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African Indigenous Epistemologies, Traditions, and Practices Before the Arrival of Europeans

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Cover Page Footnote

For her insightful feedback on earlier drafts of this work, Dr. Kay Ann Taylor has my sincere gratitude.

African Indigenous Epistemologies, Traditions, and Practices Before the Arrival of Europeans

Ernestina Wiafe

Abstract

Africa is the second-largest continent in the world (after Asia), making up around one-fifth of the planet's land area. There are many different cultural and linguistic groupings, because of how long humans have lived there. Due to this, Africans have a network of knowledge, beliefs, and traditions that they use to preserve, explain, and contextualize their ties with their culture and environment before the arrival of Europeans. Formal and informal transfers of indigenous knowledge took place between families, tribes, and communities through social contacts, oral traditions, ceremonial acts, and other activities. I will indicate, with all these indigenous systems and ways of life, the Europeans and other foreign settlers to the areas of Africa labeled the cherished traditional ways of teaching and learning of the native people as primitive and referred to the indigenous as uneducated, savage, and uncultured. It is therefore important to tell the story so that those who mismanage our affairs would not silence our criticism by pretending they have facts not available to the rest of us because, as Cinua Achebe stated, "Until the lions have their historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter."

Key words: Alkebulan, Africa, indigenous knowledge, indigenous traditions.

Introduction

Alkebulan, the original ancient name of the present African continent, translates as "mother of mankind," or according to other sources "the garden of Eden."¹ *Alkebulan* is an extremely old word and indigenous in origin. It is the second largest continent after Asia. There are many different cultural and linguistic groupings in Africa, because of how long humans have lived there.² Due to this, Africans have a network of knowledge, beliefs, and traditions that they used

¹ A. C. Diop, *The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality* (1974). Africa is the second-largest continent in the world (after Asia), making up around one-fifth of the planet's land area. The Atlantic Ocean borders the continent on the west, the Mediterranean Sea on the north, the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean on the east, and the waters of the Atlantic and Indian seas on the south. Africa's entire land area is roughly 11,724,000 square miles (30,365,000 square kilometers), and the length of the continent from north to south and east to west is 4,600 miles (7,400 kilometers). Al-Ghrn Point, close to Al-Abya Point (Cape Blanc), Tunisia, is its northernmost point. Cape Agulhas, South Africa, is its southernmost point. The furthest point east is Xaafuun (Hafun) Point, close to Cape Gwardafuy (Guardafui), Somalia. The furthest point west is Almadi Point (Pointe des Almadies), on Cape Verde (Cap Vert Up). Until the completion of the Suez Canal, Africa and Asia were connected in the northeast by the Sinai Peninsula. Contrary to popular belief, Africa's coastline, which is 18,950 miles (30,500 km), is shorter than that of Europe because there are fewer inlets and fewer bays and gulfs. Several islands off the coastlines of Africa are related to the continent. The most popular of these is Madagascar, one of the biggest islands in the world. The Seychelles, Socotra, and other smaller islands are located in the east; the Comoros, Mauritius, Réunion, and other smaller islands are located in the southeast; Ascension, St. Helena, and Tristan da Cunha are situated in the southwest; Cape Verde, the Bijagós Islands, Bioko, and So Tomé and Príncipe are situated in the west; and the Azores, the Madeira, and the Canary Islands are situated in the northwest.

² C. Finlayson, *World Regional Geography: Pre-colonial Sub-Saharan Africa*. (University of Mary, Washington, 2019).

to preserve, explain, and contextualize ties with their culture and environment before the arrival of Europeans. Although “knowledge” as factual information, “belief” as philosophical or religious ideas, and “tradition” as a practice were distinguished, I agree with other scholars that they were frequently used vaguely and indiscriminately to refer to what can be categorized as African Indigenous epistemologies.³

Before the first European settlers arrived in Africa, formal and informal transfers of indigenous knowledge took place between families, tribes, and communities through social contacts, oral traditions, ceremonial acts, and other activities. These included the development of specialized tools and technologies like flint-knapping, hide tanning, timekeeping systems, astronomical observations, symbolic and decorative modes of communication, farming and harvesting methods, hunting and gathering expertise, specialized understandings of local ecosystems, pottery-making, and creating medicinal concoctions.⁴

Indigenous people, in what is now known as Africa, had special ways of absorbing crucial information into cognition and behavior patterns that were tied to particular surroundings. This data consists of geographical, genealogical, biological, and other proof that show how individuals are related to other living things, as well as to supernatural forces, land, and water. Traditional performances, like songs, dance, ceremonies, and oral traditions, imparted both literal and figurative facts about these relationships with a common method of knowledge transmission. These traditions which were in place were trusted by skilled people and families, some of whom were experts who guarded esoteric knowledge.⁵

Most traditional beliefs among indigenous Africans were accepted as common knowledge by all members of a tribe, ethnic group, kinship system, families, and clans. Most of these can be discovered today through phenomenological experience and regular activities. Sentries such as tribal leaders, ritual practitioners, or traditional herbalists who had vested interests in extensive knowledge of herbs and maintained sites where they were located, had knowledge that was more specialized sorts of information. And since cultural coherence is guaranteed through continuous repetition, Sentries of oral traditions frequently carefully maintained the act of connecting portions of traditional narratives to specific events and localities as they passed on this knowledge even before the introduction of the European calendar.

Due to the system of inheritance and family life, the majority of African Indigenous knowledge is viewed as a hereditary system of learned awareness and competence that enables one to gain wisdom and create tools out of readily available materials as and when required.⁶ Among indigenous Ghanaian communities, these people were often selected when they are children and carefully trained by elders. Specifically, among the Akan and Ga tribes of the Ghanaian community, the Sentries usually identified as *Okomfo* and *Wulomo* respectively, mostly inherit (ed) this role within a family line. It was/is their responsibility to monitor and mediate human

³ B. Margaret, *Indigenous Knowledge and Traditional Knowledge*. (University of Pennsylvania, USA, 2014).

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ *ibid.*

interactions with the ancestral world.⁷ Among the Asantes of Kumasi in Ghana, specific categories of specialized, protected knowledge and kingship were/are entrusted only to select members of a family line. The Asante royal house, for instance, traces its line to the *Oyoko* clan, from the Abohyen Dynasty of Nana Twum and the Bretuo Dynasty of Osei Tutu Premsoo who formed the Empire of Ashanti in 1701 and was crowned Asantehene (King of all Asante). Indigenous African knowledge-keepers and traditional elders were afforded considerable respect in their communities, and that was the system of leadership before the arrival of the Europeans and present-day systems of government.

Ways of Transferring Knowledge

From the above, it is clear that formal and informal ways of knowledge acquisition were actively in existence in Africa before the arrival of the Europeans.⁸ Even though these were not taking place in a structured school and classroom setting, Africans in various parts of the continent were consistently involved in the business of transferring knowledge to the younger generation. Walter Rodney rightly acknowledges this when he emphasized, “The colonizers did not introduce education into Africa, they introduced a new set of formal educational institutions which partly supplemented and partly replaced those which were there before.”⁹

Antwi explained that the term “education” was used specifically to communicate instruction in European-type schools.¹⁰ Wiafe specifies those who have been to schools were described as educated and others, including those who learned some form of trade and apprenticeship such as hairdressing or auto-mechanic, were considered uneducated by the European standard of what constituted school, and this restricted the use and application of the concept of “education.”¹¹

Before the Europeans, knowledge acquisition, transmission, and application across the African continent differed across ethnic groups and tribes. Even though all the nations operated with various forms of economic, chieftaincy, and community systems, there was identifiable unity in the culture of learning and knowledge transmission among their traditions and practices.¹²

Traditional Systems and Practices

For instance, traditional informal education was designed to integrate young people into society. For grandparents, parents, and kinsmen, passing down the knowledge of taboos, history, music,

⁷ Smith & Wobst, 2005 as cited by B. Margaret, *Indigenous Knowledge and Traditional Knowledge* (University of Pennsylvania, USA, 2014).

⁸ W, Ernestina, *Formal Education in Gold Coast-Ghana: An Overview of Colonial Policies and Curriculum from 1919 to 1927* (Educational Considerations: Vol. 47: No. 2, 2021). <https://doi.org/10.4148/0146-9282.2252>

⁹ W. Rodney, *How Europe underdeveloped Africa* (Bogle L'Overture, London, 1972): 263.

¹⁰ Moses K. Antwi, *Education: Society and Development in Ghana* (Unimax Publishers Limited, 1992): 23. The statement that Africa had no history has been proven untrue. Research indicates African history was not written because there was nothing like reading and writing. Oral traditions through music, narratives, Ananse story, proverbs, crafts, reference to a significant natural occurrence, and celebrations of event, etc., preserved her history.

¹¹ Ernestina, Wiafe, *Western Formal Education in Gold Coast-Ghana: An Overview of Colonial Policies and Curriculum from 1919 to 1927* [Master's Thesis, Kansas State University, 2021.]. K-Rex

¹² *ibid.*

rhetoric, and most importantly, survival, to the next generation was a sacred trust. As Wiafe identified, the significance of traditional education in Ghana, for instance, did and continues to play a significant role in introducing all institutions, taboos, values, and functions to society. This education, which has been widely recognized and accepted by indigenous people, was intended to make the child a part of the totality of their social consciousness.¹³ The important cultural quality reflected in traditional practices, which were available to the younger generation and were extremely important, had solemnity attached to it, passing on from one generation to another.

Structured and Categorized Education

Like most of Africa, the Ghanaian traditional system featured a group of people, around the same age and grade, rather than being conducted in solitude.¹⁴ These folks were educated in stages as they grew and matured, with a focus on both the physical and spiritual aspects.

Abdou Moumouni notes that although parents took an active role in the education of their children, nuclear and extended family members considered it their primary responsibility to ensure their wards were well socialized according to the requirements of society.¹⁵ The family, instead of individuals, was the fundamental and most significant social unit for early Africans. It was even the family unit that owned and accessed land rather than individuals. Traditional education among the indigenous people by no exception relied extensively on community effort. The high importance the larger community attached to education makes the popular African saying “it takes a village to raise a child.”¹⁶ Among other things, this community assurance ensures that even children born to less affluent parents have an equal opportunity to overcome their economic disadvantage by receiving instruction from both the rich and the poor.

Knowledge of Care and Nurturing

Under the conventional educational system, a baby is permitted to latch on to the mother from birth for up to six years. The mother gives her newborn unconditional love and care, providing the solid foundation needed to raise a resilient, but kind adult. Mothers in Africa are recognized for their unrelenting commitment to the health and welfare of their children, exerting much effort to ensure that they are strong, healthy, and well-behaved.¹⁷

The boy child completely weans off of his mother's care and attention around the age of six, with the father taking on the majority of the responsibility for his schooling. The girl child is still primarily in her mother's custody. At this point, the youngster is gradually assimilated into adult society and frequently requested to carry out various tasks for adults in the neighborhood. The child plays games and acts out roles, which among other things helps him grow cognitively, psychologically, and socially.

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ Moumouni Abdou, *Education in Africa* (Praeger, New York, 1986): 15.

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ Caracciolo, D., and Mungai, A.M, *In the Spirit of Ubuntu: Stories of Teaching and Research* (Rotterdam, The Netherlands, 2009)

¹⁷ *ibid.*

Traditionally, informal education as provided by the indigenous people is not disconnected from life itself; it emphasized the practical day-to-day happenings of life with little abstract learning and procedures.¹⁸ In this setting, the basic foundation of societal values, knowledge, and culture are transmitted to the child, and this makes education effective because it is intertwined with life activities in the community.¹⁹ For instance, the little girl quickly learns how to be both a competent housekeeper and a savvy trader, independent of her mother, by helping the mother to make specific foods and traveling to the market to buy and sell. The male child, who initially helps his father farm the family's plot of land and goes hunting grass cutters and other small animals, quickly learns how to grow a vast plot of land on his own and how to hunt for larger game. Emphasizing this, Moumouni states, "It is by accomplishing productive tasks that the child and adolescent familiarize themselves with adult jobs and are initiated into the different social aspects of their future lives."²⁰ Therefore, education in Ghana in the past involved the child being a part of a strong and frequently complicated relationship that was intended to pass on information by members of his community.

Rhetoric and Communication Skills

Abraham, commenting on the practical nature of the traditional education system, referred to the elders of the various ethnic groups of Ghana, Nigeria, and South Africa as renowned for being custodians of knowledge and wisdom, making them the indispensable chief architects in forming the minds of the younger generation. Buttressing his assertion, Abraham cites the popular Akan proverb, "The words of one's elders are greater than amulet to show that virtue was inculcated more through exercise than through precept."²¹

In various parts of Africa, diverse ethnic and tribal communities retained their unique interpretations of traditional wisdom. While these skills may have certain aspects in common, they do not make up a single (or straightforward) toolbox. Proverbs commonly used in communication, for example, are deep philosophical truths compressed in one single statement. The unwritten nature of indigenous African proverbs made them expedient in ancient times and present days, such that from a single proverb, a whole textbook of philosophical musings could be written if the days were in a society where writing was extensively utilized. Proverbs are widely used in all African communities, and they share many common themes across the continent. The Yoruba ethnic group in Nigeria, for example, uses the proverb, "When an egg drops into an earthen pot, it is the pot that breaks." So also, the Akan ethnic group of Ghana harbors similar sentiments when they say, "The lizard which dropped from the top of the coconut tree, nodded his head up and down, and asked the earth if it felt dizzy."²²

The sense of unity and belonging among the African communities is expressed in various forms and portrayed through proverbs such as, "A man who calls his kinsmen to a feast does not do so to save them from starving. They all have food in their own homes. When we gather together in

¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁹ *ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ W. Abraham, *The mind of Africa* (University of Chicago, 1969), 70.

²² *ibid.*

the moonlit village ground it is not because of the moon. Every man can see it in his compound. We come together because it is good for kinsmen to do so.” This communicates and emphasizes the need for unity and oneness among families, clans, and communities.

The Kenyan proverb, “Try this bracelet: if it fits you, you wear it; but if it hurts you, throw it away, no matter how shiny,” was used to teach the importance of making the rightful decision and not just accepting anything that is offered or available even when it may have negative consequences.

Folklore Knowledge and Entertainment

The use of Folklore was an important part of indigenous Ghanaian education, because it transcends the entertainment realm and held/holds deep and stimulating philosophical truths.²³ Across the various ethnic groups, the education of the child involved hours of sitting under the moonlight, and listening to folklore told by the elders in the compound. These stories were undoubtedly both recreational and educative, cutting across disciplines, including philosophy, literature, law, psychology, music, drama, arts, and sociology to mention a few. Some of the stories were designed to emphasize the superiority of brilliance over steadiness. For example, the African Tortoise won his race against the Hare not by toiling upward in the night while his companion slept, but by planting in the shrubs along the route several tortoises like him, the last of whom stirred himself to the tape at a suitable time.²⁴

Adolescence Care and Transitions into Adulthood

Some formal approaches to education in the traditional setting began when the child approached puberty. Puberty rites present an opportunity for an adolescent young boy or girl to be fully recognized as an adult in society.²⁵ This stage, which is typically characterized by physical growth and maturity as well as emotional changes in youngsters, is regarded as critical in our communities. This is the time young adults are intensively taken through weeks of training under an instructor to be reminded of their cultural values and taught their roles as young adults. It is through this medium that the girls are given highlights of the traditional ideals of womanhood. They are given the right to marry, but still, have to be shaped to become good wives. Boys, on the other hand, are encouraged to step up and be responsible for their families.

In general, the adolescent child is prepared in matters of marriage, sexual life, childbearing, and family responsibilities. Interestingly, male puberty rites in Ghana are not as common as in Zambia’s *Mukanda*. South African females undergo *Umemulo* ceremonies like their female counterparts in Ghana. For example, ethnic groups such as Akan and Krobos, from southern, eastern, and Ashanti regions, who perform the *Bragoro* and *Dipo* rites respectively, have only girls undergoing this ceremony.²⁶ This is how indigenous tradition taught and admonished young

²³ *ibid.*

²⁴ *ibid.*

²⁵ Ndetei Chris, Puberty Rites in Ghana-types and significance, (blog), May 8, 2018. <https://yen.com.gh/110451-puberty-rites-ghana-types-significance.html>

²⁶ Even though these practices go on in some communities today, it is highly modernized, limiting the level of body exposure and the compulsion of marrying a man whose eyes and seeks a girl’s hand in marriage. For convenience

females' chastity and prevention of teenage pregnancies. However, puberty rites in Northern Ghana include both girls and boys. It is argued that these rites are not regular for boys because, unlike girls, the lads are taught from a very young age how to be brave and responsible. For instance, in the Sisaala tribe in the upper west region of Ghana, boys always walk in the company of men. They are taught every aspect of male responsibility except for sex, which comes later on when they are fully matured.

Vocational/Technical Skills and Training

The effectiveness of traditional education adequately supplied the blacksmith, weavers, fishermen, farmers, and other artisans needed to stimulate the economy of the various communities. Through apprenticeship, family arts and occupations were taught and transferred to younger members. So, in Ghana today, specific communities, tribes, and ethnic groups are noted for their specialty in various vocations. As a member of the Ghanaian community, we have come to accept the Ewe tribe for woodwork, the Fantes for creative arts and delicious delicacies, and the Kwahu and Asante people for business ventures. It is important to also emphasize that the indigenous people found and created their occupation and source of livelihood based on their community resources. As a result, people along the coast were fishermen who taught the act of fishing to members of their community, while those from Bonwire—a suburb of the Asante region and its environs—have continued to teach the art of weaving from one generation to the other.²⁷

Leadership Acts and Structures

Politically, socially, and culturally, the successes of the indigenous people under the leadership of chiefs, sub-chiefs, queen mothers, heads of clans, and families, demonstrate the effectiveness of the traditional knowledge, educational structure, and system. Yaa Asantewaa, an Asante queen mother of blessed memory, was one we can describe as an intellectual, politician, human rights

and to attract participation, families with female children are encouraged to allow them to undergo this rite at a very tender age. The Bragoro, which is also referred to as Brapue, is conducted after a girl's first menstruation. Typically, it's the girl's mother who announces the news as she prepares for the ceremony. A girl who is set to be initiated is called Sakyima or Brani. Before the rite takes place there is some spiritual and material preparation that has to be conducted. The spiritual arrangement of the event involves finding out if the girl's soul, locally known as 'kra,' conforms with the activities of the events. As for material preparation, it usually requires things like food items, money, and chicken among other things. While still in the preparation mode, the girl to be initiated is presented to the 'queen mother' who simply carries out an inspection to check if she is pregnant or not. Virginity is regarded as purity in the community and hence it is highly valued. Girls who happened to be 'impure' before initiation used to be cast out alongside the man who impregnated her. But then again, things have so far changed as special rituals are now conducted to make a girl 'pure' again—even after losing virginity. Unlike the Akan's, the puberty rite among the Krobo people takes place in between the months of April to May after announcements are made in February for any parent with a daughter at puberty age to bring her forth and let them be 'transformed' into Krobo woman. During this period, the girls are dressed in a special way to show that they are initiates. They have food restrictions and are only allowed to drink water from a well. They are taught the Klama dance, undergo a ritual bath, and the crux of the rite is when the girls are made to sit on a stone which is believed determines virginity. Any girl who is found not to be a virgin at the time of the rites used to be ostracized in the past and was treated as an outcast. Nowadays, a set of purification rituals are performed for such a girl. On the last day of the rites, the girls are dressed up in colorful Kente cloth (a traditional cloth in Ghana) and adorned with a lot of beads on their neck, arms, and waist. A durbar is held during which the girls perform the Klama dance amidst singing and in the presence of onlookers.

²⁷ *ibid.*

activist, Queen, and war leader. Yaa Asantewaa became famous for single-handedly commanding the Ashanti Kings in the War of the Golden Stool²⁸ against British colonial rule to defend and protect the sovereign independence of the Golden Stool.²⁹ This was the epitome of leadership that commanded much authority and respect among her people and who is a symbolic figure studied throughout the world. Emperor Menelik's leadership, that made Ethiopia succeed in resisting European attempts to colonize all of Ethiopia, is another that cannot be overlooked. Ethiopia won a decisive victory over Italy at the Battle of Adowa, in December 1895.

Conclusion

As a way to wrap up, I will indicate, with all these indigenous systems and ways of life, the Europeans, and other foreign settlers to the areas of Africa labeled the native people's cherished traditional ways of teaching and learning as primitive and referred to the indigenous as uneducated, savage, and uncultured. Hence, their thought for and subsequent adoption of western formal education systems and practices in Africa was thus justified in their minds.³⁰ The 1884 Berlin Conference's segmentation of the continent allowed for European colonization and resource exploitation for their domestic industries. This led to the artificial division of Africans along present-day physical traits and lines.

Even though many traditional knowledge topics have been identified and documented through anthropological and ethnohistorical research, others remain unknown. It is therefore important to tell the story so that those who mismanage our affairs would not silence our criticism by pretending they have facts not available to the rest of us. As Chinua Achebe said, "Until the lions have their historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter."³¹

²⁸ The Asante territory, the largest area which was yet to be occupied by the British was taken over after the British Empire conquered the Asante Empire in the final Anglo-Asante Wars. The final war, a rebellion called the War of the Golden Stool, took place from March through September 1900. That conflict began when British representative, Sir Frederick Mitchell Hodgson, sat on the Golden Stool. The Stool, which was understood by the Ashanti to be the symbol of national unity, was not a throne. When Hodgson's act became known, Yaa Asantewaa, the Queen Mother of the Asantahene, led the rebellion, which resulted in the death of 1,000 British and Allied soldiers and 2,000 Ashanti. Both totals were higher than the deaths from all previous wars combined. The British eventually subdued the rebellion and sent Asantewaa into exile in the Seychelles. From that point, the British controlled the entire Gold Coast until Ghana became independent in 1957.

²⁹ The Golden Stool is a sacred symbol of the Ashanti Kingdom of Ghana believed to possess the sunsum (soul) of the Ashanti people. Natives call it, Sika Dwa Kofi. This stool has been the symbol of power in Ashanti Kingdom since the 17th century.

³⁰ *ibid.*

³¹ "History of Mankind Quotes," *Goodreads Online*. Chinua Achebe: <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/tag/history-of-mankind>

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