

# Oral genres as sources of knowledge in West Africa

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# Roadmap

- Situating the quest for knowledge in the Africa Knows! agenda
- Types of knowledge
- Nature of knowledge: African perspectives
  
- Proverbs as sources of knowledge
- Narratives as sources of knowledge
- Names as sources of knowledge
- Festivals as sources of knowledge
  
- Concluding remarks: cognitive and linguistic justice

Even with the best of intentions ...

Mr Freddy Weima (Nuffic): the outcome of collaboration or cooperation in knowledge production is glocalization of knowledge systems.

Glocalization is characterized as “services developed globally applied to local conditions”.

This is also referred to in development practice discourse as contextualization.

This process is said to involve the tweaking and modifying of concepts using local expertise..

# Amplified local knowledge

- a consequence of this process is that
  - amplified local knowledge can lead to
  - questioning existing knowledge structures.
- 
- My problem:
  - the glocalization process is still based on concepts and ideas
  - external to the local contexts, in this case educational concepts, are still external to the African reality and then they are given an icing of African ideas. Such a cak

# Questioning existing structures and practices

- The Secretary General of the AAU Prof. Ehile posed very pertinent questions and provided some interesting historical insights. His keynote was strewn with questions like:
- Who do we learn for?
- What are we taught?
- Does education achieve anything for our people?
- What do we research for?
- What do we research?
- What do we research into? (or in other words who determines what we research and what do we do the research for?)

# Questioning existing structures

Prof. Sabelo Ndlovu Gatsheni, Professor of Epistemologies of the South, Bayreuth University, provided some of the answers or at least reflected on some of the questions raised earlier by Prof. Ehile in his equally powerful keynote. However, Prof. Gatsheni introduced some complications, in particular about the role of language and the languages used on the African continent for understanding knowledge systems and knowledge co-production and utilization on the continent.

## Lest we forget ...

... the need to make knowledge, especially modern academic knowledge, relevant to the day-to-day experiences of society is something that has been of major concern for many so-called third and fourth world indigenous populations on the margins of global divisions of knowledge, power and influence for a very long time (Tsey 2010: 4)

Tsey, Komla. "Making social science matter?: Case studies from community development and empowerment education research in rural Ghana and Aboriginal Australia." *Asian Social Science* 6.1 (2010): 3-23

# Types of knowledge

In *Making Social Science Matter* Flyvbjerg 2001 draws attention to the categorization of knowledge proposed by Aristotle. It is interesting that the type of knowledge that Aristotle thought was more important did not receive an uptake in subsequent development of the dominant knowledge system.



# Aristotilean knowledge types

Aristotle distinguished **phronesis**, **episteme** and **techne**:

For Aristotle, **phronesis**, the highest of the three classical intellectual virtues, essentially involves making judgments and decisions about what is good or bad for society based on values and interests and, as such, is quite distinct from **episteme** (analytical) and **techne** (technical) knowledge.

# Phronesis orphaned

No comparable words to epistemology or technology based on phronesis – the form of knowledge that Aristotle regarded as critical for social, political and humanistic enquiry.

... the reflexive analysis and discussion of values and interests, which is the prerequisite for an enlightened political, economic, and cultural development in any society, and which is at the core of phronesis. (Flyvbjerg 2001, p. 3)

# In defense of phronesis

Aristotle found that every well functioning society was dependent on the effective functioning of all three intellectual virtues - episteme, techne and phronesis.

At the same time, however, Aristotle emphasized the crucial importance of phronesis, 'for the possession of the single virtue of prudence (phronesis) will carry with them the possession of them all'.

# In defense of phronesis

Phronesis is most important from an Aristotelian point of view, because it is that intellectual virtue that may ensure the ethical employment of science (episteme) and technology (techne).

Because phronesis today is marginalized in the intellectual scheme of things, scientific and technological development take place without the ethical checks and balances that Aristotle and later Max Weber saw as all important.

(Flyvbjerg 2006, p. 71; cited in Tsey 2010)

# De- and re-constructing knowledge

**Chika Esiobu:** Africa Knows! Keynote

... as far as knowledge construction in Africa today is concerned, there is need for a deconstruction of what has been inherited or copied and pasted unto the African's mindset.

Deconstructing and reconstructing formal education in Africa will require understanding of our indigenous knowledge systems, which is foundational in building the education we need at the least cost possible.

# Types of knowledge: An Ewe perspective

Aféme-núnyá 'home knowledge'

(cf. home is where your umbilical cord is buried)

Agbaleme-núnyá 'book knowledge'

Dzobo, Noah Komla. "African symbols and proverbs as source of knowledge and truth." In Dzobo, N. K., Kwasi Wiredu, and Kwame Gyekye (eds) *Person and community: Ghanaian Philosophical Studies* 1 (1992): 89-100.

# Nature of Knowledge: African perspectives

- Illustrations based on proverbs:
- Knowledge is vast, it has to be collaboratively pursued
- Knowledge is like a moving target, difficult to pin down

# Proverbs



# Nature of Knowledge: An Ewe perspective



Núnyá            adidó=é  
Knowledge      baobab=FOC  
Así            mé-tu-nε      o  
Hand NEG-reach-HAB:3SG NEG

'Knowledge is (like) a baobab tree, a (pair of) hand(s) cannot embrace it'

# Nature of knowledge: An Ewe perspective



Núnyá ave-me-xevî=é

Knowledge forest-in-bird=FOC

Mé-nyá lé-ná o

3SG:NEG-MOD catch-HAB NEG

'Knowledge is (like) a bird in the forest (flying), it is not easy to hunt it down'

# Nature of knowledge: An East African perspective



- Knowledge is like a vast ocean

# Proverbs as sources of information

The content of proverbs provides rich source of knowledge: cf. Bemile 2020

- Historical
- Religious or spiritual
- Social
- Political
- Economic
- Educational
- jurisdictional

# Spread of proverbs as evidence of contact

Okó tódúkpo láshō'elú g'lube 'efó.

Tafi

Okó

to-dúkpo lá-shō

CM-place

AM-one 3PL.DEP-urinate

Be-lú

gi

lū-bá

ki-fó

3PL-put.down

REL

3SG.DEP-come

CM-lather

'It is by urinating at one place that lather is formed.'

Tefé

deká

wó=dó-á

adudó

dé-e

Ewe

place

one

3PL=put.on-HAB urine

ALL-3SG

wò=tsó-a

fú

3SG=rise-HAB

lather

'It is one place one urinates and it foams'

# Spread of Proverbs

Banódzyrám̄ telí 'ídī ozi oo.

ba-nódzyrám̄                      te-lí                      kí-dī                      o-zi                      oo                      Tafi

CM.PL-human.being                      AM-INDEF                      CM-type CM-hole UFP

‘Some human beings are deep pits.’

Amegbetó                      nyé                      to                      go-glo                      Ewe

Human.being                      COP                      river                      RED-deep

‘A human being is a deep river.’

# Abebubu – a type of lododo

"Abebubu" nye Blugbemenya aɔe si Eweawo ye de Euegbea me wozu wo tɔ, tso gɔmedede gbɔ. Bluawo bu Abebubu abe lododo ko ene, ke Eweawo tsɔe wɔ nufofo fe aɔaɔu tɔxe togbɔ be wodo fɔme kple lododo le woƒe nuɔɔi me ha.

Abebubu is an Akan word which the Ewes borrowed into the language and have appropriated it and given it their own meaning. Akans think of Abebubu as just a proverb. But the Ewes take it to be a special style of speaking, even though they bear family resemblance to proverbs (lododo).

# Abebubu – a type of lododo

Anyidoho (1997: 131) suggests that abebúbú is a special Ewe proverbial form which “is generally used only by the most skilled orators, mainly because it requires not only wisdom but superb verbal creativity”.

Anyidoho, Kofi. 1997. Ewe verbal art. In Agbodeka, Francis (ed.) *A handbook of Eweland*. Vol. 1: The Ewes of southeastern Ghana, 123-152. Accra: Woeli Press.



Eueawo bua abe tso nukpakpawo, numemewo,  
yeḡuḡuwo, uḡoḡowo kple kpẽkukuwo me. Nenena ke  
wolea ŋku ḡe xewo, lãwo kple atiwo ɟe wɔnawo ŋu kpa  
abebunyawo hetɔna ḡe nu siawo ŋu abe woawoe gblɔe vavã  
ene.

The Ewes create stylised special proverbs about various art forms:  
carvings, pottery, dances, drumming and blowing of horns. They also  
observe birds, animals and plants and 'carve' proverbial words  
attributed to them as if they have said them.

## Vox animalibus

Kesé      bé      dɔ.me      tɔ=é      nyé      ame      tɔ.  
Monkey      QT      stomach.in      own=FOC      COP      person own

Alɔgo-me      tɔ      ya      adelá=wó      tɔ=é.  
Cheek-in      own      as.for hunter=PL      OWN-FOC

Monkey says the one in your stomach is yours.

As for the one in your cheek, it is for the hunter.

Narratives

# Narratives as store houses of knowledge

Narratives or stories or folktales have been known from time immemorial to be repositories of knowledge of African communities. Moehlig 2020 notes that when Western explorers collected these stories they used them for various purposes:

They scrutinized and used them in the description of linguistic structures of African languages

As source for the inventorisation of African languages (in terms of their names

Used them as educational materials in the schools

they used them in religious promulgation

# Untapped resource

“Few scholars exploited the narrative texts as valuable archives for the study of general African concepts on the origin of the world, life and death and other basic questions of humankind”.

By this he implies that these are a rich store of knowledge but which are not tapped into.

Moehlig (ibid) see also Okpewho 1992 without I think intending it, suggests some reasons for

# Untapped resource

Why are the African narratives and the knowledge associated with them not exploited:

(i) the external ideas of prose or poetry do not seamlessly apply to the African oral narratives

(ii) even though there are indigenous terminologies for distinguishing genres of spoken art in the African linguacultures,

(a) their defining criteria often differ considerably for similar speech forms in neighbouring groups

(b) “the African terms are incongruent with the scholarly terminology used at the worldwide meta-level.”

## Interim concluding remark

So the terms that are learnt and taught with respect to spoken art are not applicable and cannot be related to the realities. This is fertile ground not only for decolonization but more importantly a glocalization that should impact the knowledge systems that we promote. In this connection it is important to stress that this process should lead to a pluralization of knowledge about spoken art, not hegemony of one system over the other, not the replacing of one system with another. It fits in with the general view about knowledge not being able to be grasped as it were by one system (see the proverbs discussed earlier).

Names: different types different  
knowledge structures



# Names

... the name *is* the individual in traditional Africa . (Herbert 1999: 216, emphasis in original)

An African name is like a Social Security number (Olanike Ore, speaking about Yoruba names)

# Symbolic value

- The Bono (Akan group of Ghana):

The implications of the 'boxed name' arise from the fact that the agyadin [name given by the father] may be hidden and never openly used throughout a bearer's life time. It may only be retrieved for composing a funeral dirge or for praise singing. (Ansu Kyeremeh 2000:24)

## Name avoidance in everyday practice

- Ibibio speaking people believe that names are worthy of respect. In this regard, children are not expected to call their elders, let alone their parents, by their names. Women who have children are usually addressed by their children's names. For example, a woman who has a child **Ime** would be addressed by **Ime's** age group—and generally, those who want to show respect to her—as **Èkà Ime** 'Mother of Ime'.
- Similarly, Ime's father would be addressed not by his real name but as **Èté Ime** 'Father of Ime' by the same category of people. *In fact among the Ibibio it is almost taboo for a child below teen age to address an adult who has children by his or her official name.* (Okno Essien 1986:85)

## Circumstances of birth names- Ewe

Table 1 :

<i>Week day</i>	<i>Male child</i>	<i>Female child</i>	<i>Common by-name</i>
Dzoda	Kɔdzo	Adzoa, Adzoyo	Adzo
Blada	Kɔmla/Kɔbla	Abla/Abra	Abla
Kuda	Kɔku/Anku	Akua/Ankua	Aku
Yawoda	Yawo/Kwao	Yawa	Awo
Fida	Kofi	Afua, Afi	Afi
Memliɖa	Kɔmi/Kwami	Ama, Ameyo	Ame
Kosida	Kɔsi/Kwasi	Akosua	Awusi

## Order of birth names - Ewe

<i>Order</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>
1st	Foli	Agoe Gogo Domeklo
2nd	Dzaha Dzako	Agoegbo Gbo
3rd	Dzatse Mensa Bensa	Mansa

# Order of birth names – Ewe (cont'd)

<i>Order</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>
4th	Anan Anane	Anan Anani
5th	Anum	Anum
6th	Nsia	Nsia
7th	Asɔŋ	Asɔŋ
8th	Botwe	Botwe
9th	Akunu Nkruma	Akunu Nkruma
10th	Bedu	Bedu
11th	Ɖuku	Ɖuku

Table 4 : *Eve twin names*

<i>Name</i>	<i>Twins, all male</i>	<i>Order of arrival</i>
Atsu/Ata	Seniority : elder	2nd
Atsutse or Atople/Atakuma	younger	1st

*Twins, all female*

<i>Name</i>	<i>Seniority</i>	<i>Order of arrival</i>
γi/Atawa	elder	2nd
γetsa/Atawakuma	younger	1st

*Twins, a boy and a girl*

<i>Name</i>	<i>Seniority</i>	<i>Order of arrival</i>
Boy : Atsu/Ata/Kpodo	elder	2nd
Girl : Atsufi/Atasi	younger	1st



# Praise names

Ewe praise names: ahonoŋkɔ

aha - no - ŋkɔ=wó

alcohol(n) drink (v) name-PL

“drinking names”, i.e. praise names

Anyidoho (1997:128)

Structurally the praise names are full texts which take the form of proverbial statements or truisms. For purposes of address and reference, only a truncated form of the name is used. The full texts are reserved for leisurely and ceremonial occasions.

# Praise name performance

Typically, these names like proverbs have two parts. The first part tends to be truncated and used as the name and in the performance, the Speaker says the name and the addressee completes it with the second part. For example,

Speaker: Zigã 'big stool/chair'

Addressee (name bearer):

Mé-nyé fia o

NEG-COP chief NEG

'does not make one a chief'

Nigerian indigenous names, like most African names, have a high culture content. They are not simple labels used, as baggage tags, for mere identification purposes. An indigenous African name on the whole personifies the individual, tells some story about the parents or the family of the bearer and in a more general sense points to the values of the society into which the individual is born. Unaware of these facts, some Western scholars are puzzled that Africans make a fuss about names. (Ubahakwe 1981:99)

# Festivals as sources of knowledge

The Hogbetsotso Festival of the Anlo Ewe

# POURING OF LIBATION TO THE GODS AND ANCESTORS



## LIBATION PRAYER BEFORE DEPARTURE TO AGƆWOVƆNU

- 
- Agoo, I call attention of the town three times
- Agoo, I call attention of the town
- God, I call you
- When day breaks, it should break on the enemy
- Ours is the evening, child of the evening is the real person
- *Recite the names of the ancestors*
- Thirteen years, we have not celebrated Hogbetsotso
- Now, we have Awɔamefia
- We are going to Agɔwovɔnu today
- This is a big assembly, what everybody has on his heart
- He should say it, so that they tell the chief
- This water is for peace, anyone who says
- We are not going to reconcile, is an enemy
- He should stay at home for us to return....

## EXPRESSION OF GRIEVANCES BY AWOJAMEFIA

*The King starts:*

*The youth who are the precious jewels*

*For the adornment of the Anlo state*

*Cannot act as one;*

*They are divided*

*These are heavy burdens on my heart*

*Those in charge of the herb should hear*

*Let it go into the herb.*

*The stools under me are many*

*But only a few of them*

*Have chiefs occupying them*

## EXPRESSION OF GRIEVANCES BY AWOJAMEFIA

*You the chiefs are not following the standard  
Set up by our ancestors in the performance of your duties.  
I am pointing the same accusing fingers to the Field Marshall,  
The Right wing and the Left wing.  
I do not have them supporting me at all times as expected.  
I am extremely worried about  
The widespread disunity in the Anlo state.  
I want to make a passionate appeal to all  
That it is necessary for us to unite as one body.  
Other communities ridicule us.  
These things are actually disturbing my soul.  
If that is the cause of the ill feeling among us,  
Then let it go into the herb.*



## RESPONSE BY THE PEOPLE

*Our king has done well but there is one thing that we are not pleased with.*

*His frequent visit abroad without prior notice to his council is not helpful to the development of the state.*



## RESPONSE BY THE PEOPLE

*There was a disturbance in the state  
And some people lost their lives  
We have seen that the children  
Of these departed souls  
Are really suffering*

*However, nothing was done to support them.  
The youths think that  
Their efforts have not been  
Recognised and rewarded appropriately.*

THE ROLE OF THOSE IN CHARGE OF THE  
HERB

*If these are the causes of the  
indiscipline in this  
community,*

*As we sit here today for this  
reconciliation ritual,*

*Let the herb hear it  
And put an end to it.*



RECONCILIATION RITUAL: PRIESTS PREPARING HOLY HERBAL WATER AND SHARING IN THE FIFTEEN POTS FOR THE CLANS



PROCESSION OUTSIDE AGORWOVONU(VENUE FOR THE RITUAL) AWOJAMEFIA LEADS FOLLOWED BY THE PEOPLE AFTER THE RITUAL



Concluding remarks

## Cognitive justice

Cognitive justice as **“the right of many forms of knowledge to exist, seeing that all knowledges are partial and complementary”** (Visvanathan 2001: 7). It is about the **“equality of knowers”** (van der Velden 2006: 1), and giving meaning to the relationships between different knowledges (van der Velden 2004: 78).

# Whose Science?

The continued mainstreaming of “**power system of knowledge**” which privileges modern science over traditional systems of knowledge is problematic.



# “Science”

, i.e. “...science as an enclosure movement which is destroying or **museumizing alternative knowledge forms....**”, and “... the citizen (is looked at) as a layman before the priests and experts of science...”, acknowledging that the citizen is a person of knowledge... every man is a scientist, every village a science academy” (Visvanathan 2002: 184, 185).

XuzsQuÄÄomz p, of szuÄÉq, vÇÄÄuq, uz, Mr~umz, \_ÄQpuqÄ

Linguistic justice is based on issues of linguistic human rights  
e.g. the right of every child to be taught in a language that  
they are familiar with

In pursuing this let us be inclusive – language on offer on the  
continent, not an either/or strategy where some languages  
are deemed not to be African.

Let there be linguistic and cognitive justice in African Studies

# Thank you! Bedankt! Merci!

- Akpe Akpe Akpe!
- Meda mo ase!
- Na gode!
- Ku fə kɛ yifo!
- Asante Sana!