renaissance or Africa rising, which embraces the politics of solidarity rather than the politics of integration. It is a vision the Global (De)Centre propagates through its agenda of learning about alternative epistemologies and bringing them centrally and equally into the debate surrounding knowledge and its production. This is a necessary agenda for the "strand that still resonates in our own time about empire, states, and the like", according to Robert Vitalis, "is considered to be the real scientific or theoretical core of the scholars' work, while the strand that involves now-repudiated racial constructs is treated instead as mere" "language," "metaphors," and "prejudices" "of the era" (Vitalis 2015: 26). At the same time, however, alternative epistemologies "cannot escape the legacy of Western discourse" (Gaonkar 2001: 14), which underscores the paramount importance of such alternative in the first place.

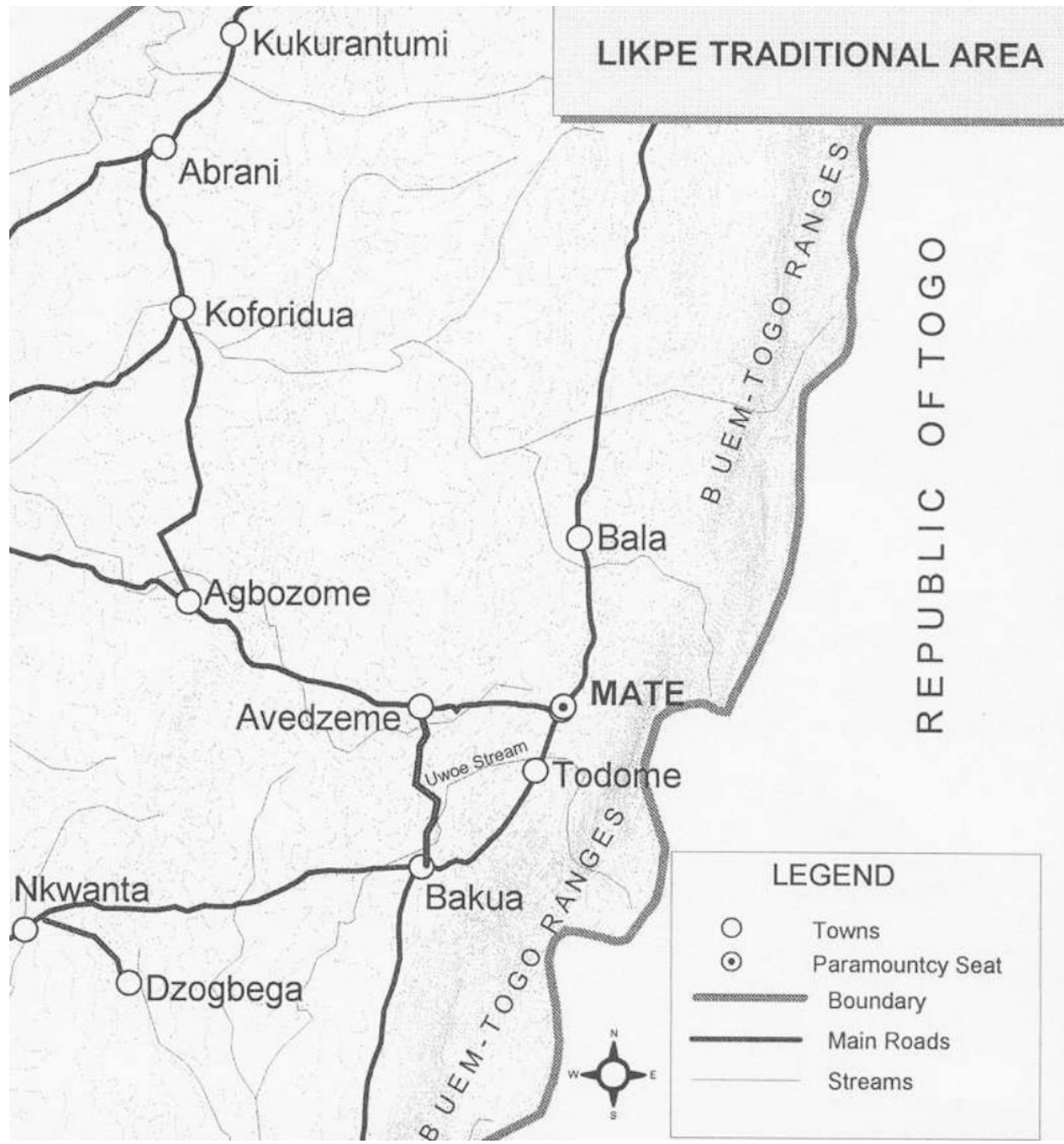
The essence of knowing, which itself is eternally characteristic of the human propensity to discover, contradicts the situation of a canon, critical thinking, or methodology in any one place of human habitation or among any group of people only to preclude other groups. Surely people everywhere have rules determining what is acceptable or unacceptable and what is permitted or not at any point in time. In other words, people have accepted means or ways of realizing certain goals. To that extend, humans develop methods through time and tested rules which guide standards of behaviour or operation. This endeavour results from critical thinking by means of which a people's life and life choices are examined. This means that critical thinking cannot be claimed by the West as its prerogative only because thinking is universal. Good intentions can be a source of arrogance, which explains why some groups of people or societies may tend to allocate the universal to their particularistic worldview. This self/other

binary has been essentialized with no space in-between, hence the need to break the canon that is epistemologically colonizing.

In their “radically revisionist thesis”, Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff (2012: 52) have argued that “in some critical respects, Euro-American personhood is evolving toward Africa, not the other way around”. This is part of the Comaroffs’ “central narrative” to debunk Euro-America’s parochial and particularistic thought as though it were the “Omega Point”, to borrow de Chardinian terminology (Teilhard de Chardin, 2008), toward which every society, people or culture must evolve. Drawing on the “conception of personhood” among the Tswana of South Africa, which resonates with other peoples on the African continent, the Comaroffs argue that “by illuminating the contrasts and consonances between African and European discourses of personhood”, “a sharp, prismatic light” is cast on “received Western notions of the modernist self and its antinomies” (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2012: 52). In other words, the universe of knowledge is not self-contained in a Western worldview, which is why the famous Ghanaian philosopher, William E. Abraham (2019: 28) asserts that it would be “an act of supine madness simply to ape the West or the East”, “in ways which cannot leave the cultures of Africa the same, without bothering to understand its mechanics and rationale”. In fact, Cheikh Anta Diop (1974: xiv) has made the bold claim that the Black world is the very initiator of “western” civilization flaunted before our eyes today rather than an insolvent debtor to history as it tends to be perceived. Cheikh Anta Diop substantiates his argument by means of an elaborate discussion on how Ancient Egyptian civilization was a black African produce. He draws on ancient Egyptian art whose images of pharaohs, gods and goddesses have typical black features to buttress his point, albeit not without controversy and challenge. And the point should also be made that even without Egypt black Africa cannot be a tabula rasa. This point is important for it leads us beyond the cultural war regarding Afrocentricism and its misrepresentations of history which Mary Lefkowitz (1996) saw typified in Martin Bernal’s *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization* (1987), for example. Over and above such controversy, it is imperative to show, as this paper seeks to do, that curiosity is a human capacity in all cultures and draw on examples demonstrating such capacity as only critical studies, the theoretical hallmark of this work, makes plausible.

Pursuing this course involved engaging with a community, the Bakpele of Ghana, to examine a few aspects of its thought processes as an example to buttress the paper’s argument. The Bakpele, now a people carved out of the Volta Region into the newly created Oti Region of Ghana, are settled on the Akwapim-Togo Mountain Range in eastern Ghana. Their area is referred to as Likpe on the map and in official Ghanaian literature but they call themselves Bakpele and speak Sekpele. Okyerefo (2013: 2) portrays the Bakpele as “blessed to be settled in Kɔkpelese, the most gorgeous countryside in Ghana, whose mountains and valleys, springs and waterfalls, rocks and caves, forests and arable lands have shaped our way of life over generations”. They are steeped in and cherish their traditions, which knowledge I have gathered

through growing up among them and participating in their community life. This work, thus, emanates from that experience and my interrogating some of those Bakpɛle I consider experts in the knowledge of the way of life of the people during my ongoing ethnographic research among them.



Source: Likpe Traditional Area. 2014 Lekoryi Festival Brochure

### **Thought as a Human Proclivity**

Story-telling, which is widespread in Africa, is an art that feeds the creative mind and engenders imagination. I have never forgotten how, as a little boy, I relished the stories I heard that transported me into the very scenes described, thereby stirring in me the crave for the imaginative. Even as an adult, I still have the said experience from time to time through reading a great novel, for example. Obviously, story-telling preceded writing and the latter would simply cast into stone and thereby preserve that which was known. Story-telling was not a preserve of any culture as I remember reading texts in secondary school that said story-telling was an art prevalent and enjoyed by the Scandinavian peoples as well.

Surely the imagination stories evoked in me at an early age would induce my love for reading and later writing, all of which obviously nourish thought. So the arts or sciences as such lay deep within all cultures, simply waiting to be discovered, developed and extended. It is curiosity, which communities stimulate in their subjects, that lays the foundation for the continued production of knowledge and invention. So, for example, patrilineal societies like the Bakpɛle of Ghana would ensure smooth succession or inheritance through the paternal line while succession in matrilineal societies like the Akan in Ghana is through the maternal line. Fraught with challenges, as in the case of matrilineal inheritance in particular, the interstate succession law (PNDC Law 111) was enacted to insulate women and children from abuse at the death of a husband and a father. However, the same matrilineal succession preserves the age-old wisdom that only a woman can tell the paternity of her child, which is why succession through the mother's line is deemed absolute by its adherents. Thus, among the Asante of Ghana, the queen mother proposes the candidate who ascends the throne of the of Asante kingdom as Asantehene (King of the Asante). Nonetheless, none of these societies, patrilineal or matrilineal, is superior to the other in terms of its social arrangements as each seeks to build on the accumulated wisdom and experience of its forebears in the production of knowledge and in fomenting social thought. In the same vein, foreign social norms of no one society can be held superior to that of other societies.

To this end, the existing theories and concepts about Africa, especially with reference to western view regarding the lack of African epistemologies merit contestation. Africans have theorized and continue to indigenize various disciplines on Africa. African epistemologies, however, go beyond the contextualization of concepts in Africa to rethinking the application of concepts to African reality as has, indeed, been done and continues to evolve. This effort demands that we come up with theoretical perspectives from our reality fueled by our curiosity, research and academic courses. In that respect we should always answer questions that seek to examine African reality.

It is in furtherance of this discussion, therefore, that this paper centres on the making of African epistemologies, i.e., the production of knowledge on the continent. Abdoulaye Gueye (2002) has

analyzed in his book *Les intellectuels africains en France* the efforts two generations of African thinkers have made to construct alternative theories and approaches about Africa. Wherever human beings have lived they have, of necessity, engaged in some thinking, challenged, as always, by the essential questions of life – where do I come from, why am I here, where am I going? By the same token, Max Assimeng (1997: 2) has noted that the responses of humans to the challenges they encounter provide the background to the “*realm of ideas*” they produce, manifested in both material and immaterial terms. Thus, on the one hand, the technology and artefacts a society develops and, on the other hand, the ideas undergirding their community life in general, sophisticated or otherwise, point to the social thought of the society. Such an idea, for example, can be gleaned from reasons why some communities in Ghana (e.g., Akpafu Todzi, Amedzorfe, Kwahu, Larteh), plagued by the constant attack from their enemies, at least so the oral history goes, built their settlements on mountains or highlands in order to ward off these enemies much more easily by means of rolling rocks or boulders.

### **Bakpɛle Social Thought**

Social thought, thus, concerns the ideas human beings conceive and develop as they relate to one another and their environment. It is a product of the interaction among three important elements, as Onigu Ottite (2002:1) has observed – people, their social heritage or culture and their physical environment. Social thought originates from individual or group thinking in response to both social and physical environments. Consequently, epistemological systems are steeped in a people’s experience.

Citizenship - A good example is the question regarding who qualifies to be a citizen (ɔkpɛlenye)<sup>1</sup> among the the Bakpɛle. The question arose, in the first place, in view of slaves (mba baaya)<sup>2</sup> who had been brought into the community in the distant past and who were labelled as such, together with their descendants. Given the hostile division this social inequality engendered in the community and the acrimony thereof, the chiefs and elders, upon deliberation, reached the spectacular conclusion that the community does not tolerate ‘acephalous’ members. In other words, there is no one who has been incorporated into the ethnic group who was not ‘headed’ by the group or who does not belong to it. From thence, the elders decreed that it was a punishable offence to refer to anyone as slave and therefore an outsider. This deliberation and decision of the elders was an extension of acephalousness from societies, as anthropologists are usually wont to describe, to individuals, to the effect that no individual shall remain stateless among the the Bakpɛle.

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<sup>1</sup> The language spoken by Bakpɛle is Sɛkpɛle. Their state is known as Kɔkpɛlese while ɔkpɛlenye means citizen.

<sup>2</sup> Betidi ba baaya or mba baaya, literally meaning people who have been bought – slaves.

Thus was citizenship established to include an otherwise excluded segment of people who would have suffered exclusion in perpetuity even if other forms of social stratification in the community, such as along economic or power lines exist. Such thinking is a smart illustration of how ideas are developed among peoples and it is an important one to highlight in view of the many ethnic divisions and internecine clashes and wars that are quickly flagged as characteristic of the African continent. The infamous Rwandan genocide that fed on a division between Hutu and Tutsi that, ironically, was nurtured by the so-called enlightened colonial authority, comes to mind.

Race - The concept of race could be another interesting example among the the Bakpele, as it does not exist as the power construct that is connoted in English or other European languages. People (betide), as a concept, is what is known in Sɛkpele. Betidi simply means people and in order to distinguish among people, one may say where they come from, their origin. Such descriptions in and of themselves do not connote power, just as adjectives such as height or size or the colour of their skin can be used to describe them. Perhaps this could be attributed to the fact that the the Bakpele have not had the experience of dominating other peoples en mass and, therefore, have not had the need to develop in their language such concepts denoting power as race entails. This example points to how a people's worldview or experience shapes the concepts they developed and their epistemologies or social thought for that matter.

Social thought results in part from the nature of social conditions, hence its limitation to time and space, although it can become timeless (Ottite 2002:2). This means that not only can a people's thought transform their own time and space, indeed, it can transcend it to influence other people in their time and space. This is how cross-fertilisation is effected, as in the transfer of knowledge or technology. Such transfer is the very reason why Eurocentric thought has played such a dominant role in Africa. African epistemologies are, thereby, characterised by their cultural and social values, their encounter with the West and the resulting landscape thereof. We can, therefore, speak of pre-colonial civilizations in Africa, the colonial and the post-colonial, each of which has shaped social thought on the continent. But also independent of that, is the thought pattern a people develops, which could have similarities with other people's thought, even though both groups may share no physical boundaries. This is why it is not surprising to note that the the Bakpele have their own expressions for certain values or concepts such as good or evil, justice and injustice, or human rights even if such descriptions do not translate directly as the concepts denoting the same realities in other languages or cultures. The importance is that different cultures have similar expressions, stemming as it were from their very cravings for satisfying what it means to be human.

Returning to the celebration of citizenship among the the Bakpele, the unity for the community suggests itself as a key determinant of the elders' decision, just as the dignity of, or respect for, the human person (ditidibu). They sought to bring destructive behaviour (kabia or kabiase) in

the community to the barest minimum, thereby upholding the moral standards by which individuals in the community should abide. Notable among such standards was also what was meant by being civilized (*akpa enemi*), literally meaning one has a broader vision or view on life or reality. *Kabia* or *kabiase* also means destruction of individuals or the community, which must be curtailed.

**Leadership and Engagement** - The the Bakpɛle have no equivalent word for democracy but there is no doubt they operated according to some democratic principles. The rule of the elders is in respect of gerontocracy; leadership rests in the hands of chiefs chosen from designated families and elders, men, who grow up to fill respected positions as advisors. A similar social arrangement exists with regard to queens and female elders but men are the overarching decision-makers. It is essential to point out, however, that the chiefs and elders deliberate over issues and reach decisions by means of consensus. In the same spirit, the people in general are consulted, especially at organized town gatherings that take place in the centre of the town, which is why everyone of the eleven the Bakpɛle towns has a town centre (*obia*) where a huge tropical fig tree stands, in some cases two or more of the said tree, having been planted at the inception of the settlement. The fig tree is a resistant species that survives all seasons, thereby providing shade and evokes an aura of respect for such meeting, steeped as it is in the tradition of the ancestors. The town square marks the space of deliberation and depicts the importance consultation has among the the Bakpɛle, as I have pointed out elsewhere (Okyerefo 20128: 32) regarding the art of “consulting the old woman”, which is rendered as *ewu* in Sɛkpɛle or *abrewa* in Akan and *mama* in Ewe. This is a figurative search for wisdom, personified as a female virtue, albeit after a ripe old age, to endow the elders with the prowess to adjudicate in intractable cases. The exercise hinges on debate in order to arrive at the best solution possible.

**Deliberation and Restoration** - The town square induces freedom of self-expression that inures thought. At its best, the practice is seen when a member of the community dies. Death brings almost every member of the community, men and women, together, summoning them to a pre-burial meeting and deliberation (*ukuto*) as well as a post-burial meeting and deliberation (*likunkpo*). Typically, *ukuto* is organised on the eve of burial when the body of the deceased is brought from the mortuary to be prepared for burial. The meeting ascertains from the close relatives of the deceased, the cause of death for the benefit of the community and probes into the life and character of the deceased, whether he/she was a good person and lived peaceably with others or not. In the same vein, the gathering seeks to know how the living treated the deceased while alive and especially what care he/she received while taken ill or in the last moments of life. Also important is whether the deceased and any living member of the community is at loggerheads. The information gathered from *ukuto* would shape the next day’s meeting, *likunkpo*, after the deceased has been buried. The essence of *likunkpo*, which literally means judicial inquiry around death, is meant to mend broken relationships, which



means any offending party in relation to the questions raised at the pre-burial meeting, whether the deceased or anyone among the living, would be fined. Any person who is fined pays the penalty. In the case of the deceased person, it is the living member of his/her family who is responsible for the funeral and inherits the dead person who pays the fine, but there is also room for pardon or acquittal.

For example, when Kosi, a man from the village who had had a successful career as a civil servant and travelled the world, died in October 2018, the post burial meeting, *likunkpo*, considered the difficult relationship between Kosi and his son, Kodzo, to adjudicate between the deceased and the living, recalling how Kosi mistreated his son while alive, to the extent of refusing to pay for his education, which resulted in their protracted difficult relationship right till the death of Kosi. Some people at the meeting recounted the several attempts they made to help father and son reconcile with the father usually unwilling to do so, even calling the intelligence of his son into question. The gathering reached the verdict that Kosi, the father, was the guilty one and should be fined, where upon one person at the meeting informed the gathering that Kosi, before his demise, had confessed his guilt to him and wished to ask pardon of his son and the community. By virtue of this apology, Kosi was acquitted and was not fined. His son Kodzo was also happy the community was witness to the mistreatment his late father meted out to him, accepted the apology and peace was restored. While some of these cultural practices are being transformed, they continue to be observed for the values they inhabit in preserving the social fabric of the society. The social fabric is so sacred that not even death should be seen to shred it to pieces.

Justice - The activities of enquiry discussed above to resolve intractable problems or ensure the preservation of social harmony are aimed at the progress of the community and its inhabitants, Which, for that matter, is a core human desire, irrespective of where a people are born, live or however their way of life may be. The wellbeing of the social group, its survival and development, thus, demands curiosity of thought to unravel novel ways of adaptation to their environment and surmount whatever unfolding social circumstances or behaviour that confronts them. To this end, the society would develop its own idea of justice or injustice and its attendant reward or punishment. So, for example, since adultery is still frowned upon among the the Bakpele, an offender is punished to ensure justice. The concept of justice or injustice is expressed in Sekpele as being straight (*bɔtsyɔ*) or crooked (*mantsyɔ*) respectively. Both a person or an action can be straight or crooked and needing straightening. The same is true regarding curbing all kinds of social vices, thereby urging the individual to fulfil his/her responsibilities.

Character - An honest person would be described as one who dislikes 'dirt', *kenie*, while the contrary expression is characteristic of a dishonest person. By the same token, the dislike for *kenie* would also qualify as virtue in a community which draws a strict line between good

(acceptable) and evil (unacceptable) behaviour, which action characterizes the the Bakpele community debate at the town centre (obia), or during the pre-burial deliberation (ukuto) and post-burial deliberation (likunkpo). The foregoing points to a community that has always engaged with itself, proffering solutions to the problems with which it is confronted. This engagement emanates from a thought system that is steeped in a curiosity to discover, unravel and resolve its challenges, in order to promote societal wellbeing.

### **Conclusion**

Any “society, defined as a network of relationships in institutional contexts, is an end product of social thought. It is social thought being acted in a particular milieu” (Otite 2002: 11). If society is a product of social thought, then it stands to reason that Africa must necessarily have its social thought. The point then is not to align the concepts any one society has developed to any other one.

It is apparent, as illustrated by the Bakpele people that social thought is informed by community and external forces, evolving an overarching culture with social mores.

Is the Bakpele town square not reminiscent of the western public sphere, which has also evolved as a key component of democracy? Democracy while seen as the ultimate in western societies may yet learn from Bakpele social justice traditions in death, *likunkpo*. While society is organized by a chief and patriarchal structure, the *likunkpo* underpins an inherent democracy and justice irrespective of the language used. Here then is alternative epistemology at its best, spelling out cultural uniqueness, and inherent value and worth, of which the west could yet learn, particularly in light of an increasingly western intolerance and isolation.

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