

*There is neither a first nor a last word and there are no limits to the dialogic context.*  
Mikhail Bakhtin

# INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE AS SCIENTIFIC

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**Adebayo Anthony Ogungbure, University of Ibadan, Nigeria\***

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**Interview by Ana Fonseca**

*\* This interview was originally published in an extended version by Radio Heteroglossia on February 2014. The original interview has been shortened for this publication to fit our new, condensed format launched on September 2016. As of 2015, Mr. Ogungbure became a Lechner Scholar and Doctoral candidate in the Department of Philosophy at Texas A&M University in the United States.*

**Ana Fonseca:** Thanks for listening to Radio Heteroglossia. I'm Ana Fonseca and our guest today is Mr. Adebayo Anthony Ogungbure. He is a Ph.D candidate and an academic advisor in the Department of Philosophy at the [University of Ibadan](#) in Nigeria, Africa. Today, we will be discussing the article written by Mr. Ogungbure entitled, "[African indigenous knowledge: scientific or unscientific?](#)" published in 2013 in the academic journal *Inkanyiso: Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* of the University of Zululand in South Africa, which examines the causes and assumptions that create tension and antagonism between Western and African indigenous knowledge.

Welcome and thank you for joining us today Mr. Ogungbure.

**Adebayo A. Ogungbure:** Thank you so much Ana. It's my pleasure to be in your show.

**Ana Fonseca:** Great! In your article, you argue that, "knowledge is a cultural phenomenon and in so far as Africans have a cultural understanding, they are also capable of scientific thinking." Here you are conveying a lot of interesting ideas, one of them is the role of culture in understanding systems of knowledge, and culture is one of those

terms that have different meanings for different peoples. I would like to know what is your understanding of culture and in what sense is that you see this dynamic interaction between culture, or cultures, and the production of knowledge?

**Adebayo A. Ogungbure:** It is upon my understanding of culture as the totality of the body of knowledge produced within a society that I argue that indigenous knowledge is also scientific because it is produced within a culture, just as the knowledge in Western science is also produced within a culture.

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**Ana Fonseca:** Another point that called my attention in the above mentioned quotes was indeed your reference to scientific knowledge, and you are referring to it now as well in the context of explaining your definition of culture and the cultural basis of knowledge that you argue in your article. You seem to have a concern about dismissing indigenous African knowledge as non-scientific, and thus you argue that indigenous African knowledge is scientific in your article. So my questions in this regard are, what is your definition of indigenous knowledge and to what extent are you referring to it as scientific as well in order to challenge that dichotomy that exists between Western and indigenous forms of knowledge?

**Adebayo A. Ogungbure:** Good. Thank you so much for that question. Now what's my view of indigenous knowledge? I would define indigenous knowledge as the systematic body of knowledge acquired by local people through the accumulation of experiences and intimate understanding of the environment within a given culture. Now, in my paper, I am arguing that we can call indigenous knowledge scientific. Why? All forms of knowledge are produced within a culture. That's what I refer as the cultural basis of knowledge. So insofar as they are produced within a culture, we cannot opt for the standard, that ok, one standard is the standard of science which is in the Western world, so all forms of knowledge within native peoples those don't have elements of science. No, that argument is faulty. It is a false dichotomy. It's a false dichotomy based on the misunderstanding of the concept of science and culture. What is science? Science in a loose sense is the ability of the people to explore and exploit the resources of nature in order to make life more meaningful, in order to make human life meaningful. So, if we can explore the resources of nature, the environment to make life easy within native communities, within

cultural frameworks, then why can't we grant the status of science to African indigenous knowledge, or other forms of indigenous knowledge? And I argue in my paper, that's why we can refer to it as scientific, because there is no standard definition of science. So that's my argument, and that's why I said it is a false dichotomy.

**Ana Fonseca:** Yeah that was an important clarification because, the way I see it, it's in your definition of science that this argument was based on, which is a broader definition of science, right? That it's not just something that Western cultures have. Other cultures also have their own visions of science and therefore we can call indigenous forms of knowledge science as well.

**Adebayo A. Ogungbure:** Yeah.

**Ana Fonseca:** You also talk about the oral aspect of most African indigenous knowledge. Why orality is so important in most African cultures? Is there an advantage to communicate their knowledge orally?

**Adebayo A. Ogungbure:** Thank you so much for that interesting question. Well, first thing I need to say is that when you look of oral traditions, you are looking at African languages within African culture. African languages are exceptionally wealthy in folktales, proverbs and witty sayings which often times communicate certain ideals, values and precepts that guide people within African communities how they go about their daily life. So when we look at oral traditions we are talking about ideology that is transferred by an oral method. When you talk of orality, you are talking of peoples' epistemology. Epistemology is simply the source of knowledge, the limits of human knowledge and how human knowledge is characterized within different cultures. So the advantage within Africa on the issue of expressing their thoughts orally is that, first one: it prevents distortions of the autochthonous, the indigenous views on life, nature and society at large. Apart from that, preservation of indigenous knowledge in oral means, in oral tradition also have the impact of preserving history. Africans have what they call eulogy, or prayer singing. If you cite someone's eulogy, we can talk about his historical antecedents, what his family lineage is like, what are the values they appreciate. So in oral tradition lies nuggets of knowledge, nuggets of belief systems that are very deep. Africans believe that there are some deep aspects of their ontology that are best preserved and best transmitted orally. And they

also believe that such forms of knowledge if they try to translate it into writing, a lot of things will be lost. So when Africans try to preserve their thoughts orally they are trying to ensure that the views that they have is what it really is, *Ijinle*, in Yoruba, *Ijinle*. That is, we go back to the roots.

**Ana Fonseca:** It is interesting what you explain about the African perspective on orality because for most Western cultures it is writing that avoids distortion. Well, there are still distortions, but the prominent belief in most Western cultures is that writing is the best way to preserve their knowledge of their history, etc. So how for most Africans, how does orality avoid distortions specifically?

**Adebayo A. Ogunbure:** Africans preserve their indigenous knowledge from distortions by expressing our ideology by expressing our belief system in African languages because that is the way that we can know the traditional conceptions of society and nature.

**Ana Fonseca:** But then, it can also be argued that African indigenous knowledge can be communicated in writing still using African indigenous languages. So... what is it about orality that fits so well within African indigenous languages?

**Adebayo A. Ogunbure:** The African culture, specifically the Yoruba culture, is very colourful. I know, growing up as a young boy, I grew up knowing my grandparents expressing most of our family beliefs orally. And they would sing it, they would chant it, they would say it in folk tales. It's the chanting that I want to point out about orality. It depicts the esthetic flavour of African cultural beliefs. Now, let me go further by citing an example of the *Ijala*, which I cited in one of my papers as a form of oral practice within the Yoruba culture that shows so much indigenous knowledge preserved in it and it's also rendered...the rendition! You see the beauty of the rendition cannot be overemphasized because it's a different thing if you just read it, you write it down...it's not animated.

**Ana Fonseca:** Yeah, it's hard to look at the tone, at the emotion behind it that also contributes to its meaning.

**Adebayo A. Ogunbure:** That's what I'm driving at.

**Ana Fonseca:** It's really interesting because it's a more comprehensive view of language that is not just the word, the written word but is also the body language, the tone of your voice

**Adebayo A. Ogungbure:** Now, I want to give an example of an Ijala chant just to make you understand the emotion. When I express myself orally with this chant you will understand what I am trying to say. So let me just give you this chant on nature. This chant was chanted in Ibadan during the historic flooding of 1980 and it goes thus, after I chant it I will give a translation.

**Ana Fonseca:** Ok. Thank you.

**Adebayo A. Ogungbure:** It goes thus [Ijala chant]. This chant is translated as follows, "Will this year's rain destroy the world? Will this year's rain destroy the world? It swept the husband and the wife. It swept the husband and the wife! And also swept the child away." So this chant was to attest to the destructive havoc which rain can cause among humans and also to warn the people within the Yoruba community in Ibadan that the danger in flooding. They also gave an additional chant to this which is quite long, I just decided to take the short form, to tell the people on how to go about preventing the flood from reoccurring. So what this has to do is to show you that, in a way, there are ways messages can be communicated within indigenous people in esthetic ways so that there will be emotion, there will be sympathy, there will be empathy, and it will be easy for people to listen to the voice of two chants, and we should put on practices that will prevent such occurrence from coming to pass again.

**Ana Fonseca:** Thank you so much Mr. Ogungbure for taking the time to join us today and share with us your knowledge and point of view on these issues.

**Adebayo A. Ogungbure:** Thank you so much Ana, it is my pleasure to be on your show once again and thank you so much for giving me this platform to express some of my views and ideas. Thank you.

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