

Expressions of  
Indigenous and Local  
Knowledge in Africa  
and its Diaspora



# Expressions of Indigenous and Local Knowledge in Africa and its Diaspora

Edited by

Karim Traore, Mobolanle Sotunsa  
and Akinloye Ojo

Cambridge  
Scholars  
Publishing



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This book first published 2016

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-4438-9065-0

ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-9065-6

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## CHAPTER ONE

# EXPRESSIONS OF INDIGENOUS AND LOCAL KNOWLEDGE IN AFRICA AND ITS DIASPORA: AN INTRODUCTORY PERSPECTIVE

AKINLOYE OJO, MOBOLANLE SOTUNSA  
AND KARIM TRAORE

### **Introduction**

*Expressions of Indigenous and Local Knowledge in Africa and its Diaspora* is a book of critical discourses on Africa and the various configurations of its expression in folklore, literature, music, languages, and philosophy. The focus of the selected works is on the African continent in terms of its historical contexts and contemporary times. The preservation of the unique identity of African Indigenous and Local Knowledge is confronted by a number of challenges within the increasingly globalized and Westernized world. This collection of works is intended to stimulate and document ongoing scholarly discussion on the paradoxical dynamics of preserving this identity. Our sincere hope is that the following chapters will consequently enhance the relevance of African Indigenous and Local Knowledge. Significantly, the prominent term in the title of this collection, *expressions*, entails making known or manifestation. The papers in these collections are therefore written and selected to serve the purpose of making known some of the elements of indigenous and local knowledge as well as the practices that these elements necessitate both historically and contemporarily in the African situation.

This book is our articulation of the representation of knowledge and values which are lodged in the diverse knowledge systems in Africa and which are constantly expressed in both local and global spaces. The project to assemble the collected works emanated from the International Conference on Africa and Its Diaspora that was hosted by the African

Studies Institute (ASI) with the same theme at the University of Georgia (UGA) in November 2012. The conference provided a useful forum for the intensive exchange of ideas between scholars, researchers and technocrats from across the world working in diverse academic fields. One of the major realizations from the conversations at the conference was that indigenous and local knowledge, in our case, African Indigenous knowledge is often presented and discussed in opposition to Western '*scientific*' knowledge. The common notion in popular and, unfortunately, some technical discourse, is the opposition between the '*unproven traditional*' and the '*verified modern*' knowledge systems. This skewed representation therefore tends to present African Indigenous knowledge systems as being devoid of any methodical basis and dominated by mere emotions and speculations based on 'nature and culture'. The prejudicial assessment has ensured that Western epistemological systems are internationally recognized and supported while African epistemological systems are denigrated, discouraged or simply ignored, even on the African continent.

There are fundamentally different views on knowledge and its construction and value on the African continent and in other parts of the world, particularly the West. The majority of the African continent have profoundly different views of the world and possess dissimilar approaches to constructing knowledge to the West. It is the discounting of this essential variance that has led to the defective presentation of a disingenuous binary opposition, in terms of methodical standards, which the conference identified. The flawed perception of a non-methodical African indigenous knowledge does not take into account the multifaceted characteristics of the different African Indigenous knowledge systems. It also does not consider the delineation of indigenous knowledge, particularly the wide spectrum of included knowledge, its local essence, culture driven acquisition, generational acclimatization and its educational values within its contained society.

It is no longer contentious to note that the basic component of any society's intellectual system is the indigenous knowledge of the people in the society, including: the skills possessed by the people; their experiences across the society; and the social insights over the generations that have all been brought to bear on the maintenance, survival and improvement of the society. As noted by the World Bank at the height of the globalization movement, 'in the emerging global knowledge economy a country's ability to build and mobilize knowledge capital, is equally essential for sustainable development as the availability of physical and financial capital.' Fasokun, Katahoire, & Oduaran (2005), in addressing the psychology of adult learning on the African continent, describe indigenous

knowledge as that which ‘describes local or community knowledge that is commonly generated and transmitted over a period of time in a geographic and historic space. This kind of knowledge is generated by local people in response to the different physiological, agricultural, ecological, socio-economic, cultural and political challenges they face.’ (p. 61) Indigenous knowledge is established and constantly adapted to fit the knowledge possessors’ changing environments. It is a knowledge system that is closely interwoven with the society’s cultural values and transmitted over generations. Indigenous knowledge is also the community’s social capital and their main asset to invest in the struggle for survival, to produce food, to provide for shelter or to achieve control of their own lives.

### **Indigenous Knowledge Demarcated**

Indigenous knowledge is the knowledge construction to be found in a society and which is preserved by past generations and considered to be intrinsic to the life and identity of the community and therefore passed on to each succeeding generation. This knowledge is the result of the society’s experiential process and has undergone extensive testing and incessant experimentation within the environment in which the society has been surviving historically. This ensures that indigenous knowledge is indeed tried and true knowledge based on the life experiences of multiple generations. The knowledge and this process of continuous testing is not documented but highly trusted as it has sustained the society for generations. As noted by von Kotze (2002), this knowledge is functional and can be considered the ‘working knowledge’ of the society, such as the knowledge of surviving within the current context of the community in which one finds oneself. This ‘working knowledge’, such as how to negotiate the community’s political structure can be “defined in terms of livelihood activities, may be knowledge about changes in policies, about who is who in the hierarchy of decision makers and who can grant access to resources and services, about how trees grown for cash impact the soil and water table, and how to draw on old peoples knowledge of local herbs and roots in order to cure ailments.” (p. 237)

The above descriptions of indigenous knowledge point to the contextualization of the knowledge being described. In the case of African Indigenous knowledge, there is an African emphasis with focus on the local context producing the knowledge since no two contexts will be identical. As Semali (1999) notes, “for Africans, indigenous knowledge is about what local people know and do, and what they have known and done for generations—practices that developed through trial and error and

proved flexible enough to cope with change. The ability to use community knowledge so produced ... forms important literacy skills that are critical to the survival of indigenous peoples.” (p. 95). It must, however, be noted that African Indigenous knowledge is more than traditional knowledge. While it is rooted in the past, it continues to grow and develop in the present as it adjusts to ever changing contexts. Essentially, African indigenous knowledge is both long-established knowledge as well as contemporary knowledge. This is especially true because it is knowledge that is living and inextricably linked to daily life as it is continually reassessed, rediscovered and remade in terms of changing conditions. And since it touches on all that the people know and do, it can be characterized as holistic knowledge (Maurial, 1999; Mwadime, 1999; Semali, 1999; Von Kotze, 2002; Nsamenang, 2004).

Succinctly, indigenous knowledge is local people’s knowledge that is socially constructed by a community of people in a specific context through ongoing oral conversations between community members both past and present. Construction and reconstruction of this knowledge is dynamic as communities adapt the body of knowledge passed on to them from former generations to ever-changing circumstances. Community survival and identity are intrinsic to knowing, living by and passing on this knowledge—traditional but tailored to contemporary life (Beckloff, 2009). Indigenous knowledge focuses on the ways of knowing, seeing and thinking that belong to various African societies and cultures which involve innovation and experimentation, producing knowledge that is unique, distinctive and relevant in significant ways to the existence, advancement and development of the societies and the world at large.

## **Expressions of Indigenous and Local Knowledge**

It is the realization of the oft ignored value and importance of indigenous knowledge within African societies that motivated this collection of papers. It is also the recognition that the unfortunate binary opposition between Western knowledge systems and indigenous African knowledge systems has been costly for most Africans and African societies as multiple generations of Africans have lost valuable indigenous knowledge and, unfortunately, are not fully comfortable within the Western knowledge systems operating in most of contemporary Africa. It therefore becomes extremely critical for Africans to develop an alternative approach that values and obstinately clutches onto indigenous knowledge while encouraging a realistic evaluation of new knowledge and its appropriate incorporation. A productive method of developing such an

alternate approach is the consideration of the various expressions of indigenous and local knowledge within different African societies. This is the purpose of the fourteen chapters in this work. They ruminate upon issues related to African indigenous knowledge systems, especially as related to: African oral traditions; indigenous African languages' pedagogy and use; ideal citizenship and social responsibility; musicology; and indigenous knowledge documentation, among other issues.

In the next chapter, the first of the collection, Tanure Ojaide blazes the trail and interrogates the Eurocentric appropriation of knowledge as the sole property of the West. As the professor of Africana Studies in the Africana department at University of North Carolina at Charlotte noted, the West perceives other races, particularly the African as the 'other' in a bid to establish the primacy of their understanding. Ojaide's paper foregrounds African knowledge in terms of information, experience, education and awareness, particularly as these are embodied in African civilization as expressed in its folklore. The critic illustrates the various articulations of African indigenous knowledge as embedded in proverbs, riddles, folktales, epics, myth, music, dance and poetic performances, philosophy religion and even arts, crafts and sciences. He establishes the relationship between the indigenous knowledge and the diasporic traditions and challenges Africans in the diaspora to visualize these expressions more.

In chapter three, Harrison Adeniyi laments the dwindling fortunes of African language study in Africa, especially in Nigeria as he contrasts this unfortunate trend with the burgeoning of African language programs in the diaspora where numerous institutions have demonstrated exceptional commitment to the teaching and learning of different African languages, complementing the acquisition with study abroad programs. The associate professor in the department of African Languages, Literatures, and Communication Arts at the Lagos State University maps the history of the emergence of African language study abroad programs in the United States and beyond. He encourages more intense formal study of African languages in Africa and the implementation of the language policies in the Nigerian constitution especially. Proceeding with the perspective of expressions of African indigenous knowledge in the fourth chapter, Solomon Makinde highlights the significance of scientific and technological advancements and breakthroughs which are embedded in the culture and indigenous knowledge of Africa. The associate professor in the department of Language Arts and Social Science Education in the faculty of Education at the Lagos State University outlines the creativity and the linguistic resources of Africans to develop and invent indigenous

technologies expressed in textile, smiting, sculpture, oil productions among others. He argues for greater promotion of African languages to transmit the gains of modern technological cultures.

In the fifth chapter, Omawumi Makinde and Oludare Shorunke explore ways of achieving sustainable development in Nigeria by harnessing the untapped benefits embedded in the indigenous knowledge systems. The two scholars, a senior librarian in the Fatiu Ademola Akesode Library at the Lagos State University and a librarian at Ondo State University of Science and Technology, investigate the place of the library in exploiting values of indigenous knowledge, particularly for the attainment of sustainable development in an African country as culturally and linguistically diverse as Nigeria. In particular, they discuss the prospects and challenges for libraries in Nigeria in documentation and communication of indigenous knowledge. Chapter six continues within the vein of recognizing the value of African indigenous knowledge to economic and social development. In the chapter, Ayo Ayodele engages with the Yoruba global discursive practices encapsulated in the *omoluwabi* concept. The notion of *omoluwabi*, amongst the Yoruba people, transcends language, moral, philosophical, religious and social boundaries to produce principles and ethics of communication. As the senior lecturer in the department of English at the Lagos State University reveals, this transcending has consequences in socialization and conversational social encounters amongst the people in the larger society. Ayodele highlights various maxims that have implications for civility and interaction beyond Africa.

Arguably, science proceeds from arts; better still, arts and science exists in a symbiotic relationship. This fact is demonstrated in chapter seven by Stephanie Byrd's investigation of the application of mathematical knowledge to the craft of producing the beaded crown worn by the Yoruba *Obas* or Kings. The work by the graduate student at the Georgia State University validates the intermarriage of arts and science with concrete examples of the various designs of the beaded crowns. The chapter further addresses the mathematical ideas prevalent in the design and construction of the Yoruba crown and how these can inform the teaching and learning of mathematics in Africa. In the following chapter (Chapter Eight), Dayo Akanmu situates the use of new idioms and idiomatic expressions among bus conductors in Lagos. The new coinages have stylistic attributes and great communicative potentials even though the language use is colloquial. Akanmu, a senior lecturer in the school of languages at Adeniran Ogunsanya College of Education further explores their use of neologism, compounding, normalization, borrowing, and phonaesthetic coining as forms of expressions and creativity of language.

In chapter nine, Akinloye Ojo works to concisely contribute to the ongoing discussions on African mother tongues and their vital roles in African literatures. The associate professor in the Comparative Literature department and the ASI at UGA illustrates his contribution to the collection with the consideration of the exceptional use of the Yoruba language, particularly proverbs, in the poetry of Akinwumi Isola. Through this consideration, Ojo is able to exemplify the importance of indigenous African languages and the value of indigenous knowledge systems, particularly as contained in proverbs (which he noted as the nuggets of African indigenous knowledge systems), to an African writer. Focusing on another African writer, Wole Soyinka, and his work, *Death and the King's Horseman*, Ogunfeyimi Adeleke in chapter ten traces Soyinka's deliberate postmodernist experiment and his appropriation of the resourcefulness of indigenous language to create what Ogunfeyimi, an assistant lecturer at Samuel Adegboyega University, labels as *ambiforms* or *ambigenres* in drama bordering on generating philosophical debates.

Taking a slightly different approach, Karim Traore in chapter eleven focuses on the value of storytelling amongst the Mande people of West Africa and its contribution to the growth and transmission of indigenous knowledge in the society. Against the backdrop of the limited engagement of oral tales in the Western world, the associate professor in the Comparative Literature department and the ASI at UGA underscores the importance of storytelling as an activity punctuating communal existence and as a significant structuring factor of the community's social life. In the chapter, Traore analyses the Mande story of the *Three Sons* and demonstrates the uses of tales for discourse and purposeful commentaries, including the subversion of the usual social order.

Music is at the heart of expressions, and in chapter twelve, AdeOluwa Okunade explores the contextualization of African musical arts in the diaspora tracing the fall of African music and its eventual rise. The critic, a senior lecturer in the department of Music at the University of Port Harcourt, Port Harcourt, asserts that the resurrection of African music can be seen in the renaissance of its religions in the diaspora, the revival of its education in the review of the African curricular especially in ethnomusicology. The paradoxical rise and fall of African music is traceable to the Atlantic slave trade and the Euro-Christian missionary activities. In contemporary times, African music in the diaspora has continually played a great role in the reconstruction of African history. In a similar vein, Kamimi Comfort Gemade examines the role of music in the phenomenal growth of churches in Nigeria, in chapter thirteen. In the chapter, the lecturer in the department of Religion and Philosophy at the

Benue State University vividly demonstrates that the indigenization of church music as opposed to the uncritical transposition of European music traditions is responsible for the phenomenal growth of the new Christian religious movements in Nigeria.

In the penultimate chapter, Mobolanle Sotunsa foregrounds the esoteric expressions of knowledge found in the Yoruba talking drum. This foregrounding is built on the premise of the Yoruba proverb "*lowe lowe la n lulu agidigbo, ologbon lon jo, omoran lo n mo.*" This can be translated as *the ogidigbo drum is beaten in proverbs; only the wise can weave its dance; only the knowledgeable can decode its meaning.* Sotunsa, a professor in the department of Languages and Literary Studies in the School of Education and Humanities at Babcock University embarks on an aesthetic valuation of drum poetry performances, analyses the language and performance context of the drum sounds which transcends the oral media to the aural and acoustic media and creates greater possibilities of expressions beyond the limits of language expressions.

Finally, in the concluding chapter fifteen, Adetunji Edun (et. al) engages a more practical discussion of how beneficiaries of indigenous African knowledge systems, now resident in the diaspora, can contribute to the development of infrastructure in modern Africa. The chapter is a fitting concrete and applied chapter for the collection as it examines the African diaspora's contribution to sustainable infrastructural development in Africa. Edun, a lecturer in the Department of Economics in the Faculty of Social Sciences at the Lagos State University and his three colleagues: Olaleye Samuel Olasode, a senior lecturer in the Department of Economics in the Faculty of Social Sciences at the Lagos State University; Akinde Jubril Olatunbosun, an assistant research fellow in the Center for Planning Studies in the Faculty of Social Sciences at the Lagos State University; and Jonathan Olusegun Adedokun, a lecturer in the department of Public Administration in the Faculty of Communication & Management Sciences at the Polytechnic, Ibadan; propose a model of unified framework where both foreign investment and public infrastructural are endogenous.

Ultimately, this collection provides for the expression of the information and principles which are lodged in the different knowledge systems discussed from Africa, particularly West Africa. It becomes clear from the collected works that this information and these principles are primarily expressed within the daily lives of the people within their local societies. It also becomes clear that there is a secondary and more global level at which the expression of this knowledge and these values are perceived. It is hoped that the collection will go a long way toward correcting the skewed representation of African Local and Indigenous

Knowledge systems as merely ‘unproven traditions’ devoid of any methodical basis and dominated by mere emotions and speculations based on ‘nature and culture’.

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# CHAPTER TWO

## INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE AND ITS EXPRESSION IN THE FOLKLORE OF AFRICA AND THE AFRICAN DIASPORA

TANURE OJAIDE

### **Introduction**

Knowledge has often been racialized by Europeans who want to claim it as only theirs. From the time the West started to see Africans and their descendants as the ‘Other’, Africa has been depicted as a tabula rasa, which connotes that Africans have no civilization or imagination that carries any knowledge. The concept of the ‘Other’ was perpetrated in imperialist and colonial discourses. In the binaries created by Westerners, they (Westerners) had knowledge and Africans were ignorant - the West superior and Africa inferior (Jarosz 1992; Bhabha 1994). While Africa and the other major new homes of African descendants in the Diaspora, especially the Caribbean region and Latin America, are postcolonial, Black America cannot be strictly categorized as such, though in the First World it has been described as “postcolonial” because of its conditions similar to those of other postcolonial societies (Macleod 1997). People of African descent thus generally share similar conditions in their various homes and are perceived by the West as lacking knowledge.

Africa-originated knowledge is often ignored or attributed to outsiders. Ancient Egyptian achievements are rarely seen as pre-Islamic and acknowledged as African. Similarly, Great Zimbabwe is claimed by those who deny African knowledge to have derived its civilization and architecture from Arabs, as the great Benin bronze casting through the lost wax process was attributed to Portuguese influence. In art, Europeans place painting as High Art and sculpture, which Africans are so adept at and considered by Frank Willet to be their greatest cultural contribution to the world, as Low Art. In the so-called New World, Blacks in America

invented things whose patents were stolen by their white masters who claimed those inventions as theirs. As stated by Mario Azevedo, relying on Harry A. Ploski and James Williams in their edited *Negro Almanac* (1989 edition), “in 1832, a slave, Augustus Jackson of Philadelphia, was credited with inventing the process of making ice cream but his invention was not patented.” (352) Today, though African-Americans hold over 3,000 patents, they are not as celebrated for their knowledge and ingenuity as Caucasian inventors.

The idea of indigenous knowledge of Africa and the African Diaspora is thus a way of countering Western hegemonic thinking and arrogance about their self-perceived monopoly on knowledge. As will be seen in the following discussion, knowledge should not be seen in the limited view of being material and technological alone; rather knowledge can be not only immaterial but also manifest in so many other ways, and Africans and their descendants in the Diaspora have an abundance of indigenous and local knowledge.

Knowledge in this study will be taken in its broadest possible meaning. It has to do with the information gained through experience or education. It is the beliefs of a people arising from practical knowledge. According to Walter Brugger and Kenneth Baker, knowledge has to do with imagination, insight, experience, judgment, thinking, and knowing. To them, “the theory of knowledge is the philosophical investigation of our mind’s *capacity for truth*.” (216) Put simply, knowledge is “awareness or familiarity gained from experience of a fact or situation” (McKean 938). Key to the meaning of “knowledge” in this study are words like “information”, “experience”, “education”, and “awareness”. This presentation discusses both what can be considered the Africana aspect of what UNESCO describes as “the intangible heritage” of humanity and Thomas Aquinas speaks of as “immateriality” of knowledge (Brugger 212) as well as other material and technological aspects. Indigenous knowledge, therefore, implies the information gained from indigenous sources.

The indigenous knowledge of Africa and the African Diaspora needs to be exposed not only to affirm faith in but also to give authority to an Africa-centered civilization. In a recent book, *There Was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra*, Chinua Achebe, the renowned Nigerian writer, affirms that “we always knew of the beauty of our culture” as he describes an aspect of Igbo civilization in Nnokwa whose “townsfolk were particularly noted for their role in the transmission of the knowledge of Nsibidi, an ancient writing first invented by the Ejagham (Ekoi) people of southeastern Nigeria, and then adopted and used widely by their close neighbors—the Igbo, Efik, Anang, and Ibibio.” (192) Achebe goes on to

deduce from this that “the very existence of this alphabet dating back to the 1700s without any Latin or Arabic antecedent, is a rebuke to all those who have claimed over the centuries that Africa has no history, no writing, and no civilization!” (192) Contemporary continental and Diaspora Africans need to research into the indigenous knowledge of their forebears and the living to showcase it beside other contributions to knowledge in a universal assembly in the manner the great Senegalese poet and president, Leopold Sedar Senghor, conceptualized in *Négritude*.

While Western peoples flaunt their knowledge in books that are archived in libraries or other places, the indigenous knowledge of black peoples or peoples of African descent is generally archived in their oral traditions or other aspects of their folklore. This multidisciplinary knowledge is saved in oral texts in often invisible alphabets in different indigenous languages in Africa and the African Diaspora. In the case of the Diaspora, the languages could be English, French, Portuguese, Spanish, or Dutch, but they carry subtexts that distinguish them as African Diaspora expressions. African indigenous knowledge, therefore, is abundant and multidisciplinary. It ranges from proverbs, folktales and other oral narratives to epics, chants, and other poetic forms to medicinal and spiritual cures. African and African Diaspora indigenous knowledge is archived in the folklore whose oral traditions carry profound thoughts and practices.

This study is necessary because there is paucity of materials in the field to draw from about the indigenous knowledge of continental and Diaspora Africans. There have been numerous studies of oral traditions of Africa, as Isidore Okpewho, Ruth Finnegan, Thomas Hale, Graham Furniss, Kofi Awoonor, Timothy Wangusa, and many others have done, but their focus is not to bring out how these folkloric traditions are the media for the expression or preservation of African indigenous knowledge. Other scholars such as Wande Abimbola, Maurice T. Vambe, G. G. Darah, and Ode Ogede have studied the oral traditions of African groups such as the Yoruba, Urhobo, and Igede of Nigeria or nations such as Zimbabwe and Malawi and the use to which they have been put as a means of cultural resistance by contemporary writers. Some of the oral literature scholars such as G. G. Darah, Daniel Avorgbedor, and I have discussed the functions of specific genres of oral literature in certain traditional African communities or groups. However, again, these are not studies of the expression of indigenous knowledge or the bringing out of that knowledge from its medium of expression.

Toyin Falola and Christian Jennings in their co-edited *Africanizing Knowledge: African Studies across the Disciplines* attempt to indigenize

either universal or Western knowledge. The focus on disciplines shows a Western orientation towards departmentalizing knowledge, unlike African knowledge that tends to be more compartmentalized and integrated. Thus, the scholarly effort so far has been more to make African scholarship more African than begin a discourse of the expressions and showcasing of African indigenous knowledge itself. It is in view of these lapses in African scholarship and the need for the African civilization to showcase its knowledge to the rest of the world that I make this modest effort at discussing African indigenous knowledge and its expression in the folklores of Africa and the African Diaspora.

Whether Black folks are seen through the lenses of Pan-Africanism, Africa and its Diaspora, Black Atlantic, or global Africa, they are peoples of African descent, irrespective of their geographical abode, sharing historical, cultural, sociological, and kinship ties given their collective origins in the African Continent. They also share the same origins of race and culture that involve folklore, spirituality, literature, art, songs/music, narratives, and performance styles. There is ample evidence in the African Diaspora today to dismiss E. Franklin Frazier's argument against Melville Herskovits's view that there are strong residues of Africanity despite the harrowing experience of the Middle Passage and the other experiences of slavery in the respective regions of the New World to which Africans were forcefully brought by Europeans for economic reasons. It is in the cultural aspect of folklore that the ties to African descent are most resilient.

The Malian scholar of African folklore, Amadou Hampate Ba, once made a statement that has now become almost proverbial: "In Africa, when an old person dies, it is a library that is burnt down." (1960 at UNESCO) Traditional African culture is oral; the literature, in the forms of epic, legend, folktale, song, and other genres, is transmitted by word of mouth from one generation to another. In the non-literate culture, a person can be a treasure of knowledge, experience, and wisdom. In other words, an old person, like a library, is a repository of knowledge and this is through the medium of oral tradition. My *udje* research informant, Chief Dozen Ogbariemu, now 94 years old, talks of the practice of *udje* during his grandfather's and uncle's times before what he witnessed and participated in as an adult. Through him I could go back about 200 years of the *udje* song tradition. Folklore is thus the repository of a people's indigenous and local knowledge in the forms of language, literature, legends, myths, epics, folktales, songs, proverbs, tongue-twisters, riddles, music, dance, art, religious beliefs and practices, medicinal treatments, and other customs and traditions. These are traditions that have been carried out over time, and include such practices as birth, marriage, burial and

other rites and are passed through oral traditions. Embedded in these oral traditions are indigenous and local knowledge systems.

Put differently, folklore is a people's cultural memory; in Africa and the African Diaspora it is the oral tradition. Through orality, people of African descent store immense knowledge and wisdom. African tales, customs, legends, and other folkloric features manifest in different ways in the New World depending upon the specific history, geography, and realities of the people. Of course, the more isolated the groups are in the Diaspora, the less discriminatory the colonial laws were. And the larger the size of the black community within the entire society, the more and stronger retentions of Africanisms, for example in such places as Surinam, the Bahia Province of Brazil, Cuba, Haiti, and the Sea Islands of South Carolina and Georgia in the United States.

Folklore can also be defined as the wealth of knowledge and experience inherited by the people from their past; it links the past with the present as well as the youths with their elders. It affirms the continuity of a people's heritage and changes with time and place. In traditional African societies, there were/are no formal classes or schools as in modern society where knowledge is imparted to the young by teachers with college or university diplomas. Rather, at the end of the day's work, the elders gathered the young ones round the fireplace and taught them about their societies, ranging from how to relate to one another, making them know about their belief systems, how to be good citizens of the community, be patriotic, and understand the nature of their environment and society. The teaching of knowledge is in the forms of legends, myths, epics, folktales, songs, proverbs, tongue-twisters, riddles, etc. The oral tradition is thus the medium through which indigenous and local African knowledge is not only preserved but also passed from one generation to another.

### **African and African Diaspora Orature**

As Edward Sapir has put it, language carries the thought, ideas, and knowledge of a people. Foremost in the African language is the primacy of proverbs whose mastery confers oratorical authority on the speaker. Proverbs are words of wisdom and they often encapsulate the knowledge and experience of the people. The proverb is so important in expression that, as Chinua Achebe says of it among his Igbo people of Nigeria, it is "the palm oil with which words are eaten". This is applicable to what obtains in most African ethnicities and Diaspora societies. Proverbs and other wise sayings are copious in every African indigenous language. Knowing one's language or any of the African languages therefore is a

means of acquiring not just the language skill of interpersonal communication but also a means of gaining knowledge about oneself, society, the world, and life itself. Through constant speaking of the language, Africans gain insight into so much knowledge that should guide them smoothly through life. If not so smoothly, language helps, as in the case of the use of proverbs, to soothe one's plight.

To the Yoruba people of Nigeria, Benin Republic, and in the Diaspora, life is a market. This means we come to life, live it, and leave as in a market. Nobody sleeps in the market; one comes to either sell or buy and then leaves at the end of that market. It also has to do with the profit and loss of life. There is so much knowledge and wisdom in such a succinct saying. Igbo proverbs have been popularized by Chinua Achebe, especially in both *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*. From the child that washes his hands clean and is able to eat with elders to 'when the moon is shining the cripple craves for a walk', and 'who lives by the river should not wash his hands with spittle', Igbo proverbs carry the Igbo philosophy of life.

Proverbs are very common in the African Diaspora. There are African-American proverbs that were used to get through the harsh conditions of slavery. To the African-American, "Corn makes mo' at de mill dan it does in de crib" and "You can hide de fire, but w'at you gwine do wid de smoke?" (Courlander 443). Haitians also use proverbs profusely in their conversations. One of such is that the medicine man (bocor) gives you a protective charm, but he doesn't tell you to sleep in the middle of a highway. In other words, even if you feel safe, don't take unnecessary risks (Courlander 85). Also, the Haitians say that "what the eyes see, the mouth is silent" meaning that one should not talk about everything one observes (Courlander 85).

From the examples of proverbs given, one can say that the elderly and the experienced in the African traditional society use proverbs to dispense knowledge to younger ones who will grow up to do the same. No gathering of men and women assembled to discuss important issues, like conflict resolution, marital problems, counseling, and others can go well without copious use of proverbs. Proverbs are used to advise, console, encourage, and do so many things. In the Diaspora, proverbs are also very important.

Riddles in Africa and the African Diaspora are vehicles of local knowledge. To the Hausa, an egg with thorns is a pineapple. An Urhobo riddle is "*Phughu phughu tueghe!*" and it means that the fruits of a plant fall beside it. To Haitians, "a golden needle that gets the president out of bed" means "getting up to urinate" (Courlander 85). Answers to most

riddles are based on local knowledge and many are metaphors or tropes about what is available in the environment.

Traditional African and many Diaspora societies have special people who carry the task of passing indigenous knowledge from one generation to another. There are also those who guard the tradition to make sure that the knowledge is done professionally. I have chosen to call them “guardians of the sacred word”, after Kofi Awoonor’s title of his book on Anlo-Ewe oral poets.

A few examples will suffice, but these “guardians” are called by different names. The most distinguished among them are griots (griottes) of the Mali and Senegambian region, *ororile* of Nigeria’s Urhobo people, and the *imbongi* of the Zulu and Xhosa groups of South Africa. While on the surface one can say that the griot is a professional singer of tales, his or her role goes far beyond that to include being the custodian of the people’s oral constitution, the chronicler/historian, and one engaged in conflict resolution. The Urhobo *ororile* is a poet and composes songs that reflect the mores, ethics, and dos and don’ts of the community. He plays the role of the guardian of the community’s ethics and morals and assists to maintain a cohesive corporate existence. The *imbongi*, an instantaneous poet, plays a similar role to the griot and *ororile* among different ethnic groups in South Africa. However, he goes beyond, like the Yoruba *ijala* chanter, to extol the virtues of the society.

In addition to those concerned with preserving and disseminating indigenous knowledge with words, there are others in the traditional African community with the responsibility of preserving indigenous knowledge. They include traditional rulers and chiefs, priests and priestesses, diviners, and others. For instance, traditional rulers and their chiefs know so much about the history of their land and people. One would expect that the Alaafin of Oyo, the Ooni of Ife, the Oba of Benin, the Asantehene of the Akan, the Kabaka of Buganda, and others have oral records and texts of their history and traditions that pass from one generation to another. In fact, in Oyo the repositories of such oral history are called *arokin* and they are the official historians in the service of the Alaafin.

African and Diaspora folktales are often seen as means of entertainment for the young. However, they play an even stronger role in educating the people, especially the young, about morality, ethics, and wisdom. Each folktale is an oral “text” taught by elders and studied by young ones for lessons of life and society. The stories could be about animals, birds, or even spirits but no-one is left in doubt that they behave as humans in society. African folktales are very didactic and have lessons

embedded in them. The animals in the story promote a sense of communal existence and harmony while the individual exercises some rights and obligations. Each individual contributes to the wellbeing of society and any attempt to disrupt this sense of harmony is resisted by the sanctioning of the over-individualistic ones. The *ajakpa* tales of the Yoruba are a good example of the place of the individual in the community. The tortoise is greedy and goes against the spirit of communal cohesion. As John Mbiti says of the African view of oneself, "I am because we are."

People are socialized to know folktales to relate to other folks in the community and understand the environment. This kind of indigenous knowledge is very important for the individual and the community. The knowledge of an individual believing in a corporate existence is fundamental to the world created by African folktales. As Mazisi Kunene has emphasized, Africa may not be industrially and materially advanced but the Mother Continent is wealthy ethically. In Haitian folktales, opportunity is given to individuals to be mischievous and extreme but such actions or modes of behavior are not condoned. One who transgresses the communal ethos thus becomes a pariah and is often ridiculed to discourage extreme or radical behavior that promotes selfish interests instead of corporate ones.

Other forms of oral traditions are sources of indigenous knowledge. The epic is a repository of a group's knowledge. It teaches a people's history, culture, arts, and more. Of course the griot who sings the heroic tales is a human treasure and carries the experience of his or her people. From the various texts of *Sunjata*, *Ozidi*, and the epic of *Mwindo*, there is so much to learn about the African concept of hero. Isidore Okpewho in *The Epic in Africa* has done a thorough study of the features of the epic hero. In *Sunjata* such features include patience, courage, passion for justice and fairness, saving one's people from oppression and exploitation, and exercising of authority for the people's good. According to Okpewho, the hero represents the highest ideal to which society can aspire. The hero is a good citizen who has leadership qualities and has a passion for justice, fairness, and a sense of pride in the homeland. People of African descent imbibe knowledge of history, political science, civics, military tactics, psychology, sociology, the arts, and many others from their epics or heroic tales.

Similarly, myths and legends are also sources of knowledge. Myths may obscure scientific reasoning but they are meant to explain the nature of things and teach a lesson. I have used in my novel, *Matters of the Moment*, the myth of why man and woman are always quarrelling but cannot do without each other. As man alternates between desire for and

distrust of woman, God withdraws to an impossible height so as not to be bothered by humans who should resolve their problems themselves. This knowledge is more than any Western or church marriage counseling service will do for a couple who know that it is in the nature of humans for a man and a woman to quarrel now and then but they must understand themselves and live together as partners to be happy in the world that God has given them. Legends teach young ones to have a sense of destiny and a passion to be great. That greatness can only come through communal service.

As a result of the new environment, social and political dynamics, the concept of the hero in the African Diaspora is different from that in Africa. The African-American hero is a case in point, whether High John the Conqueror or Stagolee. In the racist plantation society, High John has to be quick-witted, smart, cunning, and imaginative to not only escape the punishment of the slave masters but also affirm his humanity in however limited a space he is allowed to live. Thus, in the oppressive American society of slavery days or racism in the post-Emancipation era till now, the African-American has to be witty to navigate his or her way smoothly through the racist hurdles thrown on the way. By subverting their masters, both High John and Stagolee affirm a counter heroism in an oppressive racist society and era.

A significant source of knowledge is African and African Diaspora oral poetic performance traditions. *Udje*, *halo*, *ijala*, and *izibongo* are representatives of African oral poetic performances, the first two satiric genres and the latter two panegyrics. *Udje* expresses the worldview of the Urhobo people as *halo* does for the Ewe, *ijala* for the Yoruba and *izibongo* for the Zulu and Xhosa worldviews. *Udje* involves satire and takes the form of highly articulated song sequences performed in a dramatic context. It is a unique type of Urhobo dance in which, on an appointed day, rival groups, representing quarters and even whole towns, perform songs composed from often exaggerated materials about the other. The dance songs strongly attack what the traditional society regards as vices: laziness, vanity, wretchedness, miserliness, flirtation, adultery, prostitution, wickedness, and greed, among others. The singers are intent on upholding what they consider to be positive norms of the society. Central to the concept of *udje* are the principles of correction and determent through punishment with “wounding” words. These songs have an important social function, for they maintain a delicate balance between the general good of the society whose ethos must be upheld and respect for the law-abiding individual. The satirical content of the songs demonstrates the extent to which they are imbued with a distinctive moral awareness

related to the collective life. There is thus a profound sense in which they bear out, in an arresting form, Henri Bergson's conception of "laughter" as an essential part of the mechanisms by which social life is regulated, by ridiculing what in a particular society would be considered individual excesses or threats to collective harmony. The Urhobo *udje* tradition bears comparison to the genre known as *halo* among the Anlo-Ewe, an ethnic group that straddles the frontier between Ghana and Togo. As with *udje*, *halo* performances consist of satirical songs by rival groups who confront each other in a definite context of staged performances. On the other hand, both *ijala* and *izibongo* are praise poetry; they extol the virtues of courage, generosity, selflessness, and readiness to take on the community's tasks towards a harmonious society.

For sure, these satiric and panegyric genres of the oral tradition of Africa and the African Diaspora have so much knowledge in them to be learned by the listeners and audiences for whom they were and continue to be performed. As I explained elsewhere (Ojaide: 2003), there were no prisons in traditional Urhobo society. Thus serious crimes such as murder were punished with execution. However, lighter crimes such as flirtation, stealing and others were punished with satiric songs; hence the *udje* and *halo* took the place of ordinances and laws and made everybody fall into line. While one can exercise one's individuality, it should not hurt others. As will be commented on later, many of these oral poetic genres were part of traditional festivals and were dedicated to tutelary gods. Knowing these songs helps one to navigate one's way through society with ease – avoid the don'ts and, as in the praise poetry, strive for the virtues of the society.

African-American battle rap, Greek Societies' Step Show, Afro-Caribbean/Trinidadian Calypso and Afro-Brazilian Capoeira and *jongo* carry the competitive spirit of both *udje* and *halo*. In fact, they are, like their African counterparts, "battles", even if for artistic supremacy. Capoeira is seen more by many as a martial art rather than poetic performance. The competitive spirit of these African and African Diaspora artistic traditions imbues them with virtues of their communities that both practitioners and audiences strive to emulate to create a peaceful society.

## Music and Dance

Music and dance are also major vehicles of indigenous and local knowledge. Molefe Asante observes that music is, among black cultural expressions, the "most authentic example of continuity". (qtd. in Fox 8) It is not just a matter of continuity as far as the formal and aesthetic aspects are concerned but also in the knowledge carried along into the New World

in new genres which may have synthesized with other cultural genres they met and interacted with. Robert Elliot Fox says that blacks brought the drum in their “skins” to the New World (4). Though drums were banned to avoid secret communication among slaves, especially in the American South, because they far outnumbered their owners, they metaphorically came with the drum beneath their skin. This drum manifests itself in the form of instruments like the banjo and music in the forms of rumba, salsa, calypso, and other African musical traditions in the New World. Congo Square in New Orleans bears testimony to the African roots of jazz.

Music and dance of African origin share similar features with major diasporic musical traditions. As noted by, among others, J. K. Nketia, Francis Bebey, Harold Courlander, and Joseph Holloway, African-related kinds of music share common features. They include percussive instruments and rhythms, call-and-response, and vitality of costume and expression.

Where is the indigenous knowledge in African music and dance? Let us take the example of the Shona instrument and music called *mbira*. It is infused with mythical beliefs and it is said that when you play the *mbira* you get your wish. It is a soothing music that is said to be divinely accompanied. Most African dance forms - like many in the Diaspora, especially in the Caribbean and Afro-Brazilian areas - are artistic reenactments of myths, legends, and history. Music and dance are parts of festivals dedicated to gods to look with benevolence at their human underlings. Many prayers are in the forms of songs accompanied with drumming while the dances celebrate the communion of humans, ancestors, and gods. In fact, the drum calls the ancestors and gods to listen to human prayers and activities. Music and dance in traditional and even Christian worships in Africa and the Diaspora result in spirit possession, a heightened form of spiritual consciousness. It appears people of African descent, especially in religious circles, have long been aware of the impact of music on the brain that modern Western researchers are only now talking about. Music and dance are themselves artistic skills that are learned. In addition, they carry the belief systems of the people and give the people a cultural identity.

### **Religion, Spirituality, and Philosophy**

A people’s knowledge involves their conceptualization of human existence. Spirituality is very important to peoples of Africa and its Diaspora. To Joseph Holloway, “Religion forms the core foundation of the African world.” (xiv) It is also said that “African spirituality is the most enduring legacy of African cultural impact in the New World.”

(Ogundiran and Saunders) African religious/spiritual practices, as expounded by John Mbiti in his *African Religions and Philosophy*, have a strong impact in the New World's Vodoun, Santeria, and Candomble. Spirit possession, a trance-like state in African religious practice, can be found in the more traditional African religions of the Diaspora as well as in the Christian practices in some black churches. From slavery times, prayer houses were important in allowing blacks to have their own sense of Christianity as different from that of their enslavers. However, there has been a lot of syncretism of religious and spiritual practices and beliefs in the new environment, as can be seen in the Catholicizing of the Yoruba orishas in Cuba and Brazil.

African religious beliefs and practices relate to the social life and the numerology of the people. The Yoruba Ifa is a good example of a system of divination that relies on the numerical signs in multiples of four. Most traditional African markets take place in four or eight days, the respective small and big markets. There are two of things, as with the Igbo people. As Chinua Achebe has said, "Where one thing stands, there can also stand another." The duality of things in traditional African cosmology is significant of male and female principles that complement each other. As in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, a priest serves a goddess and a priestess ministers to a god, as in the case of Chielo and Agbala. There are chants of words or phrases three or seven times to secure efficacy of prayers or medicines. Among the Urhobo, the number 9, *rhirin*, has a mystical power of the everlasting.

There is so much knowledge in these religions and spiritual practices of Africa and the African Diaspora. The faith in an Almighty Lord whom they serve through subordinates runs parallel to many Catholic beliefs; hence traditional African religions fared very well where the colonists were Roman Catholic Christians as in Haiti, Cuba and Brazil. In a few instances, the Christian saints were used as a cover to refer to African gods even where and when they were officially banned. Religion, irrespective of its origin, has a code of knowledge that informs the belief systems and practices. The use of sacrificial animals as in Santeria and Candomble is very African and meant to appease the orishas so they will heed prayers.

It is significant to pursue the deep knowledge that is steeped in philosophical concepts in African and African Diaspora religions and philosophy. Two examples that need further discussion are the Yoruba *Ase* and the Akan Sankofa. *Ase* involves the mystical power to will things to happen, the faith to have prayers fulfilled, and have a divinely ordained good life. One learns in praying from Yoruba folklore that: "The transformative energy created in prayer allows one to change the