

Curiosity is the Bedrock that transcends Boundaries and foments African Conceptualization of Critical Categories

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Résumé - Français

Le modèle dominant de la production du savoir continue de refléter une division mondiale du travail intellectuel très stratifiée. Cet article s'appuie sur les processus de pensée des *Bakpɛle* du Ghana pour postuler que la curiosité, et la production de connaissances qui en résulte, est un art éternellement humain, ce qui rend impératif de repenser la manière dont le savoir mondial est produit. À partir d'études de terrain, le déploiement de l'observation participative et des discussions avec des individus bien informés dans le cadre des études communautaires, cet article démontre le processus d'élaboration de catégories conceptuelles telles que la citoyenneté, le *leadership*, la race, l'engagement, la délibération et la restauration qui émanent de la curiosité et du discours critique propre aux *Bakpɛle* pour informer l'organisation et l'ordre social.

Abstract - English

The dominant pattern of knowledge production continues to reflect a very stratified global division of intellectual labour. The paper draws on the thought processes of the *Bakpɛle* of Ghana to underscore the premise that curiosity and its resultant knowledge production is an eternally human art, making it imperative to rethink how global knowledge is produced. Drawing on fieldwork, deploying participant observation and discussions with knowledgeable individuals as part of the community studies, the paper demonstrates the process of elaboration of conceptual categories such as citizenship, leadership, race, engagement, deliberation and restoration emanating from *Bakpɛle* people's curiosity and critical discourse to inform social arrangement and order.

Keywords : Curiosity, African critical categories, knowledge production, *Bakpɛle*, Ghana

Ikisiri – Swahili

Muundo uliopo wa uzalishaji wa maarifa unaendelea kutoa tafakari kuhusu mgawanyiko wa kidunia wa wafanyakazi wa kitaaluma. Makala hii inaangazia michakato ya mawazo ya *Bakpɛle* nchini Ghana ili kusesitiza kwamba udadisi na uzalishaji wa maarifa ni sanaa ya kibinadamu inayofanya iwe muhimu kutafakari tena jinsi maarifa ya ulimwengu yanavyozalishwa. Kwa kutumia data kutoka uwandani, uchunguzi shirikishi, na majadiliano na watu wenye ujuzi kama sehemu ya masomo ya jamii, makala hii inaonyesha mchakato wa ufafanuzi wa kategoria za dhana kama vile uraia, uongozi, rangi, ushiriki, mazungumzo, na maongozi yanayotokana na udadisi wa watu wa *Bakpɛle* pamoja na semi muhimu zinazotoa taswira ya mpangilio wa utaratibu wa kijamii.

Articles

Curiosity is the Bedrock that transcends Boundaries and foments African Conceptualization of Critical Categories

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This paper illustrates how African societies have developed their own conceptualization of categories such as citizenship, race, leadership, engagement, deliberation and restoration, based on input from the *Bakpele*¹ community in Ghana. These categories have been chosen for analysis in the paper because they were frequently alluded to in discussions among the *Bakpele* people during fieldwork. Of note, societies such as the *Bakpele* have assigned culturally-specific meanings to these categories and use them to arrange their social order.

The paper engages with social theorists who have discussed the capacity of Africans to create their own intellectual categories. While this is not a philosophy paper, it borders on philosophy in the sense in which Mudimbe (1988, p. 156) observes that “philosophy concerns the experience of humans, although it cannot be assimilated to it; philosophy bears on experience, reflects it without being congruent with it”. The African social theorists whose debate about the existence of African philosophy, especially in their critique of Tempel’s (1959) ethnophilosophy that was extended by Kagamé (1956) and offered a deeper understanding of the subject, serves as a good foundation to this study. Hountondji is a good example of this group of scholars whose work offers us an appreciation of the critical thought processes and knowledge production of individuals and how these shape their communities. For Hountondji, African philosophy, as ethnophilosophy, is “the imaginary search for an immutable, collective philosophy, common to all Africans, although in an unconscious form” (1983, p. 38), - this is a mirage. Rather than such an imaginary endeavour, he also opines that “African philosophy, like any other philosophy, cannot possibly be a collective world-view” but can “exist as a philosophy only in the form of a confrontation between individual thoughts, a discussion, a debate” (Hountondji,

¹ The language spoken by *Bakpele* is *Sekpele*. Their state is known as *Kokpelese* while *Okpelenye* means citizen. *Kokpelese* has ten towns and villages with a population of about 36,328, a figure obtained from the Hohoe Municipal Assembly. The settlements are Likpe Abrani, Likpe Agbozome, Likpe Avedzeme, Likpe Bakua, Likpe Bala, Likpe Koforidua, Likpe Kukurantumi, Likpe Mate, Likpe Nkwanta, Likpe Todome.

1983, p. 53). Indeed, Oruka (1990) has shown in *Sage Philosophy* that such individual thoughts exist, just as the philosophical writings of Africans on Western thought, such as Wiredu on Kant on material implication and the concept of truth, are an integral part of African philosophy, as are the analyses of the concept of freedom or the notion of free will, by Oruka or Idoniboye (Hountondji, 1983, p. 65). These African scholars have demonstrated the propensity of individual thought, giving rise to what Hountondji terms the existence of African philosophy “in a new sense, as a literature produced by Africans and dealing with philosophical problems” (1983, p. 63).

This work draws on that propensity of individual thought as it shapes debate in an African community, debate and discussion among people within the *Bakpele* community, resulting in the development of categories that endure, to the benefit of social order arrangement. The paper contributes to the de-centring of western dominance and the re-centring of African Social Thought. It argues that curiosity, which drives the human person’s insatiable quest for answers to eternal questions, is the anchor of African epistemologies. Curiosity is fed by rational thought and experience, an art which transcends boundaries - the boundaries of culture, class, race and all the social categories society has created to celebrate difference. After all, the said difference results from a tempting human desire that sets superiority against inferiority, that spurs and is spurred by injustices in the human community, which in turn fuel and are fuelled by all kinds of ideologies. The work builds on my research with the New Global (De)Centre², which stimulates my keen interest in alternative epistemologies, a growing interest I have garnered through teaching African Social Thought at the graduate level. I have argued that instead of thinking of “alternative epistemologies as a kind of antithesis to a “dominant epistemology” (Mills, 1988) enacted by means of the politics of knowledge measured by an overriding Western canon”, the concept must “be understood as other ways of knowing, which are equally universal” (Okyerefo, 2018, p. 31). Therefore,

[a]lternative epistemological systems refer to unique ways of knowing and theorizing about the world, from an African perspective, for example. Epistemologies are knowledge systems that explain being, beliefs and aspirations, indeed the general way of life of a people. All groups of people have their unique way of life, meaning their culture, thereby developing their

² <http://globaldecentre.world/gdc/about-gdc> The Global (De) Centre (GDC), a platform comprising a network of humanists and social scientists; artists, writers, musicians, and filmmakers; creative managers, such as curators and publishers; and activists, seeks to produce, disseminate, and act upon knowledge in more inclusive ways. A short version of the paper is posted on the GDC website.

own ideas through which to give expression to their existence (Okyerefo, 2018, p. 31).

In his *Critique of Black Reason* (2017), Mbembe argues for working against the injustices of all social ideologies. In this vein, decoloniality becomes a project of “seeing oneself clearly” a “decentering” that will enable a “politics of solidarity” rather than a “politics of integration”. Such epistemological compass is a vision the Global (De)Centre propagates through its agenda of learning about other means of knowing and bringing them centrally and equally into the debate surrounding knowledge and its production. This is a necessary agenda for the “strand that still resonates in our own time about empire, states, and the like is considered to be the real scientific or theoretical core of the scholars’ work, while the strand that involves now-repudiated racial constructs” is merely treated as ““languages”, “metaphors,” and “prejudices” of the era” (Vitalis, 2015, p. 26).

The essence of knowing, which itself is eternally characteristic of the human propensity to discover, contradicts the situation of a canon, critical thinking, or methodology in any one place of human habitation or among any group of people only to preclude other groups. Surely people everywhere have rules determining what is acceptable or unacceptable and what is permitted or not at any point in time. In other words, people have accepted means or ways of realizing certain goals. To that extent, humans develop methods through time and test rules which guide standards of behaviour or undertakings/actions. These endeavours result from critical thinking by means of which a people’s life and life choices are examined. This means that critical thinking cannot be claimed by any one group of people as its prerogative only, because thinking is universal. Good intentions can be a source of arrogance, which explains why some groups of people or societies tend to allocate the universal to their particularistic worldview. This self/other binary has been essentialized with no space in-between, hence the need to break the canon and point out that societies have developed their own conceptualization of categories.

In their “radically revisionist thesis”, Comaroff and Comaroff have argued that “in some critical respects, Euro-American personhood is evolving toward Africa, not the other way around” (2012, p. 52). The authors here point to the way in which the West’s very self-definition has significantly been with reference to the colonized others. This is part of the Comaroffs’ central narrative to debunk Euro-America’s parochial and particularistic thought as though it were the Omega Point, to borrow de Chardinian terminology (Teilhard de Chardin, 2008), toward which every society, people or culture must evolve. Drawing on the “conception of personhood” among the Tswana of South Africa, which resonates with other peoples on the African continent, the Comaroffs argue that “by

illuminating the contrasts and consonances between African and European discourses of personhood”, “a sharp, prismatic light” is cast on “received Western notions of the modernist self and its antinomies” (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2012, p. 52). In other words, the universe of knowledge is not self-contained in a Western worldview, which is why the famous Ghanaian philosopher, William E. Abraham, asserts that it would be “an act of supine madness simply to ape the West or the East” ... “in ways which cannot leave the cultures of Africa the same, without bothering to understand its mechanics and rationale” (2019, p. 28). In fact, Diop (1974) has made the bold claim that the Black world is the very initiator of Western civilization flaunted before our eyes today rather than an insolvent debtor to history as it tends to be perceived. Diop substantiates his argument by means of an elaborate discussion on how Ancient Egyptian civilization was a product of Black Africa. He draws on ancient Egyptian art whose images of pharaohs, gods and goddesses have typical Black features to buttress his point, albeit not without controversy nor challenges. And the point should also be made that even without Egypt, Black Africa cannot be a tabula rasa. This point is important for it leads us beyond the cultural war regarding Afrocentrism and its misrepresentations of history, which Lefkowitz (1996) saw typified in, for example, Martin Bernal’s *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization* (1987). Over and above such controversy, it is imperative to show, as this paper seeks to do, that curiosity is a human capacity in all cultures, enabling people to think through processes, and to discuss and debate ways of overcoming problems, thereby creating critical categories to ensure enduring social arrangement. Curiosity is the art of “restless questioning” (Hountondji, 1983, p. 53) or “a rigorous reflection on the conditions of philosophy as well as on the conditions of existing individuals and societies” (Mudimbe, 1988, p. 161). I will draw on examples from the *Bakpɛle* (*Ɔkpɛlenyɛ* is singular), a sub-group of the Guan of Ghana, to demonstrate such capacity fed by individual thought, discussion and debate, which Hountondji and others recognize as the hallmark of African philosophy.

Method

The *Bakpɛle*, now a people carved out of the Volta Region into the newly created Oti Region of Ghana, are settled on the Akwapim-Togo Mountain Range in eastern Ghana. Their area is referred to as *Likpe* on the map and in official Ghanaian literature, but they call themselves *Bakpɛle* and speak *Sɛkpɛle*. *Likpe* is derived from *Likpeawo*, an Ewe word, which means “stone sharpeners”, and is believed to have been conferred on the *Bakpɛle* by the *Ewe* of *Gbi* in and around the city of Hohoe, referring to an oral historical narrative in which the *Bakpɛle*

were preparing to engage the Gbi in battle in retribution for the latter's murder of a pregnant *Okpelenye*.

Map 1: Map of Ghana with new Administrative Regions



Source: <http://www.ghanadistricts.com/Home/LinkData/7188>

Edmund Kwame Okyerefo, a native, portrays the *Bakpɛle* as “blessed to be settled in *Kɔkpɛlese*, the most gorgeous countryside in Ghana, whose mountains and valleys, springs and waterfalls, rocks and caves, forests and arable lands have shaped our way of life over generations” (2013, p. 2). The *Bakpɛle* are steeped in and cherish their traditions. I have gained much knowledge as a result of my fieldwork and participation in their community life, which began in 2007; indeed, more than what I learned when growing up among them. This is because, though a native, I did not grow up in *Kɔkpɛlese*. It is my research interest that has brought me there frequently in my adult life. This work, thus, emanates from what I have learned through participant observation as well as through discussion and debate with the *Bakpɛle* individuals, who are most knowledgeable in the way of life of their people. As part of my research, I participated in *Kɔkpɛlese* town square meetings as well as their pre-burial and post-burial funeral meetings. Funerals are particularly significant times for the community and, of course, the bereaved, and present important occasions to witness conflict and harmony in the community during the discussions, debates and resolutions at the community meetings regarding the actions of the deceased. For this particular paper, I have chosen illustrations from community meetings at Likpe Agbozome, especially because the pre-burial and post-burial meetings characterising *Kɔsi*'s³ funeral (as we will see later) was fraught with conflict, an important ingredient necessary for debate.

Connecting this ethnography to the propensity of individual thoughts, discussion and debate within the community, one can observe how a conscious effort is made to give birth to critical conceptual categories as ferments of social order. This paper will not belabour the point regarding the existence of African Philosophy. Hountondji has already made that abundantly clear and pointed out, over and above the question of its existence, the need to locate African philosophy within “a truly theoretical discourse which will be indissolubly philosophical and scientific” rather than delve into an ideological self-definition (1983, p. 33). This leads to the important emphasis on the universality of philosophical thought. To this end, Hountondji illustrates with Kagamé's assertion that “formal logic is the same in all cultures” and that concepts, judgement and reasoning have no Bantu, Eastern or Western specificity: “What is expressed on this subject, in any language of Europe or Asia, America or Africa, can always be

³ All names used in the paper are pseudonyms. The photographs used are also by permission of the photographer and the groups appearing in them who are happy to have their ‘way of life’ documented in this research.

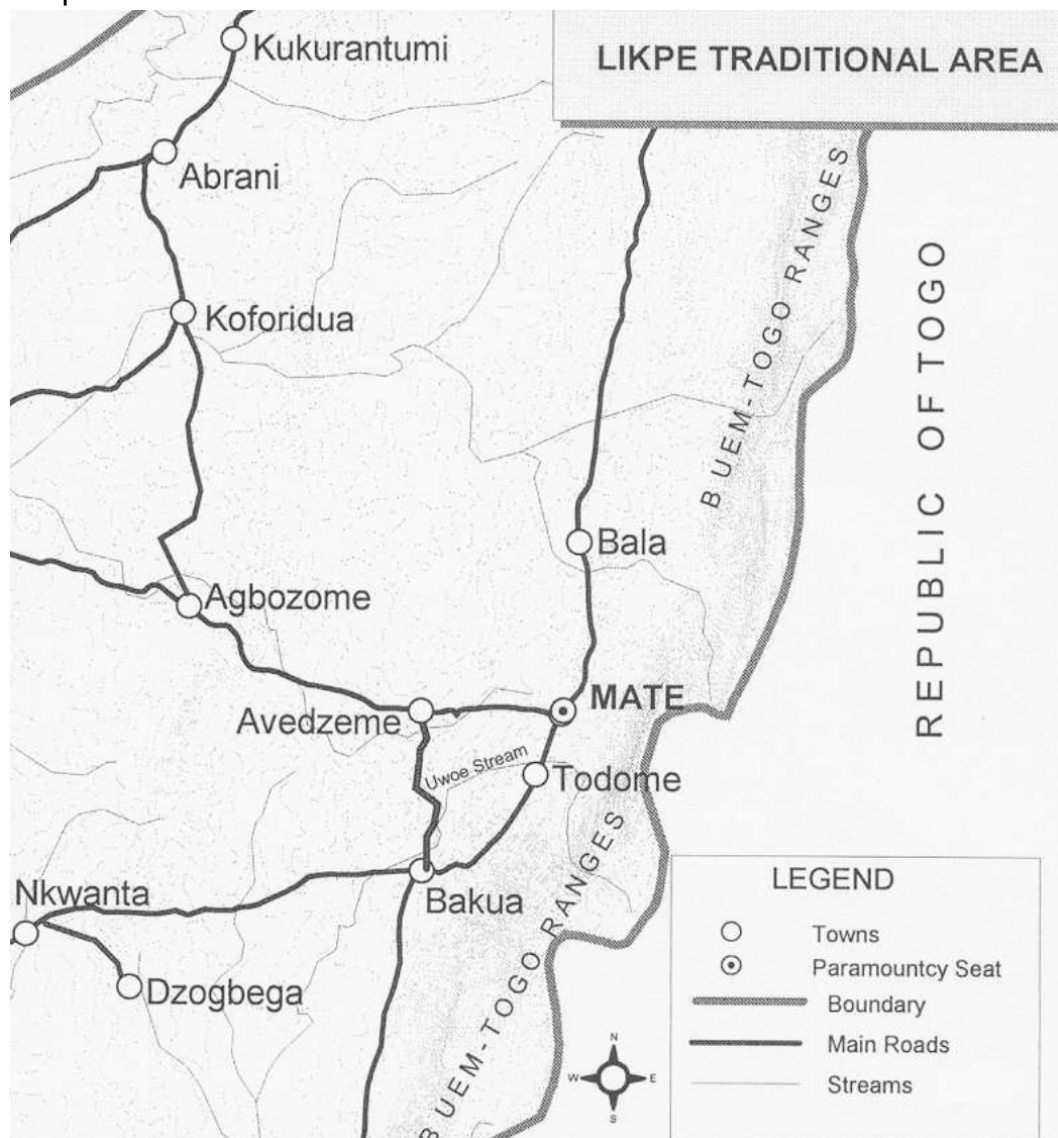
transposed into any other language belonging to a different culture” (Hountondji, 1983, p. 40-41). As seen earlier, Hountondji lays emphasis on the character of African philosophy as that “restless questioning, the untiring dialectic that accidentally produces systems and then projects them towards a horizon of fresh truths” (Hountondji, 1983, p. 53). To this end, I will elaborate more on the creative process of the conceptual categories assembled in the paper.

Horkheimer’s depiction of theory as critical when it endeavours “to liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave them” (1982, p. 244) is central to this argument. This study understands such human circumstances broadly as environmental and socio-cultural, which will involve the critical use of thought (reason) and experience (praxis) to surmount any impediment that could hinder a person or community’s wellbeing. The process forestalls an environmental hindrance to a cultivated life, just as social or cultural ideals like a people’s practices, laws, values, folkways, mores, when uncritically interrogated, could end up subjugating the human subject(s). The application of critical reasoning to define a person’s identity or belonging, such as citizenship endows, or the cultivation of land in specific ways as to suit a peculiar environment and to produce particular crops, ensures human survival in the environment concerned. Any such application stems from the curiosity inherent in humans to liberate themselves from a harsh physical environment, for example, just as the cultivation of ideals or values like justice could be liberating from equally thought out ideas such as injustice that promotes enslavement. Here then the art of curiosity is explored within the *Bakpɛle* thought process, leading to its interrogation of some conceptual categories as specific illustrations.

Responding to a question on how the *Bakpɛle* make decisions regarding their society, a 90-year old respondent, Kwame Agbibo, said to me on April 8, 2017 *bo ebu buə bo ate bo etsuəsa mmi ite kuse*, which he himself translated literally into English as “we calculate to know our arrangements today for the sake of tomorrow”, or “we are curious about the nature of our arrangements today and their implications for tomorrow”. I found this thought captivating, which is why it informs my topic for this research: “Curiosity is the bedrock that transcends boundaries and foments African conceptualization of critical categories.” This respondent is literate, with a good educational background, and was one of the two people who developed *Sɛkpɛle* into a written language. By “arrangements” he meant social arrangements. He explained further that there are other derivations of the verb *bu*, i.e., to calculate. So, for example, *bu akonta* means calculate sums and *bu disi* literally means calculate your head, i.e., think. “We engage the thought process”, he said. In our encounter, he displayed a mastery of both *Sɛkpɛle* and English.

This paper, thus, seeks to establish curiosity as a human propensity in the process of knowledge production, and I am using my ethnography of the *Bakpɛle* to demonstrate that in that society, curiosity produces knowledge within a local episteme that is valid. What does knowing this do for our understanding of African systems of knowledge more broadly? Following what others like the Comaroffs have established regarding the Tswana or other peoples on the African continent, the illustration with the *Bakpɛle* can be used to drive home a conceptual point more forcefully, relating back to Hountondji's "restless questioning, the untiring dialectic that accidentally produces systems and then projects them towards a horizon of fresh truths" (Hountondji, 1983, p. 53).

Map 2: Likpe Traditional Area



Source: Likpe Traditional Area. 2014 Lekoryi Festival Brochure

Figure 1: Likpe Mountain range



Source: Okyerefo 2013

Thought as a Human Proclivity

Story-telling, which is widespread in Africa, is an art that feeds the creative mind and engenders imagination. I have never forgotten how, as a little boy, I relished the stories I heard that transported me into the very scenes described, thereby stirring in me a craving for the imaginative. Even as an adult, I still have the said experience from time to time through reading a great novel, for example. Obviously, story-telling preceded writing and the latter would simply cast into stone and thereby preserve that which was known. Story-telling is not the preserve of any one culture, as I remember reading texts in secondary school that said story-telling was an art prevalent and enjoyed, for example, by the Scandinavian peoples.

Surely, the imagination stories evoked in me at an early age would induce my love for reading and later writing, all of which obviously nourish thought. So the arts or sciences as such lay deep within cultures, simply waiting to be discovered, developed and extended. It is curiosity, which communities stimulate in their subjects, that lays the foundation for the continued production of knowledge and invention. So, for example, a people's curiosity regarding safeguarding their societal wealth and heritage for generations after

them will inform their descent rules wrought through their social thought. Patrilineal societies like the *Bakpɛle* would wish to ensure smooth succession or inheritance through the paternal line, while succession in matrilineal societies, like the *Akan* in Ghana, is through the maternal line. Given succession and inheritance is normally fraught with challenges, as in the case of matrilineal inheritance in particular, the interstate succession law (PNDC Law 111) was enacted to insulate women and children from abuse at the death of a husband and a father. However, the same matrilineal succession preserves the age-old wisdom that only a woman can tell the paternity of her child, which is why succession through the mother's line is deemed absolute by its adherents. Thus, among the Asante of Ghana, the queen mother proposes the candidate who ascends the throne of the Asante kingdom as Asantehene (King of the Asante). Nonetheless, none of these societies, patrilineal or matrilineal, is superior to the other in terms of its social arrangements, as each seeks to build on the accumulated wisdom and experience of its forebears in the production of knowledge and in fomenting social thought. In the same vein, foreign social norms of no one society can be held superior to that of other societies.

Existing theories and concepts about Africa, especially with reference to Western views regarding the lack of African knowledge systems merit contestation. If Africans have the capacity to be curious about themselves, about life and the environment, then surely they must be capable of nurturing the sort of imaginative spirit capable for knowledge production. African conceptualization of critical categories, however, go beyond the contextualization of concepts in Africa to rethinking the application of concepts to African reality as has, indeed, been done and continues to evolve. This is exemplified in Nyamnjoh's (2004) assertion that Western epistemology emphasises *what* questions while African epistemologies introduces *why* questions into the debate. This effort demands that we come up with theoretical perspectives from our reality fuelled by our curiosity, research and academic courses. In that respect we should always ask and answer questions that seek to examine African reality.

It is in furtherance of this discussion, therefore, that this paper centres on the process of developing critical categories among the *Bakpɛle* in illustrating the production of knowledge on the continent. Gueye (2002) has analysed in his book: *Les intellectuels africains en France*, the efforts two generations of African thinkers have made to construct alternative theories and approaches about Africa. Wherever human beings have lived, they have, of necessity, engaged in some thinking, challenged, as always, by the essential questions of life – where do I come from, why am I here, where am I going? By the same token, Assimeng (1997, p. 2) has noted that the responses of humans to the challenges they

encounter provide the background to the “*realm of ideas*” they produce, manifested in both material and immaterial terms. Thus, on the one hand, the technology and artefacts a society develops and, on the other hand, the ideas undergirding their community life in general, sophisticated or otherwise, point to the social thought of the society. Such an idea, for example, can be gleaned from reasons why some communities in Ghana (e.g., Akpafu Todzi, Amedzorfe, Kwahu, Larteh), plagued by the constant attack from their enemies, at least so the oral history goes, built their settlements on mountains or highlands in order to ward off these enemies much more easily by means of rolling rocks or boulders.

***Bakpɛle* Conceptual Categories**

Social thought, thus, concerns the ideas human beings conceive and develop as they relate to one another and their environment. It is a product of the interaction among three important elements, as Ottite (2002, p. 1) has observed : people, their social heritage or culture, and their physical environment. Social thought originates from individual or group thinking in response to both social and physical environments. Consequently, the process of knowledge production is steeped in a people’s experience. The following examples illustrate how the *Bakpɛle* were curious about guiding the sense of direction and purpose to their society, with the aim of ensuring its stability. I consider these conceptual categories because they emanated from critical discourse held by the townsfolk of Likpe Agbozome at their town square on January 3, 2018 to deliberate on several issues, including the town’s development projects and the state of life in the community generally. The meeting was called at the instance of the chiefs and elders, in conjunction with the Likpe Agbozome Welfare Association (LAWA). LAWA is the town’s association of residents in Accra, the country’s capital, and the diaspora, whose members remit money to their families back home and support the town’s development projects. By the nature of the deliberations on this occasion, the discussion and debate verged on what the people consider the eternal values upon which their society was built, which they cherish and are determined to preserve. Individuals simply raised their hands to be called to make their intervention and counter debate, resulting in a very lengthy discussion from about eight in the morning to one in the afternoon (some 160 citizens attended the meeting). I profited from this meeting in view of my research, asked questions for clarity and documented the categories I will discuss below, after exploring them further with a few individuals in the community whom I regard as knowledgeable and who partake in deliberations around funerals. The results are

what I consider a rich ethnographic evidence of the community's life and its critical engagement with ensuring social order.

Citizenship - A good example is the question regarding who qualifies to be a citizen (*Οκπελενυε*) among the *Bakpele*. I have pointed out that the language spoken by *Bakpele* is *Σεκπελε*, while their state or traditional area is known as *Κεκπελεσε*, and an individual citizen, *Οκπελενυε*. The question regarding who qualifies to be an *οκπελενυε*, or citizen, arose, in the first place, in view of slaves (*mba baaya*)⁴ who had been brought into the community up to the beginning of the 20th-century and who were labelled as such, together with their descendants. Given the acrimonious division this social inequality engendered in the community, the chiefs and elders, upon deliberation, reached the spectacular conclusion that the community does not tolerate 'acephalous' members. In other words, there is no one who has been incorporated into the ethnic group who was not 'headed' by the group or who does not belong to it. By the middle of the 20th-century the elders had decreed that it was a punishable offence to refer to anyone as slave and consequently an outsider (interviews with Kwame Agbibo, April 8, 2017, and the *mankrado* of the town - owner of the land - April 9, 2017). This deliberation and decision of the elders should be seen as an extension of acephalousness from societies, as anthropologists are usually wont to describe, to individuals, to the effect that no individual shall remain stateless among the *Bakpele*. This decision ensured that any of such individuals were absorbed into their host families with full rights, such as family name and land ownership. This means that even if the phrase *mba baaya* has not fallen into disuse, it is not used with regard to any individual but with reference to a historical reality that once pertained to the community.

Citizenship was therefore established in such a way as to include an otherwise excluded segment of people who would have suffered exclusion in perpetuity even if other forms of social stratification in the community, such as economic, or power lines, or even disagreement between clans, continued to exist. Such thinking is a smart illustration of how ideas are developed among peoples and it is an important one to highlight in view of the many ethnic divisions and internecine clashes and wars that are quickly flagged as characteristic of the African continent. The infamous Rwandan genocide that fed on a division between Hutu and Tutsi that, ironically, was nurtured by the so-called enlightened colonial authority, comes to mind.

⁴ *Betidi ba baaya* or *mba baaya*, literally meaning people who have been bought – slaves.

Returning to the celebration of citizenship among the the *Bakpɛle*, unity for the community suggests itself as a key determinant of the elders' decision, just as the dignity of, or respect for, the human person (*ditidibu*). They sought to bring destructive behaviour (*kabia* or *kabiasə*) in the community to the barest minimum, thereby upholding the moral standards by which individuals in the community should abide. Notable among such standards was also what was meant by being civilized (*akpa enemi*), literally meaning one has a broader vision or view on life or reality. *Kabia* or *kabiasə* also means destruction of individuals or the community, which must be curtailed.

Race - The concept of race is another interesting example I discussed with the *Bakpɛle*, as it does not exist as the power construct that it connotes in English or other European languages. People (*betide*), as a concept, is what is known in *Sɛkpɛle*. *Betidi* simply means people and in order to distinguish among people, one may refer to where they come from (their origin). Such descriptions in and of themselves do not connote power, just as adjectives such as height or size or the colour of their skin can be used to describe them. Perhaps this could be attributed to the fact that the *Bakpɛle* have not had the experience of dominating other peoples en masse and, therefore, have not had the need to develop in their language such concepts denoting exploitative power as race entails. However, as pointed out in the discussion on slave/citizen above, other ways of denoting power used to categorize people exists in *Sɛkpɛle* in regards to social differentiation. This example points to how a people's worldview or experience shapes the concepts they developed and their knowledge production or social thought for that matter.

In view of the wealth of information the *Bakpɛle* have on citizenship, I deliberately introduced the concept of race in my discussions during fieldwork to see the effect. I could not get much out of my interviewees, obviously because they have not been preoccupied with it, apart from the literate ones who would typically refer to it as a foreign concept. This reality points to how social thought develops. Social thought results in part from the nature of social conditions, hence its limitation to time and space, although, in Ottite's view (2002, p. 2), it can become timeless. This means that not only can a people's thought transform their own time and space, indeed, it can transcend it to influence other people in their time and space. This is how cross-fertilisation is effected, as in the transfer of knowledge or technology. Such transfer is the very reason why Eurocentric thought has played such a dominant role in Africa. Knowledge production in Africa is, thereby, characterised by each society's cultural and social values, the people's encounter with the West and the resulting landscape thereof. We can, therefore, speak of pre-colonial civilizations in Africa, the colonial and the post-colonial, each of which has shaped social thought on the continent. But also

independent of that, is the thought pattern a people develops, which could have similarities with other people's thought, even though both groups may share no physical boundaries. This is why it is not surprising to note that the *Bakpɛle* do not have the concept of race in their language but possess their own expressions for certain values or concepts such as good or evil, justice and injustice, or human rights even if such descriptions do not translate directly as the concepts denoting the same realities in other languages or cultures. So, for example, *bɔtsyɔ* in *Sɛkpɛle* literally means being straight but also being just, while the opposite form, *mantsyɔ*, means being crooked, in both the literal and factual sense. These are values that form and inform character, as we will see below. The importance is that different cultures have similar expressions, stemming, as it were, from their very cravings for satisfying what it means to be human.

Leadership and Engagement – Just as the concept of race, the *Bakpɛle* have no equivalent word for democracy. The rule of the elders is in respect of gerontocracy; leadership rests in the hands of chiefs chosen from designated families and elders, men, who grow up to fill respected positions as advisors. A similar social arrangement exists with regard to queens and female elders, but men are the overarching decision-makers. It is essential to point out, however, that the chiefs and elders deliberate over issues and reach decisions by means of consensus, even if the process of debate itself may be marked by dissension. In the same spirit, the people in general are consulted, depending on the nature of the issue. For example, while the entire people is not consulted in the choice of a chief, which is the prerogative of the royal family, issues having to do with the welfare of the town, such as improving social amenities like the community water project or agreeing on levies for projects or fines for those who refuse to participate in communal labour require consultation at organized town gatherings that take place in the town square.

Such consultation binds individuals to the commonweal. This is why everyone of the eleven *Bakpɛle* towns has a town centre (*obia*) where a huge tropical fig tree stands, in some cases two or more of the said tree, having been planted at the inception of the settlement; practically, for shade during meetings, but above all to serve as a symbol of unity (interview with the *mankrado* - May 2, 2019). The act of consultation characterised by the *obia* no doubt smacks of what may be considered democratic principles.

Figure 2: *Obia* at Likpe Agbozome



Photograph taken by the author, May 2, 2019

Figure 3: *Obia* at Likpe Bakua



Photograph taken by the author, May 2, 2019

The fig tree is a resistant species that survives all seasons, thereby providing shade and evokes an aura of respect for such meeting, steeped as it is in the tradition of the ancestors. The town square marks the space of deliberation and depicts the importance consultation has among the *Bakpɛle*, as I have pointed out elsewhere (Okyerefo, 2018, p. 32) regarding the art/tradition/custom of “consulting the old woman”, which is rendered as *ewu* in *Sɛkpɛle* or *abrewa* in *Akan* and *mama* in *Ewe*, all of which are Ghanaian languages. This is a figurative search for wisdom, personified as a female virtue, albeit after a ripe old age, to endow the elders with the prowess to adjudicate in intractable cases. The exercise hinges on debate in order to arrive at the best solution possible. Needless to say, oratory skills are also significant in this endeavour. This point is reiterated in *Feminine Wisdom as an Axis to Traditional Knowledge in Africa* (Okyerefo, 2019).

Deliberation and Restoration - The town square induces freedom of self-expression that inures to the benefit of thought. At its best, the practice is seen when a member of the community dies. Death brings almost every member of the community, men and women, together, summoning them to a pre-burial meeting and deliberation (*ukuto*) as well as a post-burial meeting and deliberations (*likunkpo*). Typically, *ukuto* is organised on the eve of the burial when the body of the deceased is brought from the mortuary to be prepared for burial. The meeting ascertains from the close relatives of the deceased, the cause of death for the benefit of the community and probes into the life and character of the deceased, whether he/she was a good person and lived peaceably with others or not. In the same vein, the gathering seeks to know how the living treated the deceased while alive and especially what care he or she received while taken ill or in the last moments of life. Also important is whether the deceased and any living member of the community were at loggerheads. The information gathered from *ukuto* will shape the morning after burial meeting, *likunkpo*. The essence of *likunkpo*, which literally means judicial inquiry around death, is meant to mend broken relationships, which means any offending party in relation to the questions raised at the pre-burial meeting, whether the deceased or anyone among the living, should be fined. Any person who is fined pays the penalty. In the case of the deceased person, it is the living members of his or her family who are responsible for the funeral and inherit the dead person, who pay the fine, but there is also room for a pardon or acquittal.

For example, when Kɔsi, a man from Likpe Agbozome who had had a successful career as a civil servant and travelled the world, died in October 2018, the post burial meeting, *likunkpo*, considered the difficult relationship between Kɔsi and his son, Kɔdzo, to adjudicate between the deceased and the living, recalling how

Kɔsi mistreated his son while alive, to the extent of refusing to pay for his education, which resulted in their protracted difficult relationship right till the death of Kɔsi. Some people at the meeting recounted the several attempts they made to help father and son reconcile with the father usually unwilling to do so, even calling the intelligence of his son into question. The gathering reached the verdict that Kɔsi, the father, was the guilty one and should be fined, whereupon one person at the meeting informed the gathering that Kɔsi, before his demise, had confessed his guilt to him and wished to ask pardon of his son and the community. By virtue of this apology, Kɔsi was acquitted and was not fined. His son Kɔdzo was also happy the community was witness to the mistreatment his late father meted out to him, accepted the apology and peace was restored. While some of these cultural practices are being transformed, they continue to be observed for the values they inhabit in preserving the social fabric of the society. The social fabric is so sacred that not even death should be seen to shred it to pieces.

Figure 4: *Ukuto*



Photograph taken by Killian Akpemado, May 3, 2019⁵

⁵ The photographs here do not match the occasions described in the text so as to ensure anonymity.

Figure 5: *Likunkpo*

Photograph taken by Killian Akpemado, May 5, 2019

Justice - The activities of enquiry discussed above regarding resolving intractable problems or ensuring the preservation of social harmony are aimed at the progress of the community and its inhabitants, which, for that matter, is a core human desire, irrespective of where a people are born, live or however their way of life may be. The wellbeing of the social group, its survival and development, thus, demands curiosity of thought to unravel novel ways of adaptation to their environment and to aid humans surmount whatever unfolding social circumstances or behaviour that confronts them. This point can be illustrated with how the question of citizenship among the *Bakpɛle* was resolved that, until some slaves were introduced into the community this was an unnecessary question. To this end, the society will develop its own categories of justice or injustice and its attendant reward or punishment. So, for example, since adultery is still frowned upon among the *Bakpɛle*, an offender is punished to ensure justice. The punishment consists in a fine of cash, a ram and alcoholic spirits. Most of the cash is paid to the offended while the ram is sacrificed and the drinks used to pour libation to purify the entire society whose sanctity was soiled by the offence. While the alcoholic beverage is drunk at the gathering the meat of the slaughtered animal is shared among the adjudicators. The public nature of this rite is meant to deter others from such humiliation. The concepts of justice or injustice in *Sɛkpɛle*, *bɔtsɔ* (being straight) and *mantsɔ* (being crooked) apply to both a person or an action. Therefore, both a person and an action can be

straight or crooked, thereby needing straightening. The same is true regarding curbing all kinds of social vices, thereby urging the individual to fulfil his or her responsibilities, aimed at building the kind of character the society cherishes. The following episode illustrates the point.

During fieldwork in May 2019, I witnessed the incident of a young man (Komla) of the Obakomba clan at Likpe Koforidua being summoned before the clan elders for extending the boundary of his farmland into his neighbour's by uprooting the flower demarcation hedge. Of interest is the fact that even in the 21st century, the common agreement is for a particular flower to be planted as a hedge to demarcate boundaries among clan members, while a specific species of a tree is used between different clans. This means boundaries between clansmen are "soft" while those between clans are "hard". A clansman simply needs permission to farm on another's land without any charge but the boundary may not be shifted. These arrangements are strictly obeyed and no one usurps a clansman's land, in spite of the apparent temporary nature of the demarcation. The elders of the clan, therefore, sent a delegation to the land to settle the dispute between the two clansmen, replant the hedge on the original boundary, and fine Komla an amount of money and alcoholic spirits as deterrent for the crooked behaviour.

Character - An honest person would be described as one who dislikes "dirt", *kəni*, while the contrary expression is characteristic of a dishonest person. By the same token, the dislike for *kəni* would also qualify as virtue in a community which draws a strict line between good (acceptable) and evil (unacceptable) behaviour, which action characterizes the *Bakpɛle* community debate at the town centre (*obia*), or during the pre-burial deliberation (*ukuto*) and post-burial deliberation (*likunkpo*). The foregoing illustration points to a community that has always been engaged with itself, proffering solutions to the problems with which it is confronted.

These engagements emanate from a thought system that is steeped in what the 90-year old man described as "we calculate to know our arrangements today for the sake of tomorrow" (*bo ebu buə bo ate bo etsuəsa mmi itɛ kuse*). This attitude to life underscores my observation in the introduction regarding human beings' insatiable quest for answers to eternal questions, thereby establishing curiosity as a fundamental principle of thought which, I argue, transcends boundaries. The curiosity to unravel and resolve its challenges, in order to promote societal wellbeing, lies at the heart of the *Bakpɛle* mode of knowledge production expressed in the conceptual categories the society has developed.

This ethnographic study, therefore, depicts the *Bakpɛle* as a group of Africans that, like other groups, have developed their own concepts, ways of knowing and knowledge production. The discovery portrays how concepts of originality and

innovation mark the African reality, albeit distorted sometimes for reasons of politics and ignorance. Clearly, this ethnography invites us to delve more honestly into the African reality, which drives home more forcefully Mudimbe's observation that "philosophy concerns the experience of humans, although it cannot be assimilated to it; philosophy bears on experience, reflects it without being congruent with it" (1988, p. 156) and Hountondji's assertion that African philosophy can "exist as a philosophy only in the form of a confrontation between individual thoughts, a discussion, a debate" (1983, p. 53). You cannot discuss a people without making them part of the conversation. That is the only way to benefit from the breadth and depth of their reality, which stands in solidarity with other people's reality rather than subsist in the other. The knowledge unearthed in this study regarding the *Bakpɛle* depicts a people in tune with their life's circumstances with their 'thinking caps' constantly on to liberate them from those "circumstances" that would otherwise "enslave them" (Horkheimer, 1982, p. 244).

Conclusion

Any "society, defined as a network of relationships in institutional contexts, is an end product of social thought. It is social thought being acted in a particular milieu" (Otite, 2002, p. 11). If society is a product of social thought, then it stands to reason that Africa must necessarily have its social thought. The point then is not to align the concepts any one society has developed to any other one, but to seek to discover their unique wealth, which may well be shared with others. It is apparent, as illustrated by the *Bakpɛle*, that social thought is informed by community and external forces, evolving an overarching culture with social mores. Is the *Bakpɛle* town square consultation not reminiscent of the Western public sphere which has also evolved as a key component of democracy? Democracy, while seen as the ultimate in Western societies, may yet learn from *Bakpɛle* social justice traditions in death, *likunkpo*. While society is organized by a chief and patriarchal structure, the *likunkpo* underpins an inherent democracy and justice irrespective of the language used. Here then are conceptual categories emanating from critical discourse at its best, spelling out cultural uniqueness, and inherent value and worth, of which the west could yet learn, particularly in light of an increasingly western intolerance and isolation.

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