

African Epistemology as a Catalyst for Good Governance and Leadership in Africa.

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.100800383>

Received: 16 August 2026; Accepted: 24 August 2026; Published: 05 September 2026

ABSTRACT

The paper aims at using knowledge that is domiciled in the African continent to examine and solve the myriad of problems bewildering the continent. Emphasis in this paper is placed on how these problems such as economic retardation, corruption, despotism, war, Human trafficking, militancy and a host of others just to mention a few could be exterminated. It opines (the paper) that indigenes of Africa who are renowned scholars residing in other continents of the world could be called upon to participate in the ongoing developmental processes in their various countries. There are sagacious senior citizens of Africa whose brains could equally be tapped in terms of revamping and revitalizing the ailing economy of Africa. Africa has vast resources that can be explored in developing its economy without necessarily relying on the so-called developed countries. The paper believes that effort needs to be intensified by the leaders of Africa in ensuring that there is unity of purpose among them so as to cooperatively work together to develop African economy. Lip services, according to this paper should no longer be played in the administration and governance of this region. Leaders must eschew the habit of looting treasury by stashing money away into foreign coffers instead of ploughing the money back to better the lot of the people of Africa. Selfishness, greed, corruption, war and other similar vices must be avoided if Africa is to develop. The paper concludes that the footpaths of African fathers such as Awolowo of Nigeria, Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, etc, must be followed in order to attain the goal of development set by them for the continent.

INTRODUCTION

The place of knowledge in the continent of Africa cannot be over-emphasized. The major focus of this paper is to examine how knowledge that is contextualized within African continent could be used to bring about spontaneous development and progress of African people. For example, how the knowledge of our so-called sagacious elders and African scholars could be tapped to solve the myriad of problem bewildering the continent. The paper posits that most of the indigenes of Africa residing in America, Europe etc. could be invited to participate and share their wealth of experience in the developmental processes going on in their various countries. They need this invitation in order to work with African leaders so as to revamp and revitalize African moribund economy. The paper opines that if the contributions of some of the African forefathers namely; Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, Obafemi Awolowo of Nigeria and host of others just to mention a few could be harnessed and explored, African continent would bounce back economically.

There are lots of potentials and resources, both materially and intellectually, in Africa that can be used to develop her economy without necessarily looking for aids and assistance from other continents of the world.

In spite of our enormous natural resources and huge potentials, Africa remains grossly and undoubtedly underdeveloped. Regardless of all the social and economic policies that had been implemented by successive administrations, Africa still remains lacking in social, economic and political developments. Political instability, abject poverty, severe youth unemployment, heightened crime rate, poor health – care facilities, pervasive, malnourishment and recently, insurgency/terrorism have been the predominant features within the polity. Africa certainly defies conventional logic – severe poverty amidst vast mineral riches, agricultural potential and abundant human capital.

This “development anomaly” also fits into the trends and narrative of political instability within the continent,

for which Africa has become notoriously infamous and synonymous with. Indeed, governance is one of the major problems in Africa and, by extension, Nigeria. In retrospect, the myriad of the nation's problems can be attributed to the absence of good governance, democratic growth and development, thus effectively ensuring democratic dividends to be stifled and non-existent.

It is an unassailable fact that democracy as is currently practiced in Nigeria and Africa as a whole has produced unpalatable results associated with the nature of the Nigerian and African states and the character of our elites. Our democracy has thus far tended to promote inequality rather than equality. Hence, there can be no genuine democracy in a country where citizens are grossly unequal in wealth and the poor who are invariably the majority are dependent on the wealthy.¹

Good governance, on its part, is absolutely imperative for social and economic progress. Good governance involves justice equity, protection of life and property, enhanced participation, preservation of the rule of law and improved living standard of the populace. Governance is termed bad when it fails to achieve capacity of a government or as it relates to leadership capability. Failure of governance, therefore, could expressly mean failure of leadership. For good governance to be feasible in Nigeria sound anti-corruption policies devoid of mere speeches or lip service must be put in place. There have to exist a functional legislature, a viable and independent judiciary and the attitudinal transformation on the part of our political elite, the absence of which good governance and development will continue to be mirage. Also for good governance to be achieved, there is a dire need for the entrenchment of internal democracy and adequate funding of political parties. In Africa, our political structure is styled in such a way that political parties are funded by wealthy individuals and wealthy party members, as opposed to political parties being self-funded as is obtainable in other genuinely democratic climes. A situation where political parties are hijacked by a few wealthy individuals who determine those presented as candidates during elections is the reason good governance has been elusive in the African's democratic governance. As long as our political parties lack internal democracies and are being funded by government or a group of wealthy party members who dictate the pace of things in the party, good governance would continue to be lacking and sustainable democracy non-existent. In addition, the successful conduct of free, fair and credible general elections is an important foundation of democracy and good governance.²

However, African epistemology is seen as a panacea towards ensuring that the problems affecting the economic development of the continent are nipped in the bud. It is granted in this wise, that knowledge is to be sought inwardly towards ensuring that African solutions are applied towards exterminating some of these problems bewildering us in Africa.

Before venturing into defining or giving a descriptive analysis of African epistemology, effort needs to be intensified in briefly looking at what epistemology is.

What is Epistemology?

The word "Epistemology" derives from two Greek words, "Episteme" which means knowledge and "logos" meaning theory. That is why epistemology is also known as the theory of knowledge. Epistemology is the study of human knowledge, the study of the nature of human knowledge its origin, its scope, its limit, its justification, its reliability, or otherwise, its certainty or otherwise. It is like knowledge taking a critical look at itself to justify itself. We claim to know, but how do we know that we know? How are we sure that what we claim to know to be true is really true? How reliable is our knowledge. How can we prove that we know? How can we justify our knowledge? What is the guarantee of the certainty of our knowledge? The skeptics contributed a great deal to the development of epistemology in western philosophy by challenging the claim to know and the basis of such knowledge. The critical and sometimes devastating challenge of the skeptics spurred the epistemologists on to continually re-examine the nature, the basis and the justification of knowledge. Epistemologists had to do this in order to find answers to the challenges of the sceptics and to refute them.³

Epistemology can be said to have begun with the sophists, the fifth century B.C itinerant teachers of philosophy. The philosophers before them, i.e. the pre-Socratic philosophers were not interested in epistemology but in cosmology. Thus they were cosmologists, and they lived in the sixth century B.C. But when the sophists came to the scene in the fifth century B.C; they changed the focus of philosophy from cosmology to man and the society.

The sophists were very critical, skeptical and relativistic in their conception of knowledge. Their contribution to epistemology was their criticism and scepticism. By being critical and skeptical they threw a challenge to epistemologists, like Socrates and Plato, who in order to refute them tried to justify knowledge, to prove that objective knowledge was possible. The sophists criticized many of the traditional beliefs of the people and cast doubt on them. “What is the proof that such beliefs are true?” they would ask. They also claimed that knowledge was relative, that truth was relative. What is true from one point of view may be false from another point of view. They denied objective, universal knowledge or truth. “What is true for you may not be true for me”. In fact, one of them by name Protagoras of Abdera, said that man was the measure of all things. “Man” he says, “is the measure of all things, of things that are that they are, of things that are not that they are not”. Everyman, in other words, decides for himself what exists and what does not exist, what is true and what is not true.

In responding, Socrates rejected the relativism and skepticism of the sophists and maintained that there was objective, universal knowledge. He was very critical of the sophists and precisely because of their skepticism and relativism which he opposed. For him, knowledge is certain, objective and universal. It is quite possible for man to acquire objective and universal knowledge which is certain.⁴

More so, man derives its curiosity from admiration and wonder of the beauty of nature and the events and things observed in the universe. He begins to ask questions; how did these things come to be? Why do they exist? How come the orderliness or disorderliness? How come the nexus between objects and events, and between one event and the other? Am I really sure of what I think I smell or see, feel, taste or hear? Then, reflection and deeper critical and analytical thinking begins about the issues raised. This curiosity has led into what is now referred to as philosophy and all boils down to how knowledge is being acquired.

Epistemology is that part of philosophy concerned with determining the basis of knowledge claims. In epistemology, the typical questions pertaining to the justification of beliefs, the sources of human knowledge, the scope and extent of knowledge.⁵ Traditionally, the basic problem in epistemology is that of whether we can know at all. That was what has earned the field of epistemology the name “theory of knowledge”. The issue here is not that of affirming or denying the appropriateness of the name. The fact is that today, the problems in contemporary epistemology have shifted to that of justifying our knowledge claims and of determining the scope and limits of knowledge. Epistemology is interested in the question of the grounds for human knowledge claims, including providing criteria and applying them to claims about the sources, scope and extent of knowledge.

According to the Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology, epistemology “is the theory of the origin, nature and limits of knowledge”.⁶ It is the branch of philosophy that investigates the process of human cognition and all problems associated with its acquisition and justification. It is the task of epistemology to refute or justify cognitive claims. D. W. Hamlyn aptly defined epistemology as the “branch of philosophy which is concerned with the nature and scope of knowledge, its preoccupation and basis and the general reliability of claims to knowledge”.⁷

African Epistemology Analyzed.

Having given an insight into what epistemology is, how then do we define African epistemology?

African epistemology is the study of the way and how people of Africa acquire, use and develop knowledge. It is the study of the origin, nature and the conceptual framework of knowledge in Africa. This definition does not mean that knowledge is not objective and that is not universal in nature but knowledge in this perspective is viewed from a cultural milieu. Though African epistemology has its foundation in Africa but this does not deny foreign scholars from studying it. African epistemology is the study of knowledge in the traditional African setting.

In our examination of the nature of African epistemology, we shall more or less be following the analysis of Temple, Awolowo, Nkrumah, Nyerere and a host of others just to mention a few who in one way or the other have written philosophical treatises about African epistemology. There seems to be a tacit agreement amongst the above mentioned philosophers and scholars, which is a discussion of a people’s conception of knowledge without a prior examination of the underlying principles of their thought world views.

The conception of man (knowledge) is always linked to a particular conception of being and science, and therefore the assertion of philosophers especially with regard to the origin of knowledge, require a prior examination of their view on science and philosophy so that the accuracy and relevance of their solutions to questions concerning the nature of knowledge can be evaluated in light of these more basic assumptions.

In order to investigate human knowledge, it is important to inquire into the foundations of knowledge for without examining these foundations, it is very easy to reach wrong conclusions about how the Africans know.

African theory of knowledge as a branch of African philosophy is a recent phenomena. The dearth of written documentation is a factor militating against the progress of this branch of African philosophy.⁸

P. Temples, Bantu philosophy (1958) defines African concept of knowledge (wisdom) as “how deeply he understands the nature of forces and their interaction” True wisdom lies in ontological knowledge; it is the intelligent forces of their hierarchy, their cohesion and their interaction.⁹

Furthermore in the unpublished dissertation of Ukagba “A Philosophical Examination of African Concept of Man With Reference to the Igbo of South East of Nigeria” (1993), he argued forcefully here on the primacy of being before knowledge. He agreed with Temples that “true wisdom lies in ontological knowledge” the African knows in accordance with his nature. It is therefore only at the level of individual and community that African knowledge become possible. The ultimate knowledge which forms the basis of community and individual knowledge equally exist but at the transcendent level.¹⁰

The individual is a member of his community. Consequently, the individual lives and acts as a member of a given community. From one first moment of his existence in the community, the individual is influenced by the life and experiences of the community. These influences are very important factors in the development of human knowledge in the individual. In so far as the society influences human knowledge, from the first moment of the existence of the individual in the community, it is a mediate foundation of human knowledge, for the community provides the folktales, myths and symbols which are indispensable forms of human knowledge and understanding.¹¹

According to K.C. Anyanwu, like African metaphysics, African epistemology is deeply rooted in African tradition. Originally, the tradition of a people is the effect of their experience; and since philosophy is a reflection on human experience, it follows that African tradition which entails African religions, root culture, oral literature, traditional art, fables, proverbs, idioms, rituals, music, dance, folklores, and myths are the contents of African epistemology.

As earlier said, African epistemology is metaphysically and spiritually inclined. The tradition of African philosophy relates more with the spiritual and supernatural elements in nature which gives emotional and aesthetic satisfaction to the average African person. Thus, the ideal life as exemplified by African epistemology is to co –exist as one with nature. In doing this, great emphasis is placed on spirituality and an understanding of the world via a spiritual source because African epistemology regards the experiential word and the non-experiential world as causally related.

K.C Anyanwu opines that African epistemology also enforces beliefs in a basic assumption about reality. It expresses the fact that reality is beyond the empirical world of space and time; that everything which exists is charged with life forces or spirits i.e. all beings possess a spiritual backing. It also presents the hierarchical order of life force, which is God, divinities, ancestors, spirits, man, animals, plants and minerals.

According to him, in justifying African epistemology, African culture can be defined from many angles. By African culture, we mean folklore, history, etiquette and many other things. The truth is that African epistemology which entails African culture is simply composed of these things and is a complicated unit that can be divided into several categories. It would have been so wonderful to dive into the world of African wonders and artifacts and start a long journey for information and discovery. Unfortunately, our society seems to ignore that priceless inheritance we received from ancestors to contribute and give it to our posterities.¹²

The Contributions of African Epistemologists (Philosophers) to the Development of Africa: Africa epistemology As a Catalyst for Good Governance and Leadership.

To start with, to ensure good governance and leadership in Africa, the best form of government is the one founded on reason and guided by reason; the best form of government is the most rational form of government, and the freest government; a government in which the individual live freely under the guidance of reason.

Based on the above assertion, the whole contributions of African epistemologists (philosophers) cannot be discussed under this heading but some vital areas of their contribution will be mentioned and discussed in relation to how good government and leadership could be fostered in Africa.

Philosophy generally reflects the socio- political situation of its time and place. Socio- political situations generally raise many questions in the minds of people and thus give rise to reflection and philosophizing. Hence, there is always a close connection between the socio- political situation of a place at a given time and the philosophy of that place at that particular period.

Hence, in order to understand the philosophy of any philosopher, it is important to know the socio- political situation from which the philosophy arose. Contemporary African philosophy is predominantly a political philosophy, and this reflects the socio- political situation from which it arose. The socio- political situation of contemporary Africa raised questions in the minds of African thinkers and prompted them to force their thoughts on political issue.

The Berlin Conference of 1885 gave official sanction to colonialism in Africa. Africa was divided among European countries for the purpose of exploitation, subjugation and domination. European countries became “masters” of African nations and “owners ” of everything in Africa which was of any value.¹³

African nations were subjected to foreign domination and exploitation. The reins of government were forcefully seized from African rulers by the new rulers and self- appointed master. Those who dared to resist were ruthlessly slaughtered. Having over powered the African nations, the colonial masters began to humiliate, to rule and to exploit them. They began to remove to their countries, everything they found in Africa which was of any value, and thus began the underdevelopment of Africa by the Europeans who exploited Africa to develop Europe.

However, this situation was destined to come to an end, for it is impossible to continue indefinitely to deprive any people of their fundamental human rights. The first half of this century saw the rise of nationalism in Africa. Men like Nnamdi Azikiwe, Kwame Nkrumah, Awolowo, having acquired education abroad came back home and began nationalist movements aimed at putting an end to colonialism in Africa. This was the beginning of the end of colonial exploitation and domination in Africa. The heads that were forcefully bowed down began to rise again, and African culture which the colonial masters had tried to suppress began to be revived.¹⁴

At this junction, we shall briefly look at the contributions of two or three of the above mentioned sages and see how they had contributed to good governance and leadership in Africa particularly in the area of revamping African economy

Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana,

Without wasting time on his profile, he was a socialist revolutionary and was very critical of capitalism. Capitalism, according to him, is a refined form of feudalism, which in turn is a refined form of slavery. Nkrumah claims that original men lived communalistic lives, all land belonged to the community. Everything was owned by the community including all the means of production, and everybody worked for the common good of the community.

Traditional African society, Nkrumah says, is not capitalist, but egalitarian and communalistic. Capitalism is irreconcilable with egalitarianism and communalism of traditional African society. African nations should reject the inequality, individualism, capitalism and imperialism brought into Africa by the European imperialists. Nkrumah admonishes African nations to go back to the egalitarianism and communalism of traditional African society. The developed form of communalism of traditional African society is socialism, hence by adopting

socialism, African nations would not only be going back to their roots but would be adopting it in its developed form. Independent African nations, he warns, must be on their guard against neo-colonialism which is a greater danger than colonialism. There can be no compromise with the welfare of the African people.¹⁵

Leopold Senghor and Julius Nyerere

Leopold Sedar Senghor, the former Senegalese president is a renowned poet and philosopher. His main contribution to the development of Africa is anchored on his philosophy of Negritude which should be seen against the background of the French colonial policy of assimilating Africans into the French Culture and citizenship. This meant the rejection of African culture, African values and African identity as worthless. Africans were expected to consider it an honour to be allowed to adopt the French culture and become French citizens at the expense of their own culture and identity. Senghor's philosophy of negritude is a rejection of this French colonial policy of assimilation and an assertion of the value of the African culture and identity. Senghor emphasizes the fact that the African has a distinctive outlook on life and a distinctive cultural identity. Like Nkrumah, Senghor also maintains that individualism and capitalism are foreign to African traditional society and the African way of life which is communalistic. Africans have their own culture, their own values and their own identity derived from a common heritage and different from the European culture, European values and the European identity.

Negritude is, this a philosophy of re-discovery and cultural re-awakening, a philosophy of cultural emancipation aimed at giving the African people a sense of pride and dignity in their identity as Africans, by making them appreciate the value of their culture as distinct from the French culture and identity. The Ujamaa Philosophy of former president Julius Nyerere of Tanzania is based on the communalism of traditional African society. Nyerere agrees with both Nkrumah and Senghor that capitalism and individualism are foreign to Africa, and that traditional African society is communalistic. Traditional African society, Nyerere argues, is not based on conflict, struggle or tension but on "familyhood", that is, family relationship. This is the root of authentic African socialism. But in the modern world of "familyhood" will have to be extended beyond the confines of the extended family, beyond the confines of the tribe and made to embrace the whole society, the whole country, the whole of Africa and the whole of human race. African socialism must be based on this.

Nyerere envisages a society made up of atomic family units, a country made up of Ujamaa villages, a kind of "family village" with mutual co-operation and collaboration. Such a nation would be basically family units extended to embrace the whole society. The capitalistic spirit of acquisition, individualism, the exploitation of man by man, class struggle and conflicts will be eliminated and everybody will be prepared to work for the good of the community in any capacity. The rulers will identify themselves with the masses and work with them. The society will aim at self-reliance and self-liberation. This, with the elimination of colonialism, exploitation and inequality from the African Society, the individual feels liberated. For Nyerere, liberation is inseparable from development; in fact, he sees development as liberation, and this is to be achieved in an egalitarian and communalistic society based on familyhood.¹⁶

Obafemi Awolowo

An eminent thinker with deep prophetic insight, Chief Obafemi Awolowo (also known as Awo) is a convinced and uncompromising advocate of socialism. In his political life, he has consistently been on the left wing and the critical side in an essentially capitalist society. If there is any Nigerian thinker, whose ideas have influenced the lives of millions of people, it is Obafemi Awolowo. As a politician he has not been very successful, but as a Philosopher and thinker he has been most influential and most successful. Awolowo's socialist ideas have for decades constituted a powerful force that cannot be ignored in the political climate of Nigeria. Indeed he is more of a thinker, a philosopher than a politician.

Awolowo distinguished between the primary aim of a state and its ultimate purpose. The primary aim, according to him, is the maintenance of internal order and the prevention of external aggression. The ultimate purpose of a state is to enable its citizens "enjoy the fruits of their labour, and to live a full and happy life, including the enjoyment of the fundamental human rights. But the realization of these objectives depends on a number of

factors, including the manners in which the wealth of the state is produced, exchanged and distributed, and the kind of government adopted in the state.¹⁷

From the foregoing, if the recommendations of the above Philosophers are adopted in the governance of the affairs of Africa, Africa would not only retrace her step back to development but would have a sporadic development.

As earlier said, Africans who are scholars residing in other continents of the world, must be invited to participate in the development of Africa by airing their voices to the developmental process. .

Fostering Good Governance and Leadership in Africa.

Government, according to John Locke, is the servant of the people and is responsible to the people. The government derived its power from the people, a mandate to carry out the wishes of the people. If the rulers are not fulfilling the wishes of the people, then the people reserve the right to remove them from power by rebellion and to elect new rulers who will carry out their wishes. Rulers should always keep in mind that they were elected into office by the people with the mandate to carry out their wishes otherwise they can be removed from office by the people through rebellion. Locke, moreover, advocates the separation of powers in the government. In his view, it would not be proper for the same people to be vested with the legislative and executive powers. For if the same group of people both make and executive laws, self-interest would dictate both the making and the execution of laws. The legislative and executive powers should therefore be separated.¹⁸

Good Governance can be a panacea for conflicts in Africa. Since most conflicts stem from extreme poverty, inequality, ethnicity alienation and bad governance, good governance is certainly indispensable in effectively defusing tensions and preventing conflicts within the polity.

Africa's failures have come about largely as a result of frequent leadership change, lack of ideology, policy reversal and weak institutional patterns. This paper also emphasizes leadership selection process in Africa. It (the paper) opines that the leadership selection process in Africa takes the imposition pattern and that African leaders have frequently come to their positions with limited experience. Hence, the decline in moral and discipline caused by bad policies, eroded professional standards and ethics and weakened the system of government. A call for focus on Leadership and governance is timely, important and no doubt topical, reflecting the worldwide thrust toward political and economic liberalization. All about good governance is the need to organize society towards the achievement of common goal and the capacity of government to effectively manage its resources and implement sound policies. Good governance has several characteristics. It is participatory, consensus oriented, accountable, transparent, responsive, effective, efficient, equitable, all inclusive, and follows the rule of law.

CONCLUSION

The crucial elements in the good governance being called for in Africa are accountability, transparency, predictability, human rights e.t.c. Africans can develop the common values necessary for the governance of African societies which in essence must be rooted in the spirit of cooperation, tolerance and adherence to constitutional rules and procedures. The long term salvation of Africa therefore, depends on the quality of its leadership. In this context, apart from improved quality of education so as to secure able future leadership, the present leaders of Africa have a special responsibility to develop a new generation of leaders, tested in our era. This is the new challenge to African leaders and a necessary measure for Africa's future that can sustain stability and development. As noted by Oputa (1995), leadership in a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society like Africa should adopt secularism as its "magna carta". It should not be seen to unduly attach to a particular religion. The necessary distinctions should be drawn between private religious life of the leaders and his public image as a leader of many different religious groups. This will give the leadership the credibility it so much require to inspire and win the confidence of the entire citizenry. African leaders should pursue useful economic policies which will benefit the continent.

To this end, knowledge that is inwardly sought (i.e. within the confines of Africa) can be used to solve the myriad of problem pervading the continent. That is, African solutions should be applied in eliminating various problems bewildering the continent.

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