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**Oral Tradition, Epistemic Dependence,  
and Knowledge in African Cultures**

**Abstract**

*This paper examines the nature and legitimacy of oral tradition as a method of acquiring, archiving, retrieving, and transmitting knowledge, beliefs, values, and practices in traditional African communal cultures. I argue that oral tradition, which involves parables, proverbs, myths, art, and folklore, also involves relying on elders as the repositories of knowledge and tradition. I argue that this reliance can be justified based on the principles of epistemic trust, epistemic dependence, and epistemic communalism. The notion of epistemic communalism, which involves epistemic division of labour and epistemic comparative advantage, requires a multidisciplinary holistic approach to knowledge in Africa. This communal method of acquiring knowledge indicates how people accept beliefs and justify their acceptance of beliefs as members of an organically integrated community. This underscores the need for mutual dependence among philosophy and other disciplines such as history, anthropology, literature, and science as the source and basis for African knowledge.*

**Keywords**

oral tradition, African communalism, traditional knowledge, epistemic dependence, epistemic communalism, ethnophilosophy, reliance on elders

**Introduction**

This essay seeks to explicate the nature and legitimacy of the epistemic and pedagogical methods of oral tradition, which is common in and among many African communal cultures. Communalism involves the idea of mutual dependence and organic relationships between community and individuals, and among individuals. Such relationships exemplify relevant values and beliefs that are sustained by the informal oral methods of learning about cultural traditions. Oral tradition, which is an informal method of learning, acquiring, imparting, and transmitting knowledge, beliefs, traditions, and values, involves among others things, parables, myths, proverbs, artwork, and folklore. I argue that oral tradition must also be understood in terms of reliance on elders as repositories of knowledge, which is based on the principles of epistemic communalism, dependence, and division of labour. I argue that oral tradition in African traditional cultures captures not only the communal *processes* or *methods* of creating, justifying, accepting, encoding, archiving, and preserving knowledge, but also the *sources* of the *contents* of such knowledge, in terms of cultural beliefs, practices, and values.<sup>1</sup> Thus, oral

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See: David William Cohen, "The Undefining of Oral Tradition", *Ethnohistory* 36 (1989) 1, pp. 9–18, p. 9.

tradition is useful as a method of interpreting, retrieving, articulating, understanding, and reconstructing knowledge, thought systems, and philosophies of African peoples.

### **The Nature and Legitimacy of the Method of Oral Tradition**

It is fairly recent that the method of ‘oral history’, which involves the use of ‘oral traditions’ and other forms of narratives, was accepted as a legitimate historiographic method.<sup>2</sup> Its acceptance came, in large part, from the efforts of the Ibadan School of History.<sup>3</sup> Western scholars had argued that Africa did not have any history or forms of knowledge before its contacts with Europeans, simply because there were no written records and, that there was no way to retrieve a legitimate African history or knowledge that was acceptable to Western scholars or intellectual canons. Members of the Ibadan School of History had to strenuously argue that Africa had a history or knowledge before colonialism. They substantiated their claims by arguing in favour of oral tradition or history as a legitimate historiographic method, and by actually using such method to reconstruct and retrieve significant parts of African history, traditions, and knowledge.

According to E. J. Alagoa:

“Dike and Biobaku’s books became the models for the new historiography. In an important departure from conventional historical canons of the day, they championed the use of oral tradition, which they used in their book to a limited extent together with British documents.”<sup>4</sup>

This point is pertinent for two reasons. First, the argument in favour of the method of oral history could suggest a philosophical argument for a unique method of engaging in research, intellectual inquiry, retrieving knowledge, in particular, about Africa. Historians have now accepted this method as part of the methodological canon in the discipline of history. Second, the criticisms that African historians faced regarding the method of oral history and the non-existence of African history are similar to the arguments that have been used to question the existence of African philosophy and the legitimacy of ethnophilosophy or traditional African thought as a genuine philosophical enterprise.<sup>5</sup>

I suggest that the discipline of philosophy has something to learn from the discipline of history and the efforts by the Ibadan School of History to argue for the acceptance of the method of oral tradition into academic canons. African philosophers must learn from their counterparts in African History about the legitimacy of oral tradition as a method for understanding African thoughts, to confront Eurocentric views of philosophy that seek to deny the existence of African philosophy. One can appreciate this methodological point about oral tradition, if one understands that much relevant knowledge, beliefs, ideas, values, and practices in African cultures were taught and learned from everyday lived-experiences, parables, myths, proverbs, stories, folklore, folk tales, musical lyrics, funeral dirges, and other forms of narratives.

Many philosophers are beginning to appreciate the role that oral tradition can play in retrieving and reconstructing African knowledge, and in particular African philosophy, ideas, and thoughts systems. According to Kwasi Wiredu:

“... an oral tradition is a transmission of ideas from generation to generation using the spoken word and any associated devices short of writing. On this showing, proverbs, of which there is superabundance in African culture, are an obvious item in the oral heritage. They frequently have a philosophical significance, apart from the commanding beauty of their epigrammatic terseness. Also, they often contain wise, practical advice.”<sup>6</sup>

However, Wiredu is quick to indicate that although oral tradition is usually seen as devoid of a writing tradition, a writing tradition cannot be completely devoid of oral tradition:

“... actually, there is no such thing as an exclusively written tradition.”<sup>7</sup>

I might also suggest that oral tradition cannot be devoid of other forms or methods of documentation besides writing that has heuristic epistemic value and philosophical relevance. For instance, Wiredu indicates that distinct from oral tradition in African cultures “are art motifs, sometimes painted, other times carved out of wood or cast in other media. Many of these express deep philosophical conceptions”.<sup>8</sup>

Barry Hallen argues that there are drawbacks in oral tradition. It is open-textured and the knowledge it represents “becomes collective rather than personal, rote-learned rather than reasoned”.<sup>9</sup> This comment presupposes the view that rational knowledge and philosophy cannot be collective because knowledge or philosophy must be personal and reasoned, and it is not possible to have collective reason or rationality. This view is problematic based on the work philosophers have done in social ontology and collective inten-

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Modupeolu M. Faseke, “Oral History in Nigeria: Issues, Problems, and Prospects”, *Oral History Review* 18 (1990) 1, pp. 77–91, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1093/ohr/18.1.77>. Faseke distinguished between ‘oral tradition’ and ‘oral history’. I do not. Faseke does, however, indicate that people might use them in different situations to suggest that they are coextensive or interchangeable.

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The Ibadan School History refers to a group of Nigerian Historians who taught History at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria, in the 1950s. It includes scholars like Kenneth Dike, Saburi Biobaku, Ade Ajayi, E. A. Ayandele, A. E. Afigbo, Obaro Ikime, among others. In addition to these Nigerian historians, some expatriate historians, such as Michael Crowther, J. B. Webster, R. J. Garvin, Robert Smith, J. D. Omer-Cooper, joined in the efforts to use oral tradition to reconstruct a history of the African past. See: Paul E. Lovejoy, “Nigeria: The Ibadan School of History and Its Critics”, in: Bogumil Jewsiewicki, David Newbury (eds.), *African Historiographies: What History for Which Africa*, Sage Publications, London 1986, pp. 197–205.

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Ebiegberi Joe Alagoa, “Nigerian Academic Historians”, in: B. Jewsiewicki, D. Newbury (eds.), *African Historiographies*, pp. 189–196, p. 191.

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In the debate regarding the nature and existence of African philosophy, those who deny the existence of African philosophy argue that what is usually characterized as African philosophy is not legitimate philosophy but ‘ethnophilosophy’. They distinguish between

‘ethnophilosophy’ and ‘formal philosophy’. The former represents the traditional and commonly held beliefs and ideas of people in African cultures in terms of their folklore, myths, and values. The latter, which they claim is the only legitimate philosophy, represents the written ideas of formally trained philosophers who teach and do research at Universities. See, among others: P. O. Bodunrin, “The Question of African Philosophy”, in: Richard A. Wright (ed.), *African Philosophy: An Introduction*, University Press of America, New York 1984, pp. 1–23; Kwasi Wiredu, *Philosophy and an African Culture*, Cambridge University Press, London 1980; Paulin Hountondji, *African Philosophy*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1983; Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Necessary Questions: An Introduction to Philosophy*, Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs (NJ) 1989; Kwame Anthony Appiah, *In My Father’s House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture*, Oxford University Press, New York 1992.

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Kwasi Wiredu, “An Oral Philosophy of Personhood: Comments on Philosophy and Orality”, *Research in African Literature* 40 (2009) 1, pp. 8–18, p. 10, doi: <https://doi.org/10.2979/ral.2009.40.1.8>.

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Ibid., p. 10.

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Ibid.

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Barry Hallen, “The Open Texture of Oral Tradition”, in: *African Philosophy: The Analytic Approach*, Africa World Press, Inc., Trenton (NJ) 2006, p. 166.

tionality.<sup>10</sup> In the efforts to satisfy the individualistic, personal, and rational strictures of philosophy and knowledge, Hallen, J. O. Sodipo,<sup>11</sup> and Odera Oruka<sup>12</sup> have sought to identify a different aspect of oral tradition, which involves their efforts to identify individuals with wisdom and knowledge of African traditions. Hallen and Sodipo identified such people as *onisegun* among the Yorubas, and Oruka identified them as sages among traditional Kenyans. These people were identified and seen as equivalences of individual philosophers in the West. These people did not have any form of writing but were able to transmit their ideas to others or philosophers (such as Oruka and Hallen) in interviews.

Hallen argues that the Yorubas do not characterise the material contents of oral tradition – information passed down from generations – as knowledge in the strict sense; such contents become knowledge only if, and when, they have been tested and verified to be true. However, it is my view that the processes of testing and verification, which are the bases for accepting oral tradition (as a method and the contents), are an inherent part of the nature of oral tradition. Traditional knowledge, ideas, principles, and beliefs, which include their (explanatory and justificatory) basis for acceptance, in terms of testing and verification, are learned, taught, and understood via everyday maxims, myths, proverbs, platitudes, and stories. For instance, children are told moral stories, folklore, and myths in informal settings, in the evenings after dinner. Folklore and myths are a kind of explanatory epistemic devices to help people understand and make sense of principles, actions, experiences, responsibilities, and communal expectations.

W. V. O. Quine's account of myths as cultural epistemological and explanatory devices would be illuminating here. In his view, myths are useful epistemological devices for making sense of our experiences and coping with reality. They are useful methods for understanding, learning, and educating people about their world, reality, culture, tradition, and their place in them, to know how to relate to them. According to Quine:

“Epistemologically, these are myths on the same footing with physical objects and gods, neither better nor worse except for differences in the degree to which they expedite our dealings with sense experiences.”<sup>13</sup>

Traditional cultures have myths about gods, witches, animals, trees, various entities, mystical or ancestral powers, while scientific cultures have myths of atoms, molecules, force, and energy. In indicating the cultural nature of myths and the important role they play in different cultures as a way of making meaning, Quine argues that

“... in point of epistemological footing, the physical objects and the gods differ in degree and not in kind. Both sorts of entities enter our conception only as cultural posits. The myth of physical objects is epistemologically superior to most in that it has proved more efficacious than other myths as a device for working a manageable structure into the flux of experience.”<sup>14</sup>

The essential point is that we need myths, in whatever forms, as conceptual, symbolic, and abstract representations, to make better sense of reality and our experiences. In African traditions, the combination of myths, as symbolic and abstract representations, practices, and concrete physical experiences have proved to be a useful and an effective method of teaching, understanding, learning, and making sense of knowledge including moral principles. This point about making meaning based on symbolic and abstract representation is illustrated by the work of Parker English and Nancy Hamme.<sup>15</sup> They indicate that art in African cultures is used as symbolic representations of knowledge

and moral principles, and as an informal process of moral education. Their conception of art in African cultures indicates that it is a kind of text or narrative, and a symbolic way of archiving and encoding knowledge.

In their view:

“It [art] constitutes one of how the resources of the material environment are employed in the lives of people as social and communicative beings. The arts are also a collection of describable activities (responses to these activities) based on the proclivity to ‘make special’.”<sup>16</sup>

They argue that art in this sense of a narrative or text plays a vital role not only in the process of moral education but also in the process of acculturation and transmission of knowledge. Because morality is an important part of a culture, acculturation and socialisation constitute vital and effective methods and processes of moral education, i.e., the transmission and preservation of moral knowledge. Such a process of acculturation and moral education include indoctrination. In the view of English and Hamme, ‘indoctrination’ is an essential element of education that involves the informal, thoroughgoing, subtle, and robust process of encoding and imparting on children by elders, foundational knowledge, tradition, values, and ways of life.<sup>17</sup>

N. K. Dzobo also indicates that proverbs and symbols, similar to art, are an essential source of knowledge in African cultures. Proverbs and symbols constitute a way by which Africans document, encode, archive, preserve, and transmit ideas, beliefs, values, information, history, and traditions. He argues that

“Africans have been using both visual and oral ‘picture words’ for a considerable time to express, transmit and store their thoughts, emotions, and attitudes. All over Africa, visual images and ordinary objects are used *symbolically* to communicate knowledge, feelings and values.”<sup>18</sup>

If we see art as symbols, myth creation, and a form of imagery, and proverbs as narratives or literary texts, all as part of oral tradition used in the informal

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See, among others: John R. Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality*, Penguin Books, London 1995; Raimo Tuomela, *A Theory of Social Action*, Reidel Publications, Dordrecht 1984.

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Cf. Barry Hallen, J. O. Sodipo, *Knowledge, Belief, and Witchcraft: Analytic Experiments in African Philosophy*, Stanford University Press, Stanford (CA) 1997.

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Odera Oruka, *Sage Philosophy: Indigenous Thinker and the Modern Debate on African Philosophy*, E. J. Brill, Leiden 1990.

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Willard Van Orman Quine, “Two Dogmas of Empiricism”, in: *From A Logical Point of View*, Harper & Row Publishers, New York 1961, p. 45.

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*Ibid.*, p. 44.

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Cf. Parker English, Nancy Steele Hamme, “Using Art History and Philosophy to Com-

pare a Traditional and a Contemporary Form of African Moral Thought”, *Journal of Social Philosophy* 27 (1996) 2, pp. 204–233, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9833.1996.tb00247.x>.

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*Ibid.*, p. 206.

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*Ibid.*, p. 226. What people usually refer to as ‘indoctrination’ is actually an essential element or aspect of ‘education’. Hence, it is difficult to make a clear-cut distinction between ‘education’ and ‘indoctrination’ in the broad practice of imparting knowledge. See: Polycarp Ikuenobe, *Philosophical Perspectives on Communalism and Morality in African Traditions*, Lexington Books, Lanham (MD) 2006, pp. 215–255.

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N. K. Dzobo, “African Symbols and Proverbs as Source of Knowledge and Truth”, in: Kwasi Wiredu, Kwame Gyekye (eds.), *Person and Community: Ghanaian Philosophical Studies I*, Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, Washington, D.C. 1992, pp. 89–100, p. 85.

processes of moral education, then we can appreciate how art can be “used to facilitate or make palatable socially important behaviour”.<sup>19</sup>

Art could be seen as a form of documentation and “a residue of events whose purpose was to impose upon social individuals unforgettable patterns of essential knowledge and explanation”.<sup>20</sup>

If we understand African art and symbolic representations in this broad sense, then it can be a valuable source of knowledge or basis for understanding African thought. Art provides a window into traditional African epistemology, especially the methods of inquiring about and acquiring knowledge that is captured aptly by the informal use of different forms of oral and encoded narratives and literary genres. Alagoa indicates that the literary genres that provide the contents and processes of oral tradition include proverbs, riddles, drum praise titles, song, and folktale.<sup>21</sup> In discussing the nature and role of proverbs among the peoples of the Niger Delta, Alagoa argues that proverbs may reveal, among other things, ideas about the nature of institutions as well as the moral principles that guide people’s conduct.

Proverbs, myth, and folklore capture abstract principles and concrete experiences from which children can draw knowledge, learn about the cultural history and traditions, and the propriety or acceptability of particular actions in given circumstances. According to Alagoa, “shrines, artistic representations, objects and rituals may, accordingly, be classed as mnemonic devices for recording history,” cultural knowledge, values, and practices of the past.<sup>22</sup> English and Hamme illustrate the epistemological role of the literary genre of African art as a method of creating and encoding knowledge by indicating how it functions in cultural practices and ceremonies that represent or indicate the public process or method of expressing and transmitting the knowledge, values, thoughts, and beliefs of a culture.

Given English and Hamme, art is essential in African cultures as methods of preserving and transmitting knowledge, because

“... it is used as an encoding and mnemonic instruments to make important information more easily and accurately assimilable. As a result, even in the absence of written texts, essential aspects of culture are not lost, ignored or dismissed. Instead, coded in non-literate ways, they are integrated and expressed in socially shared symbols.”<sup>23</sup>

Thus, ceremonies and rituals are a part of the oral tradition of traditional African people, which represents their body of knowledge (practices, values, history, ways of life, principles, and beliefs) that they consider important. Some works of art in African cultures are functional objects like robes, staffs, swords, drums, stools, jewellery, and hats, which have special cultural symbolism. They tell stories about what they symbolise and their cultural functions, value, and practices. Some artistic objects also represent concrete or abstract ideas and have symbolisms that encapsulate certain values, norms, or principles by which certain behaviours are deemed acceptable or unacceptable.

### **Elders as Communal Repositories of Knowledge**

It is usually by a body of knowledge that the core identity and cultural legacy of a group or community are perpetuated and passed down from generation to generation, partly by reliance on elders. Elders in the community play multiple roles in the informal process of archiving and transmitting knowledge. On the one hand, elders are the custodians, sources, and repositories of the

knowledge, history, beliefs, and values in African cultures by overseeing the transmission of the traditions.<sup>24</sup> Traditional knowledge and history, which are partly encoded in myths, symbols, arts, as well as the memories of elders, are transmitted via visual and oral media. On the other hand, elders have the communal responsibilities of providing the justifications for, upholding, and ensuring the maintenance and adherence to cultural beliefs and traditions for communal well-being and harmony, as well as helping to impart relevant values and knowledge on children, to help them attain moral personhood.

We should bear in mind that an elder in African traditions is not simply or solely a person who is old. An elder is a ‘grown-up’ who has proven himself in the community based on his actions, and he is socially recognised as a responsible person of moral repute and demonstrated wisdom and knowledge of the culture and traditions. Thus, being an elder is an earned epistemic and moral status based on demonstrated practical wisdom, years of practical life experience, knowledge of traditions, and good behaviour. A person demonstrates his or her moral and epistemic status as an elder in deeds, words, and the ability to use life experience to justify beliefs, values, and practices. This idea is captured by the proverb: it is one’s deeds that count, not one’s years.<sup>25</sup> Elders can impart wisdom by advising and guiding children, and implicitly or explicitly providing the explanatory, historical, and justificatory bases in tradition for principles, which specify and prescribe requisite behaviours, values, practices and moral duties.

An elder’s duty requires him or her (as a ‘grown-up’) to display a wealth of knowledge, years of practical life experience, and good judgment by exhibiting responsible action and robust moral sensitivity. Usually, such responsible communal elders act as mentors and role models; their actions are seen as codes, narratives, abstract knowledge, and principles, and the exemplifications of the ‘ideals’ or exemplars of culture, values, traditions, and the acceptable modes of behaviour. By their consistent good actions, elders educate the young about the tradition and model their behaviours. Children go to elders to learn about traditions, beliefs, values, and justificatory foundations. Children learn to imitate the behaviours of elders whom they see as role models that exemplify the traditions and accepted practices of the past. Children learn the traditions and the proper behaviour that is expected of them by following the

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P. English, N. S. Hamme, “Using Art History and Philosophy to Compare a Traditional and a Contemporary Form of African Moral Thought”, p. 206.

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Ibid.

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Ebiegberi Joe Alagoa, “The Use of Oral Literary Data for History: Examples from Niger Delta Proverbs”, *The Journal of American Folklore* 81 (1968) 321, pp. 235–242, doi: <https://doi.org/10.2307/537543>.

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Ebiegberi Joe Alagoa, “Oral Tradition Among the Ijo of the Niger Delta”, *Journal of African History* 7 (1966) 3, pp. 405–419, p. 408.

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P. English, N. S. Hamme, “Using Art History and Philosophy to Compare a Traditional and a Contemporary Form of African Moral Thought”, p. 206.

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See E. J. Alagoa, “Oral Tradition Among the Ijo of the Niger Delta”. For a discussion of the role of elders as repositories of cultural knowledge and links to the past.

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This distinction between ‘being old’ as an indication of chronological age and of being ‘an elder’ as an earned moral and epistemic status can be illuminated by an interesting distinction that I saw once on a car sticker, which says that *growing old* (chronologically in years) is mandatory but *growing up* (as an earned moral status) is a choice. Not all ‘old people’ are ‘grown ups’.

examples of elders. The ability of children to imitate elders is an important process of learning, and it is a necessary learning outcome in the process of transmitting traditional knowledge.

The popular saying “action speaks louder than words” underscores the epistemic status given to the actions of elders as examples or exemplars, and the ability of the young to imitate them. Kevin McDonough underscores this point by indicating the importance of moral examples as exemplars and a means of moral education especially at the initial formative stages of helping children to acquire the requisite moral habits.<sup>26</sup> The use of words and narratives are also necessary to reinforce the acceptable behaviours, values, beliefs, and the ideas that are encoded in myths, symbols, arts, and various ceremonies. From experience, children understand the privileges and respect that are accorded to *responsible elders* as repositories of knowledge, as well as their sacred duties in the process of transmitting knowledge and the upbringing of children. Understanding this special recognition of elders, and the privileges of the epistemic and moral status given to them could provide some practical incentives or motivations for children to aspire to this status.

As children begin to mature into adolescence, there is a concerted effort to educate them about the communal ways of life and the basis for deference to, and dependence on, elders as moral and epistemic authorities who are the sources of all forms of traditional knowledge and values.<sup>27</sup> It is usually expected that the young do not simply identify acceptable behaviours and simply imitate them without any rational thought or justificatory basis. The duties of elders and children are not just indicated as dogmas that must be accepted without any rational basis or justification. Children are not simply indoctrinated to accept these dogmas without reasons or reasoning. The African conception of moral personhood underscores the idea of modelling elders’ behaviours as examples and exemplars that children ought to imitate. ‘Personhood’ represents the idea of a respectable and responsible elder, which is a moral and an epistemic status that is earned in one’s life by deeds, by acting consistently by duty and excellence by communal values and principles.

The historical, justificatory, and motivating foundations for traditions, values, and practices regarding the moral and epistemic status and role of elders are represented in proverbs, anecdotes, real-life experiences, stories, parables, folktale, and myths.<sup>28</sup> For instance, this is illustrated poignantly in the following proverb: what an elder can see while lying down, a child could never see when he climbs to the top of a tree. As Alagoa indicates, the proverb “A difference in days shows in a difference in wisdom” underscores the epistemic authorities given to elders mostly because of, among other things, their many years of practical life experiences. He argues that “one reason that the elders are given such privileged treatment is the belief that age confers wisdom – the older is wiser than the young”.<sup>29</sup> Moral and epistemological authority resides in the combination of age, experience, good judgment, character, and practical wisdom.

The proverb “a young person may have more new clothes or items than an elder, but the elder has more antiques, rags, and a greater variety of old clothes” captures this justification. The idea is that antiques and old clothes have hidden values that new items do not have, and new clothes can not match the value of antiques and the practical functionality of a variety of old clothes and rags. As a further illustration of the status of elders and their moral and epistemic authority, an African proverb indicates that a young child cannot learn how to swim in the ocean if adults do not help him, because, without

help, he would drown. Life is seen proverbially as a wide and deep ocean, and to navigate it without drowning, one must have the guidance and help of elders. The apragmatic justification for the moral and epistemic dependence on elder might be found in the proverb, a defiant child who refuses to heed the moral admonishment of an elder is not only putting himself in danger but also the whole community.

Educating a child is justified from the perspective of the child's interest because without it he runs the risk of not leading a meaningful life to be a responsible adult – to achieve personhood. This view about living a meaningful life, personhood, and one's ability to achieve it, Ifeanyi Menkiti argues, requires education and incremental growth in knowledge, experience, wisdom, and the requisite principles of human action. As one grows in age and experience, one begins informally to learn how to act and acquire the relevant knowledge of cultural traditions and moral excellences that are considered necessary to navigate life to attain responsible adulthood.<sup>30</sup> From the perspective of the community, the actions of an individual may create problems for the community and prevent other people from leading meaningful lives. In traditional African communities, formal educational institutions, structures, and the curriculum for imparting knowledge, beliefs, and moral values did not exist. People acquired knowledge and were educated through informal processes of day-to-day upbringing and living by following its traditions.

The communal and close-knit nature of the society allowed everyone to use the social institutions, examples, narratives, and practices to reinforce the teachings and traditions of the community because everyone had some responsibility in raising and caring for children. This is the basis of the now popular African idea or saying that 'it takes a village or community to raise a child'. Simply because everyone has the responsibility of raising or caring for children in the community, it does not follow that everyone may meet that responsibility. It should be noted that not every adult in the community is morally upright and not everyone can have a direct impact on every child. However, everyone has a responsibility of making sure that there is some semblance of consistency in the teachings and practices of the traditions; they are expected to be reinforced consistently by everyone either directly or indirectly. Guidance by elders must be done in both words and deeds; one cannot say one thing and do something contrary. The community tries to avoid mixed or contradictory messages that may be puzzling and confusing for children regarding the tradition, the acceptable behaviour, and the proper value or principle.

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Kevin McDonough, "The Importance of Examples for Moral Education: An Aristotelian Perspective", *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 14 (1995) 1, pp. 77–103, pp. 81–89, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1007/bf01075185>.

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The principle of epistemic dependence says that A can depend on the authority of B, if B has evidence to justify a belief. Thus A can use the authority of B and B's evidence to justify his own belief, in spite of the fact that he himself lacks the evidence. See: John Hardwig, "Epistemic Dependence", *Journal of Philosophy* 82 (1985) 847, pp. 335–349, doi: <https://doi.org/10.2307/2026523>.

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For a discussion of proverbs as a process of oral tradition and the source of knowledge of the past, see E. J. Alagoa, "The Use of Oral Literary Data for History", pp. 235–242.

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Ibid., p. 240.

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Ifeanyi Menkiti, "Person and Community in African Traditional Thought", in: R. A. Wright (ed.), *African Philosophy*, pp. 171–181, p. 173.

Achieving human well-being is the fundamental goal of African communal traditions, and it is deemed important as the moral underpinning and pragmatic goal in the transmission of traditions and values to children. This is the underpinning for acculturating children into relevant communal practices, beliefs, values, and traditions, to promote solidarity, communal harmony, and human welfare. There is usually a general sense of agreement on the propriety and justification of practices, principles, values, and prescribed actions, in that they have their foundation in the community's commonly accepted value, interests, and human well-being.

Communal values and traditions are encoded and exemplified in everyday communal functions because people must use traditional knowledge, history, and moral principles consistently to guide their conduct. In the process, people learn the cultural practices, acquire values and virtues, develop a moral conscience, virtues, and the ability to feel shame, regret or disappointment when they do something that is traditionally unacceptable. The community as a whole, its structures, members, elders, and institutions constitute the educational institution and informal processes of using proverbs and narratives.

It is pertinent to note that the community as an informal process and structure for transmitting knowledge represents a hierarchy. Those at the top hierarchy (elders) teach and reinforce those lower in the hierarchy (children) what to learn and how to behave for everyone to live in peace and harmony within the community under the guidance of spirits and ancestors. Moreover, the community in African cultures consists of persons both dead (ancestral spirits) and alive.<sup>31</sup> Ancestors or the spirits of the dead have a place in the epistemic and moral hierarchy of a community. Ancestors are placed on a level higher than elders. They are relied on spiritually or called upon by elders for revelatory knowledge and spiritual guidance regarding how things should be done. Through such spiritual guidance, elders can educate others or pass down the tradition, and in the process, promote human welfare and harmony in the community by people following traditions.

The highest moral status for the living includes elders, people with traditional titles of recognition, chiefs, kings or queens who consistently demonstrate wisdom and knowledge.<sup>32</sup> Having a title, or being a chief or king, is not simply or solely a status of social or political leadership; it also represents a high moral and epistemic status that children should strive to emulate and, in some situations, attain. The following proverb captures the status of elders, chiefs, or kings in the epistemic or moral hierarchy: if you wash your hands clean (if you are morally upright), then you can be in communion and dine with elders and kings. It should be stressed that the idea of 'being in' or 'having' communion with kings and elders does not refer solely to the literal sense of eating meals but also to a social, moral, epistemic communion requiring social recognition. One must be morally upright and socially recognised to be an elder and to partake in this moral and social communion. Hence, the proverb: if you want to be (or are) close to the king then you must be (are) 'bright looking' (morally clean and socially recognised).

Being morally clean and socially recognised are necessary conditions for one to be proverbially and literally 'close to a king'. This is underscored by the proverb that when you are close to the king, his moral cleanliness or goodness will rub off on you. This implies that one would be morally upright and socially recognised if one emulates a king. Thus, kings and elders are custodians and repositories of the knowledge, values, and traditions, and in some respects, personifications of the moral health and character of the community,

its cohesiveness and ability to promote human well-being. The proverb “you cannot use the palm of one hand to cover *the wide ‘mouth’ of a pot adequately*” underscores the role of the community as an institution and elders in the informal education of children for solidarity, human welfare, and harmony in the community. The pot is likened to the child; covering its wide ‘mouth’ amounts to the extensive process of guiding and protecting children by filtering what children learn, which must involve human welfare.

The metaphor of the pot is instructive because its wide opening represents the gullibility and impressionistic nature of children, and the tendency for the opening to let in, without adequate filters, undesirable things. The pot needs the covering in the form of filters to discriminate between good and bad, what goes into the pot: what one must learn. Safeguarding and guiding children (covering the ‘mouth’ of a pot) involves teaching children the tradition, values, and history of the community, including how to behave in the community to lead meaningful lives and grow up to be respectable elders or persons. The ideas of communal welfare, communal knowledge, and communal raising of children are instantiated in the saying: it is the responsibility of an elder to guide a child morally, but the responsibility of the child to heed the guidance of elders. When both fail in their responsibilities, we cannot achieve communal welfare and solidarity. Thus, it is the fault of the child to refuse to heed the guidance of elders and the fault of the elder to refuse to guide children properly.

This is because elders ought to be responsible teachers and repositories of knowledge and the young ought to be willing learners and curious inquirers. An important element of educating a child involves the obligation of a child to trust, depend on, or defer to, elders and community for knowledge and moral guidance. The obligation and trust by children have the logical, epistemic, and moral correlative of the expectation that elders must be responsible and accurate in what they teach children about how to navigate and live a meaningful life. One’s own individual intellectual or cognitive abilities alone are usually not considered enough for one to acquire the requisite knowledge, virtues and character, act morally, and live a meaningful life. One requires a wealth of practical experience, knowledge of tradition, and communal guidance in addition to one’s cognitive abilities to be able to live a good life.

Cognitive facilities are only formal structures; their proper development and use must be supplemented by material knowledge of values, cultural traditions, and experience, which are the contents of our formal cognitive structures and their proper use. This idea is expressed in the proverb: the clever mind or cognitive abilities of a child that has not seen many life experiences will not know the right thing to do in many situations; hence, he must depend on elders who have more life experiences. This is one justification for the wisdom of elders that requires children to depend on them to be educated about traditions, communal knowledge, and relevant justification, by the examples

31

The idea that the spirits of the dead are alive and part of the community is underscored by the fact that when old people die, they are buried inside homes or around the house. They are (in spirit) still considered members of the family and community. In ceremonies or events, they are called upon in prayers to provide spiritual guidance. See: Richard Onwuabine, “The Human Person and Immortality in

Ibo (African) Metaphysics”, in: R. A. Wright (ed.), *African Philosophy*, pp. 183–197, p. 189.

32

Chieftaincy and kingship are hereditary in some cultures, but an heir must exemplify the requisite moral purity or integrity that is demanded by such status.

of proper behaviours, and stories about life experiences, which are encoded in myths, art, parables, proverbs, and folklore.

### **Epistemic Dependence and Communal Reliance on Elders**

The reliance on elders involves the epistemic principle that individuals could justify their beliefs based on the authority of, or place their trust on, the wisdom of elders as repositories of knowledge. Such reliance involves the reasonableness of the principles of epistemic dependence, epistemic trust or reliabilism, and epistemic deference. Hardwig expresses the principle of epistemic dependence as follows:

“Suppose that a person A has good reasons – evidence – for believing that *p*, but a second person B, does not. In *this* sense, B has no (or insufficient) reasons to believe that *p*. However, suppose also that B has good reasons to believe that A has good reasons to believe *p*. Does B then, *ipso facto*, have good reasons to believe that *p*? If so, B’s belief is epistemically grounded in an appeal to the authority of A and A’s belief. And if we accept this, we will be able to explain how B’s belief can be more than mere belief; how it can indeed, be a rational belief; and how B can be rational in his belief that *p*.”<sup>33</sup>

This principle indicates that, if one has good reasons to believe that others, as reliable experts, authorities, or epistemic superiors, have good reasons for a belief, then one has good reasons and it is rational to believe what the experts believe justifiably.

If this principle is plausible, then it can justify the communal oral methods by which traditional Africans acquired knowledge and justified beliefs, by relying on reliable elders as authorities and repositories of traditional beliefs and values. People considered the tradition and elders as *reliable* sources of and methods for transmitting knowledge. The reliability of the sources and processes, which are truth-conducive, would adequately justify the beliefs. Hence, the authority of elders as sources of traditional knowledge and values was accepted. This involves the principle of epistemic reliabilism. The circumstances that led traditional Africans to depend reliably and justifiably on elders involved trust and extended family and neighbourhood connections that engendered communal fellowship and the informal communal methods of upbringing and the processes of acquiring and justifying beliefs in traditional African cultures.

Based on the principles of epistemic dependence and *process reliabilism*, elders were rightly considered paternalistic custodians and conveyors of knowledge. Thus, people were justified in deferring epistemically to, and rely on, elders and their rendition of tradition. If we accept epistemic paternalism, reliabilism, and dependence, then it is reasonable to say that a person is rational for accepting a belief, if he has good reasons to believe that the reliable repositories of knowledge that he trusts and depends on for his justification have good reasons to accept it. If this is reasonable, then it makes sense as an epistemic principle or practice, that in some situations, one’s will (as an epistemic inferior) be paternalistically dependent on or overridden by accepted reliable authorities or epistemic superiors in the epistemic community. Hence, in African traditions, high epistemic status is accorded only to *elders* who have demonstrated practical wisdom and knowledge of the traditions and acted properly. As Wiredu indicates, the respect accorded to elders or age was not fortuitous or gratuitous, and elders were *rightly considered* custodians of knowledge, especially knowledge of a practical kind.<sup>34</sup>

Given the nature of communalism in African cultures, in terms of the symbiotic and organic relationship among people in the community, the idea of epistemic division of labour, sharing ideas, and performing one's epistemic responsibilities for the general welfare are important parts of one's overall communal responsibilities. This principle of epistemic dependence, according to Hardwig, is supported by the idea that the

"... rational layman recognizes that his own judgment, uninformed by training and inquiry as it is, is *rationally inferior* to that of the expert (and the community of experts for whom the expert usually speaks) and consequently can always be *rationally* overruled."<sup>35</sup>

One intuitive or cognitive psychological basis for the principles of epistemic dependence and paternalism has to do with the natural limitations on human cognitive abilities. Usually, an infinite amount of available information, knowledge, and evidence is necessary for a single belief to be adequately justified. For any act of adequate justification, one needs more complex beliefs than one alone can understand fully and independently. No single individual alone has the cognitive abilities to process and understand all the relevant infinite amount of information.

In reality, there are many complex beliefs that we accept or must accept in a given context to lead a meaningful life, relate properly to others, and justify other beliefs. Some of these beliefs and information are complicated and intricate for us alone to independently understand, evaluate, and establish as the basis for us to rationally justify our beliefs adequately. Because of the complexity of the justifications of our putatively simple beliefs, without epistemic dependence, we would have to justifiably accept an infinite number of beliefs that would be necessary to adequately justify a belief in an epistemic community. We would need different disciplines, expertise, and perspectives to justify and illuminate the understanding of the amount and complexity of the beliefs, beyond what anyone alone (exclusively) can know, understand, evaluate, and justify individually or independently. Some of these beliefs are those that other people who are experts have or reasonably accept, and we cannot ascertain or understand the justificatory basis for these on our own, but the experts can.

As such, we have to accept some beliefs justifiably on the basis of epistemic trust of 'experts' and depend on their knowledge and reliability as source of knowledge. If this is the case, then we all have to acknowledge or accept some degree of epistemic inferiority in some situations concerning some matters. Such acceptance would require us to subordinate our epistemic judgment, cognitive autonomy, rational independence to some authority – in terms of depending on or deferring to epistemic authorities. Hence, one cannot meaningfully maintain cognitive and rational independence, since a single person alone is incapable of understanding fully and adequately evaluating all the relevant information necessary to justify his beliefs adequately, where such adequacy is necessary for one to be rational. We depend on others within a given epistemic community to determine what a person can justifiably claim to know.

33  
J. Hardwig, "Epistemic Dependence", pp. 335–349.

*and Particulars*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington (IN) 1996, p. 68.

34  
K. Wiredu, *Philosophy and an African Culture*, p. 29; Kwasi Wiredu, *Cultural Universal*

35  
J. Hardwig, "Epistemic Dependence", p. 342.

This idea underscores the plausibility of the principle of epistemic communalism – the idea of communal inquiry – where there is an epistemic division of labour, sharing of evidence, and reliance on the inter-subjective agreement as a basis for the adequacy of a justification. The practical implication of rationality implies that people must share ideas, engage in communal inquiry and cognitive division of labour as a means to arrive at the most reasonable beliefs. This sense of rationality implies that one must avoid epistemic solipsism and independence, and accept epistemic dependence on some expert (or his beliefs). Although it is reasonable to depend on others epistemically, if we have good reasons to believe that they have good reasons to hold certain beliefs, we must restrict such dependence to legitimate, trusted, reliable, and proven authorities. Hence, elders (not just one elder, but some agreement among many elders) in African communities have the trust as authorities, reliable sources of knowledge, and reliable method of transmitting knowledge.

The highest court of appeal for rationality and epistemic justification lies outside the individual, one discipline, perspective, or the independent and exclusive cognitive abilities of a single person. The highest rational and epistemic court of the appeal lies, in part, on a synthesis of the views of others in an epistemic community, and how people understand relevant facts. This requires some inter-subjective agreement regarding how others interpret facts, and whether one's belief corresponds to such agreement. The plausibility of the principles of epistemic communalism and dependence implies that it is not possible for one discipline or perspective exclusively and independently, to understand fully, establish, adequately evaluate, and rationally accept the justification of a belief. Thus, the adequacy of a belief or justification would depend on all the evidence and perspectives that all epistemic authorities have as the basis for relying on them or their beliefs as a basis for one's justification.

In this communal context, Hardwig's point is reasonable,

“... that it is sometimes *irrational* to think for oneself—that *rationality* sometimes consists in deferring to epistemic authority and, consequently, in passively and uncritically accepting what we are given to believe (...).”<sup>36</sup>

Epistemic dependence implies that it is unreasonable to expect people to use their will *every time* to make every decision, and it is irrational for anyone to do so, especially if such decisions are contrary to the accepted views of epistemic authorities in the community and detrimental to the community. Thus, whether or not one is rational in accepting beliefs depends on, (i) the rationality and adequacy of the epistemic rules and methods that are used in the context of an epistemic practice and community, and (ii) the proper use of these rules and methods in arriving at a belief. In many African cultures, the epistemic rules and methods which require the reliance on elders as epistemic authorities are rational.

The idea of rationality in epistemic communalism and epistemic dependence involves the sharing of cognitive and epistemic responsibilities. The idea of knowledge in African traditions (as epistemic communities) requires reliance on and sharing with others who have different knowledge background and perspectives. This suggests a view of knowledge as holistic and requiring multiple perspectives and disciplines or expertise. This holistic approach to knowledge in African tradition and the efforts to retrieve and reconstruct the knowledge of African tradition applies to contemporary academic inquiry. We must rely on the works of historians, art historians, philosophers, sociolo-

gists, and anthropologists to capture the ways of life, ideas, beliefs, thoughts, practices, and values of African peoples.

This idea requires all disciplines and people from different perspectives to engage in epistemic sharing of information, a division of labour, and rational engagement and synthesis. This multi-perspectival idea of knowledge is illustrated by the allegory of the blind men trying to understand the nature of an elephant. One touched the tail and said it looks like a rope; another touched the trunk and said it looks like a wall, while another touched the leg and said it looks like a tree. The elephant is best understood as a combination of all of these and perhaps more. This African idea that knowledge involves reliance on others or synthesis of various views is underscored by the idea of truth in African communal traditions, which involves, in part, some sense of approximate consensus or inter-subjective agreement among elders or experts, on which other people who are epistemic inferiors, would epistemically depend. Such agreement need not necessarily be unanimous.

Wiredu underscores the plausibility of the communal and social constructivist idea of knowledge and truth among the Akans, in his analysis of *nokware*, which is translated as ‘truthfulness’. According to Wiredu:

“*Nokware*, then, means literally being of one mouth. Less literally, it means being of one voice. It is sometimes suggested that this oneness of voice refers to communal unanimity; so that the truth is that which is agreed to by the community.”<sup>37</sup>

The idea of the communal agreement is not simply a similarity among opinions, but the idea that various individuals’ beliefs about facts are in agreement among themselves, and that the agreement also corresponds to or are supported by the facts or experiences. This idea of truth in African traditions involves some sense of communal agreement regarding how they see, interpret, or understand the facts.

It should be borne in mind that the principles of epistemic dependence and epistemic communalism do not imply that individuals lack the cognitive autonomy and creative imagination to make decisions and justify beliefs independently. Usually, there are situations in which it would be rational to prevent someone from relying on and using, solely and independently, his cognitive abilities or will. These situations involve those where the individual’s cognitive abilities are defective, and knowledge is limited. Wiredu argues that:

“A mind too raw to grasp anything like relevant alternatives still needs to be led, at least, away from danger.”<sup>38</sup>

He indicates that when an individual begins to understand relevant alternatives, no justification could exist for the deliberate restriction of his will. We must appreciate that even an adult’s mind may be too raw about some subject matter such that it may be necessary for an adult to refuse to rely on, solely and exclusively, on his cognitive autonomy and epistemic independence.

The rawness of a mind does not depend on young age alone; it also depends on one’s effort or willingness to inquire, one’s imagination or curiosity, and the nature of the subject matter in question. Hardwig argues that, even for adults, “rationality sometimes consists in refusing to think for oneself”.<sup>39</sup>

36  
Ibid., p. 343.

37  
K. Wiredu, *Cultural Universal and Particulars*, p. 105.

38  
K. Wiredu, *Philosophy and an African Culture*, p. 3.

39  
J. Hardwig, “Epistemic Dependence”, p. 336.

Moreover, age *per se* does not necessarily indicate cognitive or rational sophistication. For instance, the mind of an adult with limited knowledge who is not an expert or curious may be raw. The mind of a medical doctor who is not a specialist may be raw about a certain illness and its treatment. A person cannot practically pursue absolute epistemic individualism across the board regarding all matters. On some matters, one would require epistemic dependence on other epistemic superiors to recognise that on some practical issue, some alternatives in a social context are ‘real’, appropriate or better, while others are not. Because the promotion of general welfare was one of the central practical aims of communalism and epistemic inquiry, individuals have a responsibility to share ideas, information, (especially of a practical type) and evidence that could make the community better or help others.

The epistemic principle of communalism is underscored by the contextual and pragmatic nature of justification. In Sandra Harding’s view, cultural context, the pragmatic need, and contextually available evidence, cultural beliefs, and lived-experience determine what is reasonable for one to believe.<sup>40</sup> For instance, if as a herbalist, one has practical knowledge such as the effective treatment for an illness, and one refuses to share it, then one might be shirking one’s communal moral and epistemic responsibilities or doing something morally and epistemically reprehensible. This illustrates the heuristic value of the principles of epistemic communalism, a cognitive division of labour, and epistemic dependence. It also provides a practical justification for the rational variant of epistemic authoritarianism and paternalism in African communal systems, which requires that, in some situations, the overriding of an individual’s will be necessary to achieve some requisite communal epistemic or practical goals.

This point is also underscored by Steve Fuller’s argument that the idea of placing social strictures on knowledge, inquiry, and justification, which gives credence to communal inquiry, epistemic division of labour, and epistemic dependence, is motivated by the idea that we need to engage in robust inquiry to have a robust set of beliefs. In Fuller’s view, a robust inquiry is possible only if we engage in “a kind of optimal division of cognitive labour”, which requires sharing cognitive responsibilities and relying on the help of others as experts and their superior cognitive abilities.<sup>41</sup> The idea of epistemic independence or cognitive autonomy fails to appreciate the special standards for circumscribing relevant alternatives in a given context, standards, which are necessary for a group of people as a community to account for their reasoning and the justification of the beliefs they accept and find reasonable as a group. A group of people may justify a principle or belief based on the social or pragmatic advantage or the role of such a principle or belief.<sup>42</sup>

Such a pragmatic role or social advantage for the group may be independent of and irrelevant to an individual’s rational justification. A community’s justification for a belief, in terms of the social and pragmatic good for the community, might be irrelevant to an individual’s justification (*qua* individual, independent of the community) for a belief.<sup>43</sup> Thus, the dominant individualistic and autonomous view of rationality or epistemic justification is too narrow. This idea of rationality cannot capture adequately the idea of ‘what is rational for a group’ as an epistemic community. The idea of ‘what is rational for a group’ is necessary to appreciate the idea of epistemic dependence and communalism in African cultures.

## Conclusion

I have argued that oral tradition in African cultures must be understood broadly to include narratives, art, proverbs, myths, parables, and the reliance on elders as the custodians and repositories of knowledge and wisdom. The use of oral traditions in African cultures is a plausible method for archiving, retrieving, and transmitting the communal history, knowledge, traditions, beliefs, values, and practices. It is also a method and process of providing justifications and explanations for cultural practices, values, beliefs, knowledge, and thoughts. I argued that this broad view of oral tradition as epistemic and pedagogical methods is supported by the principles of epistemic dependence, epistemic communalism, and process reliabilism.

### Polycarp Ikuenobe

#### Usmena tradicija, spoznajna ovisnost i znanje u afričkoj kulturi

##### Sažetak

*Istraživanje ispituje prirodu i legitimnost usmene tradicije kao metode stjecanja, pohranjivanja, povrata i prenošenja znanja, vjerovanja, vrijednosti i praksi u tradicionalnoj afričkoj kulturnoj zajednici. Obrazlažem da usmena tradicija, koja uključuje parabole, krilatice, mitove, umjetnost i folklor, također uključuje oslanjanje na starješine kao spremišta znanja i tradicije. Obrazlažem da se ovo oslanjanje može opravdati principima spoznajna povjerenja, spoznajne ovisnosti i spoznajnog komunalizma. Pojam spoznajnog komunalizma, koji uključuje spoznajnu podjelu rada i spoznajnu komparativnu prednost, treba multidisciplinarni holistički pristup znanju u Africi. Komunalna metoda stjecanja znanja upućuje na to kako ljudi prihvaćaju vjerovanja i opravdavaju svoje prihvaćanje vjerovanja kao članovi organske integrirane zajednice. Osnajuje se potreba za zajedničkom ovisnosti filozofije i drugih disciplina poput povijesti, antropologije, književnosti i znanosti kao izvora i osnove za afričko znanje.*

##### Ključne riječi

usmena tradicija, afrički komunalizam, tradicionalno znanje, spoznajna ovisnost, spoznajni komunalizam, etnofilozofija, oslanjanje na starješine

### Polycarp Ikuenobe

#### Mündliche Tradition, Erkenntnissucht und Wissen in der afrikanischen Kultur

##### Zusammenfassung

*Die Forschung untersucht die Natur und die Legitimität der mündlichen Tradition als Methode des Erwerbs, Speicherns, der Aufspürung und Überlieferung von Wissen, Überzeugungen, Werten und Praktiken in der traditionellen afrikanischen Kulturgemeinschaft. Ich begründe, dass die*

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Cf. Sandra Harding, *Is Science Multicultural?*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington (IN) 1998.

41

Steve Fuller, *Social Epistemology*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1988, p. 3.

42

This idea is articulated by F. Schmitt. See: Frederick Schmitt, "The Justification of

Group Beliefs", in: Frederick Schmitt (ed.), *Socializing Epistemology: The Social Dimensions of Knowledge*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Boston (MA) 1994, pp. 257–287.

43

*Ibid.*, p. 273.

*mündliche Tradition, die Parabeln, Schlagworte, Mythen, Kunst und Folklore umfasst, ebenso die Anlehnung an die Oberhäupter als Wissens- und Traditionsspeicher einschließt. Ich begründe, diese Anlehnung könne durch die Prinzipien des Erkenntnisvertrauens, der Erkenntnissucht sowie des erkenntnismäßigen Kommunalismus rechtfertigt werden. Der Begriff des erkenntnismäßigen Kommunalismus, der eine kognitive Arbeitsteilung und einen kognitiven komparativen Vorteil einbezieht, erfordert einen multidisziplinären holistischen Ansatz zum Wissen in Afrika. Die kommunale Methode des Wissenserwerbs weist darauf hin, dass Menschen Überzeugungen akzeptieren und deren Akzeptanz der Überzeugungen als Mitglieder einer organischen integrierten Gemeinschaft rechtfertigen. Man bekräftigt den Bedarf an einer gemeinsamen Abhängigkeit von Philosophie und anderen Disziplinen wie Geschichte, Anthropologie, Literatur und Wissenschaft als Quelle und Grundlage für afrikanisches Wissen.*

**Schlüsselwörter**

mündliche Tradition, afrikanischer Kommunalismus, traditionelles Wissen, Erkenntnissucht, erkenntnismäßiger Kommunalismus, Ethnophilosophie, Anlehnung an die Oberhäupter

**Polycarp Ikuenobe**

**La tradition orale, la dépendance envers  
la connaissance et le savoir au sein de la culture africaine**

**Résumé**

*Cette étude interroge la nature et la légitimité des traditions orales en tant que méthodes d'acquisition, de conservation, et méthode caractérisée par un retour aux sources ; mais encore en tant que méthode de transmission des connaissances, des croyances, des valeurs et des pratiques au sein de la communauté culturelle traditionnelle africaine. Je montre que la tradition orale, qui inclut des paraboles, des maximes, des mythes, l'art et le folklore, s'appuie également sur le savoir des anciens et en constitue un « dépôt » pour les connaissances et la tradition. J'explique que ce point d'appui peut se justifier par des principes basés sur la confiance dans le savoir, la dépendance envers le savoir et le communalisme. Le concept de communalisme de la connaissance, qui inclut une division du travail sur la base des connaissances, et qui constitue également un avantage pour comparer les connaissances, requiert une approche holistique du savoir en Afrique. La méthode communale d'acquisition du savoir renvoie à la manière dont les gens adhèrent aux croyances et qu'ils justifient en tant que membres d'une communauté organiquement intégrée. Le besoin pour une dépendance philosophique commune et pour d'autres disciplines telles que l'histoire, l'anthropologie, la littérature et les sciences en tant que sources et fondements pour le savoir africain se renforce.*

**Mots-clés**

tradition orale, communalisme africain, savoir traditionnel, dépendance envers la connaissance, communalisme de la connaissance, ethno-philosophie, référence aux anciens