

EPISTEMICIDE AND THE CHALLENGES OF DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICA: RETHINKING KNOWLEDGE FOR PROGRESS

Aguinam, Callistus C.
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka.
cc.aguinam@unizik.edu.ng

&

Asadu, Godfrey C. PhD.
Bigard Memorial Seminary, Enugu.
asadugodfrey@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The problem of underdevelopment is like a ghost haunting Africa. In fact, in the social sciences, many developmental frameworks have been adduced as cure-all prescriptions to solve the problem of underdevelopment in developing countries—especially in Africa—but to no avail. However, what is not contestable is the fact that, knowledge has a great implication in the development of any nation. This is predicated on the belief that knowledge serves as a basis for understanding reality. Hence, there is no gain saying that, if reality is erroneously judged and conceived, developmental projects would wrongly be interpreted and approached. The truth about many African nations is that their knowledge banks are suffering from *colonialism*, which is a manifestation of effects of epistemicide. It is on this note that, this work employs the methods of hermeneutics and analysis to investigate how a given people's corpus of knowledge determines the level of their development. Consequently, the work discovers among other things that the level of a people's knowledge which informs their actions is the decider of which people are developed and which is undeveloped. Again, what a people hold to be true and real goes a long way into determining the path of development they will follow. Thus, the study recommended that for holistic development to be achieved in the developing world/countries there is the need to transform their worldview and liberate their thinking from the clutches of narrow mindedness and influences of Eurocentric ideologies orchestrated by epistemicide. As such, government policies must urgently prioritize the reclamation and revitalization of indigenous African knowledge systems to foster genuine and sustainable development.

Keywords: Epistemicide, Indigenous Knowledge, Decolonization of Knowledge, Third World Countries, Worldview, Development in Africa

INTRODUCTION

After several decades since the end of colonialism, most parts of Africa are still grappling with problems such as high poverty rate, corruption, lack of basic infrastructural facilities across all sectors of the economy, unemployment, high mortality rate, political instability and insecurity of lives and property. Global Economic Prospects reports that Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) saw a slowdown in growth, with estimates for 2023 showing 2.9 percent, 0.3 percentage points less than June's forecast. The three biggest economies in the continent, South Africa, Angola, and Nigeria, had their growth decrease to an average of 1.8 percent in 2023, which restrained the region's overall growth. The other nations in the area had a decrease in growth to 3.9 percent, which was partially

caused by a steep fall in the growth of metal exporters and a drop in the price of metal globally. Furthermore, protracted and severe conflicts hindered development in a number of nations. Generally speaking, declining external demand and tighter domestic policy to combat persistent inflation delayed post-pandemic recovery (World Bank, 2024). The above evidence goes to support the reason African states are used to depict and show what it means to be backward, that is, underdeveloped in the comity of nations.

In addition, according to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization as reported by *Africanews.com*, there are approximately 244 million out-of-school children between the ages of 6 and 18. However, what is more worrisome is that more than 40%, or 98 million of them, live in sub-Saharan Africa, including Nigeria (20.2 million), Ethiopia (10.5 million), the Democratic Republic of Congo (5.9 million) and Kenya (1.8 million) (*Africanews.com*, 2022). This indicates that Sub-Saharan Africa is home to a significant proportion of the world's poorest people. Nevertheless, Africa is a continent endowed with rich natural and human resources. However, these have not metamorphosed to development. It is based on this that Kutor (2014, p.14) affirmed that the continent has remained largely underdeveloped regardless of the presence of huge natural resources (gold, cocoa, bauxite, oil, diamond, timber) and human resources based.

The contention of this work is that Africa lacks neither human resources nor material resources. But, the issue lies in her inability to use her God given resources to better herself, which to an extent is caused not only by epistemicide and eurocentrism that have made her to denigrate her mental capacity. Thus, see herself as not an authentic participant in the production of knowledge but also some internal factors which we shall discuss within the work.

The puzzle that begs for answer is how can one who sees herself not only as inferior to the West but also sees anything therefrom as authentic, chart a course different from the one dictated to her by those who surreptitiously arrogate to themselves the birth right to knowledge creation? Secondly how can Africa overcome her state of under development with this self-doubt and dependency inclinations? Finally, how can Africa achieve development when proper investment in education, research, technology, and rampant governance is treated with mere lip service?

CAUSES OF UNDER-DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICA

Many scholars have tried to suggest reasons to establish why Africa is the way it is, or rather the root causes of underdevelopment in Africa. In order to deal with this, they inferred reasons from different perspectives. Some from the colonization perspective and others from the political set up of the continent. In this way the causes of African underdevelopment could be categorised into external and internal factors, what some scholars regard as exogenous and endogenous factors

The first school of thought attributes Africa's underdevelopment to colonialism. For them, Africa is the way it is because of its colonial experience. However, one may inquire, if African continent is the only continent colonized and, if not, why is her situation different from other colonized nationalities. Secondly, if colonial experience is the cause of why Africa is the way she is (underdeveloped), why is Ethiopia not the envy of other nations, since she was not colonized?

The second school of thought argues that Africa is the way she is because of some internal factors. These internal factors include corruption, weak institutions, political instability, insecurity, etc. The truth is that the problem of Africa's underdevelopment cut across internal and external factors. Nevertheless, the main claim (or central argument) of this write up is that Africa is the way she is today not only because of lack of proper investment in education, technology, research, good governance, but more so, due to excessive dependence on the West which was necessitated by epistemicide and eurocentricism. The effect of epistemicide and eurocentricism has made Africa always look up to west for direction in both economic and social life. The next section would examine how this mentality was developed through destruction of African knowledge.

AFRICAN KNOWLEDGE AS THE VICTIM OF EPISTEMICIDE

Over the years, Western philosophers have tended to consider knowledge to be strongly tied to a universal truth. Western philosophers such as Rene Descartes, Francis Bacon, Augustus Comte, David Hume, John Locke, Bishop George Berkeley, etc. have all sought to attain absolute certainty in knowledge. In their obsession for absolute certainty, they adjudge whatever they 'clearly' conceive as knowledge or the right means of attaining knowledge to be indubitable and universal truth.

Significantly, the deep seated quest among western philosophers for certainty was realized with the scientific revolution in the seventeenth century CE. The heralds of the emerging science, such as Francis Bacon (1561-1626), Sir Isaac Newton (1643-1727), Pierre Simon de Laplace (1749-1827), etc. laid great stress on observation, experiments and mathematical reasoning as the right means of obtaining information about reality (Copleston, 1963, p. 89). Science has yielded (and continues to yield) tremendous effect in our world. An intellectual fanaticism grew in the Western world acclaiming science as having utmost authority in the interpretations of life over other forms of interpretations such as philosophical, religious, mythical, spiritual, humanistic and social (Franz, 1953, p. 822). If we are to attain any true knowledge at all, the scientific method of inquiry is considered the only means of attaining genuine knowledge and the best way of explaining reality meaningfully.

With the passage of time, this scientific view has continued to hold subtle and implicit sway in western epistemological and academic discourses. Through Western expansionism, scientific epistemological and academic traditions have been imposed and universalized as the proper means of attaining valid knowledge. Any form of knowledge that does not conform to scientific standards is considered delusory and unworthy of consideration in the academic milieu. Through the colonial relationship between Africans and Westerners in particular, Western-driven scientific epistemology came to predominate the education and epistemological discourses in Africa and across the globe. Traditional African view and rationality regarding what constitute adequate knowledge became dislodged for those prescribed by Western powers.

Interestingly, Stephen Theron, in his work entitled *Africa, Philosophy and the Western Tradition*, contends that rationality and spirituality is common to humans but Westerners developed this

tradition first. Hence, it is their (Westerners) prerogative to share those riches with others (Theron, 1995, p. 16). As insisted by Theron, Westerners “having a variety of gifts” must help others in “the dissemination and appropriation of philosophical and scientific culture”. Thus, Africans, as well as other people with non-Western views, should strive to adopt and imbibe the prototypic Western way of life and scientific epistemological views. For Theron, Western rationality, views and judgments are supreme and universal.

Using their resources e.g. wealth, ideas with universalizing tendencies, and technologies, the West who wield power and influence over other people coerce them to accept their views and rationality as true. In accord with Dare Arowolo (2010) “colonialism, Slave Trade and missionaries are the bastions of Western civilization and culture in Africa” (p. 1). Intentionally and unintentionally, colonialism and Western civilization suppressed African ways of life and thought processes. Marais Rogas argues that the colonialists did not only find raw materials in lands, they also found raw materials in human beings who they could impose their structures and ideologies on. African ways of life and epistemological views became considered as archaic, obsolete, primitive, savage and unworthy of academic pursuit. Colonially imposed western systems gradually permeated the socio-economic and political aspects of Africa (Dennis, 2008).

In line with Martin, Odei Ajei (2007) argued that “Western science has portrayed itself as the only universally valid framework for the explanation and prediction of natural and social phenomena” (p. 112). Any form of knowledge that does not meet the standards of science is deemed irrational, nonsensical and unworthy of being referred to as knowledge at all. The consequence of this is the rejection and bastardization of everything African especially African epistemology.

Alluding to this bastardization Okere discusses the enormous consequences of the role of Christianity on African Traditional Religion (ATR). He argues that the “monolith” that was Christianity abolished the mainstay of ATR – its pantheon of gods, goddesses, deities and divinities – insisting that they were idolatrous and devilish. The ministers of ATR – its priests and diviners – were no more than sorcerers; what is worse, its rites, rituals, and feasts were characterized as stinking orgies. African medicine was but unorthodox and magic, and no more! Not even our languages – they were considered “cacophonies of unspeakable gibberish. In sum, all was one irredeemable *massa damna* (Okere, 1996, pp. 20-22). Accordingly, nothing African was good enough, and nothing good could be African. Without a history, culture and civilization, how human could the African be?

Thus, the most arresting impact of Africa’s negative history is, arguably, not the pillage and its various dimensions that the African had sustained. Rather it is its influence on the African psyche, the fact that the African was forced to perceive himself in the light of that negative history and, above all, came to accept that image as exquisitely his/hers. This is precisely what Ayittey (as cited in BBC News, 2007) considers the most detrimental effect of Africa’s history. He writes, “It was probably this, rather ... that wrenched the heart from the inner psyche of blacks and assailed the very cultural soul of their existence”. The humanity of the African was, thus, heavily contested. All through life, the African had it as his self-imposed task, to prove this humanity of his. This outlook has marked the African through and through.

Hence, there is the competition to outdo one another in imitating the European. The inferior African aspires to be like the European. In terms of language, the African prefers the colonial masters' language. To speak any African language is a sign of inferiority. But one is a 'been-to' once one speaks one of the languages of the erstwhile colonizers. In admiration of the European, the African suffers identity crisis. The European is a "Bekee," "Oyibo," "Agbala." Whatever is not from the West is deemed inferior; and this includes what is roundly African; what the West does not produce. The values of the West become assumed as African values, while the core African values become rejected in preference to West. The dehumanization so affects the African that he/she is led, even, to deny himself or herself. This is the horrible aspect of the African condition. Of his aspect, Owomoyela (1996) writes:

Africans have not been the only people overrun by rampaging Europeans but Africans are unique in their belief that their future lies in becoming, in thought, speech, and habit, like their erstwhile colonizers. (p. 37)

THE IMPACT OF EPISTEMICIDE ON AFRICAN DEVELOPMENT

Research and recounted experiences have ubiquitously revealed that colonialism brought about a rupture in every aspect of life in Africa, from the traditional political institutions and indigenous economic developments to socio-cultural norms and values, all for its own benefit.

Today, despite the fact that colonialism is no longer the order of the day, the West, through education, continues to insidiously determine the trajectory of African thought and action. The level of miseducation going on in Africa is nothing to write home about. Its influence is greatly felt on the African psyche - what some scholars refer to as mental colonization and colonization of the method of knowing. Little wonder, today there is a rising interest in unravelling and addressing epistemic injustice in the continent. Epistemic injustice is a form of injustice done to one in his/her capacity as a knower (Fricker, 2007, p. 1).

African knowledge was greatly disfigured with its contact with the West. Through the instrument of colonialism, Africans were made to perceive themselves and their heritage from a negative light. It is so endemic that Africans rather than take pride in themselves and their output would rather prefer anything and everything western. This has affected the level of creativity and originality in Africa. From the foregoing, one sees immediately that knowledge plays a crucial role in a nation's development. When we examine nations across the world, it is crystal clear that their level of development reflects the depth of knowledge they possess. Sadly, one may argue that it is the level of African knowledge that kept Africans in the situation of being underdeveloped. One may ask: how is this so?

EFFECTS OF KNOWLEDGE ON DEVELOPMENT

The position advanced in this work is that there is a relationship between development and the level of knowledge in every nation. In fact, the level of development in a nation is a manifestation of its level of knowledge. It is in line with this belief that, Socrates Eboh (2018) asserts that "The

way a nation interprets matter gives rise to its ideology or worldview” (p. 2). It is important for us to note that whatever interpretation of matter one does is always influenced by the conceptual framework (Hacker, 1996, p. 291) (ways of organising experiences) which the individual or a nation operates with. The arguments of the cultural conceptual scheme advocates the belief that to understand the thought of a culture, one must understand their categories of thought and the quite different forms of explanation and interpretation which they impose upon reality as they conceive it (Hacker, 1996, p. 291). It is this peculiarity in ways of approaching reality that establishes obvious difference in a people’s ideology. A nation’s ideology defines its values, its goals and its overall attitude to life. This ideology so to speak is its mission statement. Little wonder some people believe that the ideology of a nation charts its path to development (Eboh, 2018, p. 2). Thus, to understand the kind of development being pursued by any nation one needs to analyse her ideology. This is because the ideology of a people informs her concept of, and approach to development.

In addition, it is noteworthy to underscore that what a people hold to be true(truth) significantly determines the path of development they will follow. It follows that the knowledge people possess determines the development or aspects of development that will be given more attention in their society. Knowledge they say plays out in one’s action. One cannot act outside his knowledge jurisdiction; hence, one acts based on what he or she knows or have in mind. The problem is that when this knowledge is informed by parochial colonial contents, the people more or less view the former colonialist’s ideals as the only route to development. Little wonder some scholars has established that Africans are not the only nation colonised but she is the only nation with the unique belief that her future lies in becoming, in thought, speech, and habit, like her erstwhile colonizers (Eboh, 2018, p. 2).

THE WAY FORWARD

The relationship between knowledge and development in Africa is a complex and multifaceted issue that encompasses various challenges. However, what has been established so far from the data presented in this write up, is that Africa is having crisis of development. Thus, for holistic development to be achieved in Africa, several factors - both internal and external - must be addressed.

The need to exorcize African corpus of knowledge from undue influences of eurocentricism cannot be overemphasised. To achieve this, efforts need to be made not only to rescue the African academia from its Eurocentric bent but also to cure African academia from her outdated approach to issues. These have become an urgent project. It cannot be excused that after sixty-four years of independence, Nigeria academics and indeed most African nations are still following and imitating sheepishly their colonial educational heritage. It is in line with this ugly scenario that Budd L. Hall and Rajesh in their article regrets that university knowledge systems in nearly every part of the world are derivations of the Western canon, the knowledge system created some 500 to 550 years ago in Europe by white male scientists. The contemporary university is often characterized as working with colonized knowledge (Hall & Tandon, 2017, p. 9). There is no effort to develop home

grown curriculum that would solve the peculiar problems of the 21st century African man hence, the increasing calls for the decolonization of our universities.

In addition, there is need for Africans to liberate their thinking from the clutches of narrow mindedness and influences of Eurocentric ideologies orchestrated by epistemicide. It is still fashionable among Africans to think themselves as second rate humans. This to an extent is a manifestation of epistemic injustice. Epistemic injustice orchestrated by epistemicide which is destruction of alternative sources of knowledge has made it possible for Africans in spite of being politically free to still consider themselves and anything African as inferior to its European alternative. It is on this note that Asadu (2022) in his work, *Epistemic Freedom: The Foundations of Development for Africa*, provides the following analogy to establish the narrow and Eurocentric influence of most Africans. He sates, “Taking the economic sphere as a case in point, when a Nigerian is made to choose between Nigerian made product as against the Western product, an average Nigerian would choose the Western product over the Nigerian product not minding the fact that the said Nigerian made product may be of a higher quality to its Western counterpart. In fact, Africans regard anything Western not only as superior to its African equivalent but more as the standard.

Similarly, there is the need to transform African worldview. World view mirrors a people’s perception of reality which is informed by their belief. African worldview today is coloured with so many foreign ideologies. Today, it is still fashionable among Africans to see the West as their messiah with regards to development. Colonialism, through the instrumentality of Epistemicide, instilled in Africans the notion that for her to develop she needs to monkey western system. This was orchestrated by epistemicide which destroyed African knowledge and ideologies and imposed western models of development. This has hindered the ability of Africans to leverage their own rich heritage of knowledge and wisdom for sustainable development. Thus, Africans can hardly think from their own unique perspective. Hence, for African to develop the need to change the status quo cannot be overemphasised.

On the other hand, African nations should take interest in research and education. The fact that most academic projects end up in waste bin in most African institution Nigeria being a prime example, is a manifest show of high level of unseriousness and a clear indication of poor vision of most of her leaders. Most African leaders show little interest in the research findings produced by academic institutions. As a result, many ideas generated in universities across the continent are neither tested nor applied in society. This, to a great extent, creates disconnect between education and African reality. One may ask: what is the use of such education that is not applied to solve human problems? Today, many Africans pursue education solely for certificate acquisition rather than for knowledge and practical application.

Again, there is need for African nations to start electing their best brains into political position. In *The Republic*, Plato enumerated the qualities a leader should possess, insisting on the need for either philosophers to become rulers or for rulers to become philosophers. This is on the background that a philosopher is a lover of wisdom. The wisdom in this sense is not just academic wisdom but also practical wisdom. Most times the people holding executive political positions in very many African nations are the intellectually poor but rich individuals. Thus, the truism of Latin adage, *nemo dat quo non habet* (no one gives what he has not), is not farfetched in the political

corridors of power. The policies they champion lack depth, rigor and often times good ideologies are not properly implemented. Thus, there is need for African leaders to combine wisdom and power as advised by Plato in his *the Republic*. Most times we have leaders who wield enormous power yet lack wisdom.

CONCLUSION

The truth is that the reasons for Africa's underdevelopment cut across internal and external factors. It is largely on the knowledge base. Africa's underdevelopment hovers around African's mode of perception of reality. This too, to an extent, is a consequence of both internal and external factors. With the coming of colonial administration on African soil, African mode of knowing was grossly damaged to the tune that Africans now see themselves as second-rate citizens. On the other hand, some African nations pay less attention to research and the intellectual capacity of their political office holders. At any rate, if Africa must develop, she needs to eschew dependency inclinations and intentionally elect knowledgeable leaders who would prioritize infrastructures development vis-à-vis human development. The need to develop her human capital cannot be overlooked. History has shown that enhancing people's knowledge will always have a ripple effect in the level of development of any society. Thus, for Africa nations to develop, and make a mark in the comity of nations, widening her knowledge base and freeing same from narrow-mindedness and an over bearing influence of eurocentricism cannot be over emphasised.

REFERENCES

Africanews.com. (2022). The number of out of school children continues to decline. Retrieved from <https://www.africanews.com/2022/09/02/the-number-of-out-of-school-children-continues-to-decline-unesco/>

Ajei, M. O. (2007). *Africa's Development: The Imperatives of Indigenous Knowledge and Values* (Doctoral dissertation, University of South Africa).

Arowolo, D. (2010). The Effects of Western Civilization and Culture on Africa. *Afro Asian Journal of Social Sciences*, 1(1), 1-13.

Asadu, G. C. (2022). Epistemic Freedom: The Foundation of Development in Africa. *Thought and Action Journal of Philosophy*, 1(2), 108-117.

Copleston, F. (1963). *A History of Philosophy (Vol. 3): Late Mediaeval and Renaissance Philosophy (Pt II)*. New York: Doubleday and Company.

Eboh, S. (2018). Philosophical Perspectives on Theories of Development for African Economies. *International Multidisciplinary Scientific Conference on the Dialogue between Sciences & Arts, Religion & Education*, 2, 209-218.

Franz, E. Q. (1953). Scientism. In B. L. Marthaler (Ed.), *New Catholic Encyclopaedia* (2nd ed., p. 822). New York: The Catholic University of America Press.

- Fricker, M. (2007). *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*. Oxford University Press.
- Hall, B. L., & Tandon, R. (2017). Decolonization of Knowledge, Epistemicide, Participatory Research and Higher Education. *Research for All*, 1(1), 6-19.
- Hacker, P. M. S. (1996). On Davidson's Idea of a Conceptual Scheme. *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 46(184), 289-307.
- Kutor, S. K. (2014). Development and Underdevelopment of African Continent: The Blame Game and the Way Forward. *Research on Humanities and Social Sciences*, 4(7), 14-20.
- Mwinuka, A. N. A. (2015). *On the Classical Theories of Development: Modernisation and Dependency*. Pisa University Press.
- Okere, T. (1996). African culture: The Past and the Present as an Indivisible Whole. In *Identity and Change: Nigeria philosophical studies*, 1, 20-22.
- Owomoyela, O. (1996). *The African difference: Discourse on Africinity and the Relativity of Culture*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.
- Theron, S. (1995). *Africa, Philosophy and the Western Tradition: An Essay of Self-Understanding*. Berlin: Peter Lang.
- World Bank. (2024). *Global Economic Prospects, January 2024*. Washington, DC: World Bank. <https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/661f109500bf58fa36a4a46eeace6786-0050012024/original/GEP-Jan-2024.pdf>