The Sense of Interconnectedness in African Thought-Patterns: In Search of a More Useful Philosophical Idiom

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ABSTRACT: The sense of interconnectedness is perhaps one of the most celebrated features of African thought. It has been theorized under different philosophical idioms among African philosophers. It has appeared variously as African metaphysics, ontology, socialism and even religion—all in a bid to underline the basic idea that aspects of reality are inextricably interconnected and mutually impact one another in a seemingly universal web of interaction. While each of the idioms used to express this idea has some merits, the article privileges the epistemic idiom. To support this move, I make two mutually reinforcing arguments. First, it is *appropriate* to describe the sense of interconnectedness in epistemic terms because it is primarily a mode of knowing/perceiving the world. Second, and more importantly, the epistemic idiom is *useful* for the formulation of emancipatory demands and formation of epistemic alliances against the subjugation of African and non-Western knowledges by mechanisms of coloniality.

KEY WORDS: African philosophy, interconnectedness, community/individual, solidarity, subaltern epistemologies, modernity, coloniality, ubuntu, epistemic injustice

INTRODUCTION

The *sense of interconnectedness* in African thought-patterns is one of the most celebrated ideas among African philosophers and intellectuals. It has been conceived under a variety of names by African thinkers—as "Ujamaa" (Nyerere 1968), "Ubuntu" (Ramose 2005), "Ibuanyidanda" (Asouzu 2007, 2011), and "Ezumezu" (Chimakonam 2019), to mention but a few. As I see it, these are various ways of underlining a thought-pattern that somewhat defines Africa,

namely that entities or aspects of reality (both material and non-material) are inextricably linked to one another and impinge on one another in a somewhat universal web of interaction. This sense of interconnectedness underlies Mbiti's (1970: 141) now famous statement on African personhood, "I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am." Thus, the sense of interconnectedness also finds a social expression in the much-celebrated person-community dynamics in Africa and the solidarity that flows from it.

But I do think that the challenging task that confronts African intellectuals, especially philosophers, has always been one of finding a *useful* philosophical idiom with which to *theorize* this notion of interconnectedness in African thought. I use the term "idiom" in this context to refer to the philosophical/theoretical language with which to express and *make sense of* this idea of interconnectedness. In concrete terms, we must ask: Could we adopt a language of metaphysics when speaking about the African sense of interconnectedness? In other words, is it a "metaphysics"? Or is it an "ontology"? Should we speak of it as a form of African logical system? Is it an African social/political philosophy? Or is this sense of interconnectedness a psychological disposition that could be expressed in psychological idioms? Should we adopt a religious language in describing it?

Prevailing scholarships have tended to adopt one or more of these idioms. For instance, Nyerere's "Ujamaa" (no doubt a variant of the African sense of interconnectedness) is touted as "African socialism" by its proponents. Innocent Azouzu (2007, 2011) adopts the language of ontology to analyze what he calls the "Ibuanyidanda" philosophy, while Chimakonam (2019) speaks of the "Ezumezu logic," a supposedly African logical system founded on the sense of interconnectedness. Placide Tempels (2010) employs what I take to be a language of "ontology" when describing various expressions of the sense of interconnectedness in his *Bantu Philosophy*. Abanuka (1994) tends to appropriate a "metaphysical" language in speaking about the interconnectedness of the different "levels" of reality in African thought. Elements of the sense of interconnectedness appear as "religion" in Mbiti (1970). A number of scholars have even continued to describe it in the now discredited "ethnophilosophical" idioms. Ethnophilosophy is a mode of doing African philosophy that looks very much like ethnographic and ethnological works on Africa. It lacks philosophical depth and tends to hypostasize and generalize Africa's philosophical resources. Paulin Hountondji (1983) has been its most prominent critic.

While each of these idioms possesses some merit, depending on one's standpoint, none of them seems to be sufficient, least of all complete.

In this article, I intend to *privilege* the epistemological idiom. Therefore, the claim, which at the same time justifies the appropriation of the epistemic idiom, is that the African sense of interconnectedness is basically a *sense*, a *way of knowing*. In other words, it is a *mode* of *perceiving* the world. It is an epistemic disposition—

indeed an epistemology in its own right. Seeing the sense of interconnectedness as a way of knowing would no doubt minimize the risk of hypostasizing the African experience of reality (as though it were static and thing-like), a risk that is far more pronounced and threatening when one adopts the metaphysical or ontological idiom, as seen in Abanuka (1994) and Asouzu (2007, 2011) respectively.

My analysis of the idea of interconnectedness in this paper will precisely demonstrate why it may be more *useful* to describe it in epistemic/epistemological terms. In privileging the epistemological idiom, I do not in any way wish to discredit other idioms. Though the appropriateness of adopting an epistemic idiom will be simultaneously showcased, I do not even wish to assume that it may perhaps be *most* appropriate. Therefore, the modest stress of the paper is on its *usefulness*, which lies basically in its great potential as an idiom with which emancipatory demands against epistemic injustice meted out on African and other non-Western knowledge traditions could be formulated.

Before I go any further, it is important to note—and as the title of paper already indicates—that I speak of "thought-patterns" in the plural in order not to homogenize or hypostasize the sense of interconnectedness among various African peoples. So, I reject outright the propensity in various shades of "ethnophilosophy" to make essentializing and generalizing claims about elements of African thought, for which Placide Tempels (2010) has become particularly notorious. For, I recognize that the notion of interconnectedness is quite nuanced and could express itself in multifarious forms among the various peoples of Africa. Yet what underlies the various expressions and the derivative knowledges is the basic *sense* that realities are inextricably interconnected and mutually impact one another.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, I make a case for seeing the African sense of interconnectedness in epistemological terms. To do this, I suggest that it is a mode of knowing, indeed an epistemology, insofar as "epistemology" is not conceived simply as academic hairsplitting about the nature and conditions of knowledge, but indeed as "lived knowledge." Next, and building on the foundation laid in the first step above, I try to privilege the epistemic idiom by proposing that, among the available idioms (metaphysics, ontology, socialism, etc.) for describing the African sense of interconnectedness, it proves to be more *useful* for addressing the epistemic subjugation of African knowledges and other non-Western knowledges. Finally, I demonstrate the claim made in the second step by forging a synergy between the African sense of interconnectedness and those of Latin America, drawing on insights from Mogobe Ramose (on *ubuntu*) and the scholars of the Modernity/Coloniality Collective, namely, Anibal Quijano, Enrique Dussel, Walter Mignolo and Ramón Grosfoguel.

The Sense of Interconnectedness as a Mode of Knowing

Since the key claim of the paper is that it is useful to theorize the African sense of interconnectedness in epistemic terms, it is germane to begin by showing right away that it is *appropriate* to see it in terms of epistemology. This section aims to accomplish this task of justifying the theorization of the African sense of interconnectedness in epistemological terms.

To begin with, the very notion that the individual is inextricably linked to the community and that realities mutually impact one another is basically a *sense*, a *mode of knowing the world*, even though it is often either couched in metaphysical language or meant to assume a religious outlook in Africa. As a mode of knowing, it epistemologically predisposes the African to perceive reality in a certain manner which in turn expresses itself in beliefs and societal practices. As will be further elaborated in the course of the paper, it is an *experiential* knowledge or sense, gained from contact with reality (but sometimes given some religious outlook to achieve some societal ends). For instance, African ancestors did not need the gods to tell them the importance of leaving a piece of land fallow to make for regeneration and bumper harvest. Nor did they need the gods to teach them the importance of totemizing some plant and animal species to prevent them from extinction and guarantee balance in the ecosystem. Rather, they enforced social regulations derived from these experientially obtained pieces of knowledge by putting them in the mouths of some supposed supernatural beings or deities. So, they came to *know* by experience—and did not need to *divine* it—that if cosmic balance is not maintained, humans would suffer it the most, because reality is interconnected.

It is appropriate, therefore, to locate this recognition of interaction and mutual impingement, whether causal or functional, between realities in the realm of *knowledge*. Though this type of knowledge is so enmeshed in life as actually lived, African sages are still able to discern that it is basically a question of knowledge or way of knowing. For example, when the white man came with schools to spread Western civilization and modernity, Africans unmistakably discerned that they were, at bottom, confronting a form of knowledge or mode of knowing different from theirs. As Chinua Achebe (2017: 179) narrates, "One of the great men in that village was called Akunna and he had given one of his sons to be taught the white man's knowledge in Mr. Brown's school." Note that, although Akunna would not himself go to school, he recognized the importance of having someone in his household acquire a type of knowledge—"the white man's knowledge"—different from their own knowledges and manner of perceiving reality (Achebe 2016: 13, see also 46, 84).

As I earlier hinted, the epistemological base is sometimes clothed in religious garbs; at other times it appears as folklore, myths, pithy sayings, adages, songs, names, etc. In other words, beneath all these lies a particular worldview or mode

of perceiving the world—indeed an epistemology—marked by a sense of interconnectedness. On this note, one of the foremost Igbo (African) scholars, A.E. Afigbo, urges us to go beyond the surface level of Igbo tales and folklore to unearth the epistemology loaded beneath. His submissions on Igbo (African) tales and folklore are indeed valid for other African peoples.

> When fully researched and properly interpreted, it is likely to be found that the great teaching and message of the tales is that Igbo culture and civilization is man-made rather than received, and that it is based on historical experience: that is on the message, knowledge and lessons which the mind of the Igbo man absorbed from happening (natural and non-natural) around him. . . . Gaining information, knowledge and wisdom from experience is science. In other words, the inner teaching of these fairy tales is that the Igbo world, the world as constructed by the Igbo man, is based on science—that is on what the Igbo call *mee lete* (try and see). (Afigbo 2014: 44)

In the above submission, it could be seen that the African (in this instance, Igbo) person produces knowledge, not from some other-worldly religious dictates, but from knowledge and wisdom gained from actual life experiences. The knowledge gained from perception informs religion and not the converse. As it were, the African *tells the gods what to say*, perhaps to give some force to pre-established knowledges. As I have been arguing, it is fundamentally in the sphere of knowledge.

Though this sense of interconnectedness belongs to the sphere of epistemology, it should not be understood in the "academic" sense in which epistemology concerns itself with hairsplitting arguments regarding what may or may not pass for "valid" knowledge. Rather, it belongs to the species of epistemology that Sousa Santos (2014, 2018) calls "epistemologies of the South" (as distinguished from "epistemologies of the North"). An important characteristic of such epistemologies is that they are "lived knowledges" and not theoretical knowledges. They are non-specialized, practical, folk, common sense knowledges (Sousa Santos 2018: 43). Indeed, the African does not distinguish life from thought. Like all such "Southern" epistemologies, the African sense of interconnectedness is an embodied type of knowledge insofar as the African does not despise the senses and emotions but validates tham as legitimate sources of knowledge.

Generally, Africans do not construct "water-tight" and elaborately-written systems of thought. Since Africans "did not construct a rigid and closely argued system of thought to explain the universe and the place of man in it, preferring the metaphor of myth and poetry, anyone seeking an insight into their world must seek it along their own ways, some of these ways are folk tales, proverbs, proper names, rituals and festivals" (Achebe 1976: 132). As suggested in the above citation, the sense of interconnectedness is elaborated, not in rarefied theoretical systems, but in myths, folklore, tales, pithy sayings, songs and more importantly, life as

actually lived in African society. These are the true sources of African thought, so long as they are not hypostasized in the style of "ethnophilosophy." Indeed, the likelihood of hypostasizing African thought diminishes drastically when they are understood as epistemic frameworks and expressed accordingly in epistemic idiom. But the danger of hypostasization greatly increases when they are conceived as "metaphysics," "ontology" or "religion."

The fact that African tales and pithy sayings are lived knowledges and social imaginaries does not make them any less philosophical. For, as Kwame Gyekye (1995: 24) maintains, "[i]t would be inconsistent, therefore, to recognize the fragments as embodying our earliest intimations of Greek philosophy, and then to refuse to accept (some) African proverbs and sayings as a source of knowledge of African traditional Philosophy." In light of Gyekye's argument, it would amount to a double standard to deny African thought-patterns the status of philosophy or epistemology in their own right, as though "philosophy" or "epistemology" were a special preserve of complex Western systems like those of Kant and Hegel. Therefore, the task of the professional African philosopher would be that of *disclosing* the thought-pattern or knowledge-pattern beneath the supposedly "folk" elements and reflecting upon them with a method that goes beyond the discredited style of "ethnophilosophy" (Hountondji 1983). In doing this, one must, however, bear in mind that African knowledges belong to the species of "lived knowledges"; hence it would be a futile exercise to measure them against the standards of other species of knowledge.

By way of justifying the epistemic nature of the sense of interconnectedness, I further suggest that, as a "lived knowledge," it could take the form of "social imaginary" (in the sense in which Charles Taylor [2004] uses the term), insofar as the sense of interconnectedness represents a confluence of ideal and life as actually lived in society. Taylor suggests that it is now the case in the modern Western society that an "authentic" or "ideal" human person is measured by the extent to which one is able to assert one's individual rights, freedoms, and autonomy. This "ideal," so to speak, is inseparable from the actual pursuit of authentic existence along the lines of individual self-assertion and self-realization (Taylor 1991: 31–41). In other words, it forms part of the modern Western social imaginary. In the same vein, the vision of realities as bound up in a nexus, of personhood as defined by the community, represents the African imaginary. Authentic existence is thus defined in terms of community. Even the individual's "epistemic accessibility," to use Ifeanyi Menkiti's expression, depends on the community. As Menkiti (1984: 171–72) explains, "[i]t is in rootedness in an ongoing community that the individual comes to see himself as man, and it is by first knowing this community as a stubborn perduring fact of the psychophysical world that the individual also comes to know himself as a durable . . . fact of this world."

It is perhaps for this reason that Menkiti speaks of the "processual" notion of personhood in Africa, a term that suggests that Africans do not see personhood as a mere biological fact but one that involves a "long process of social and ritual transformation until it attains the full complement of excellencies seen as truly definitive of a man" (Menkiti 1984: 171)—and the community plays a vital role in these rites of passage. Menkiti may have exaggerated on the idea that personhood is entirely "processual," and has been challenged for the claim (Eze 2008; Matolino 2011). Yet it cannot be gainsaid that personhood is, to a great extent, a function of the extent to which the individual integrates himself/herself in the life of the community—hence, an entire lifetime is committed to this pursuit. Unity and solidarity belong to the African social imaginary, for a community is considered as community insofar as it maintains this solidaristic unity among members.

From the standpoint of the African, therefore, the greatest damage done to an African clan by modernity, a damage that verges on an "Armageddon," the collapse of the clan *as such*, is that this unity is threatened. This was why there was so much regret that the "white man" (who is a metaphor for modernity) "has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer *act like one*. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have *fallen apart*" (Achebe 2017: 176, my italics). Once again, the point here is that the African sense of interconnectedness, which concretely manifests itself in solidaristic unity, is a "lived knowledge" and may rightly be considered an African "social imaginary" in the Taylorian sense.

Having provided some justification as to why the African sense of interconnectedness may be *appropriately* described in epistemic terms, I shall advance the discussion by privileging this epistemic idiom.

Privileging the Epistemic/Epistemological Idiom

As I have shown above, the epistemic idiom can be privileged because it is an appropriate description of the African sense of interconnectedness. But, more importantly, I argue that the epistemic idiom may be *useful* for having African scholarship enter into dialogue and thus form some emancipatory synergy with its Latin American counterpart vis-à-vis the demand for epistemic justice against coloniality and the attendant Western epistemic hegemony.

To prepare the ground, I first show how the idioms of, say, metaphysics/ontology, religion or some romanticized discourse on Africa's past in the form of "ujamaa socialism" may not be helpful for this purpose.

Now, let us consider the idiom of metaphysics or ontology. I think that African scholars have developed a not-very-useful tendency of couching the African idea of interconnectedness, and indeed much of African indigenous thought, in metaphysical terms. And they even employ the outright terms, "metaphysics" or "ontology" to define it. One sees this tendency in Edeh (1985, 2018) and Abanuka

(1994), among others. Perhaps deserving more attention is Innocent Asouzu, who celebrates this and seems to have elevated what he calls the "Ibuanyidanda" philosophy into a "system" of ontology. In a nutshell, Asouzu's "Ibuanyidanda" philosophy is founded on the sense of interconnectedness in Igbo thought-pattern that *sees* "all that exists as missing links of reality" (Asouzu 2011: 102), thus constituting the basis for social solidarity and synergy. Asouzu sets out to criticize what he calls a "philosophy of essence" for "polarizing" reality: "It is for this reason that while a philosophy of essence in approaching reality seeks to divide and polarize it, Ibuanyidanda ontology seeks to harmonize, complement, and unify the same" (Asouzu 2011: 102).

It is rather surprising that Asouzu (2007, 2011) uses the language of "ontology" or "metaphysics" to describe his project, thus resorting to the same "ontology" (i.e., philosophy of essence) that generates the polarizing tendency he rails against in the above citation. We should be wary of describing "Ibuanyidanda" (which is basically a sense of interconnectedness) as ontology or metaphysics. As I have already argued, the sense of interconnectedness does not belong to the "structure of things" (i.e., metaphysics/ontology). Rather, as a *way of seeing*, it belongs more properly to the realm of lived epistemology, in that it is a people's mode of perceiving the world; it is a cognitive disposition which, in turn, informs actual societal practices. Asouzu perhaps fails to recognize that the phrase "in approaching reality" he employs already suggests that it is a question of grasping reality in this or that way and deriving a body of knowledge therefrom. Moreover, it is not helpful to describe the sense of interconnectedness in metaphysical or ontological idioms because it *hypostasizes* this *sense*, rendering it static, sterile, and unable to enter into any form of dialogue with other viewpoints.

Here, I align myself with Paulin Hountondji who famously criticizes what he believes to be a wrong-headed "fashion" among African philosophers to describe every aspect of African thought as metaphysics. According to Hountondji, some of these thinkers were inadvertently influenced by the racist biases of the Belgian missionary and scholar, Placide Tempels, whose pioneering work, *Bantu Philosophy* (first published in 1945) sees African thought mainly in terms of metaphysics. And so, a whole lot of works on African philosophy published in its wake came under such name and style of "metaphysics," a term he sees as a misnomer in the circumstances. The chief problem with this is the unfounded assumption that there exists "a solid bedrock which might provide a foundation of certitudes: in other words, a system of beliefs . . . a passionate search for the identity that was denied by the colonizer—but now there is the underlying idea that one of the elements of the cultural identity is precisely 'philosophy,' the idea that every culture rests on a specific, permanent, metaphysical substratum" (Hountondji 1983: 59–60). This unfounded assumption of the existence of a certain "metaphysical substratum" is precisely the problem I find with Asouzu's "Ibuanyidanda" ontology.

Nyerere's "ujamaa"—again a derivative of the African sense of interconnected-ness—is also weighed down by a similar challenge. "Ujamaa" is a Swahili word for "family-hood." Nyerere uses it as a political slogan elevated to a level of "African socialism," inviting Africans to rediscover and re-appropriate the precolonial virtue of solidarity derived from the African sense of interconnectedness. To make his point more convincing, he paints a rather idyllic and romanticized picture of the African past, where people led a generally humane, conscientious, and just life, animated by the spirit of *ujamaa* (Nyerere 1968, 1987).

For all its potential merits, one problem with expressing the African sense of interconnectedness in Nyerere's *ujamaa* idiom is that the sense of interconnected-ness is rendered a thing of a supposedly idyllic and romanticized past. It has all the trappings of ethnophilosophy—that style of presenting African thought, famously discredited by Fanon (1967) and later Hountondji (1983) and a number of African philosophers. Again, like Asouzu's Ibuanyidanda, Nyerere's *ujamaa* presents the sense of interconnectedness as something moribund and static, that may at best be resurrected to serve contemporary African realities. It is true that modernity has dealt a blow on Africa's solidaristic way of life, but it is not the case that the sense of interconnected was entirely eradicated by the impact of modernity. For, if it were so, the attempt at resurrecting it would be a futile effort. What the mechanism of modernity/coloniality precisely did, as we shall further elaborate, is that it relegated the sense of interconnectedness and other elements of non-Western knowledges to a "subaltern" status, as it validates and promotes Western knowledge systems. But to be able to address this epistemic question, it would be more useful to adopt an epistemic idiom (than to adopt Nyerere's *ujamaa* socialist slogan); it must at least be recognized that the sense of interconnectedness properly belongs to such subalternized knowledges.

Similarly, it would be more useful to recognize that much of what appears as expressions of African "religiosity" is actually a *mode of knowing*, and thus requires the corresponding epistemological idiom in order to be articulated. It is relevant in this respect to mention the ambivalent influence of the famous African scholar, J.S. Mbiti, in shaping what would have been an early epistemological discourse on African thought-patterns into a discourse on religious practices. Mbiti (1970: 1) begins his 1970 seminal work, *African Religions and Philosophy*, with the now famous claim: "Africans are *notoriously* religious" (my italics). I think that the various aspects of African life—concept of time, the ancestorship institution, kinship and social practices, rites of passages, etc.—he discusses under the mis-leading idiom of "religious notoriety" could have been more fruitfully analyzed as practical expressions of a certain mode of seeing/perceiving the world, i.e., the sense of interconnectedness.

Mbiti's approach gives the dubious impression that Africans allow religion to exercise a certain dictatorship over all aspects of life. But, as I have earlier submit-

ted, forms of religiosity are themselves an expression of a certain mode of seeing and knowing. For instance, it is quite well-known that the Igbo people of Nigeria have an extant epistemological disposition that makes them averse to any form of stifling control, neither from humans nor from gods.

> But power so complete, even in the hands of chi, is abhorrent to the Igbo imagination. Therefore, the makers of proverbs went to work again, as it were, to create others that would set a limit to its exercise. Hence the well-known *Onye kwe chie ekwe*. (If a man agrees, his chi agrees.) And so, the initiative, or some of it at least, is returned to man. (Achebe 1976: 135)

It is clear from the above citation that the Igbo do not want to surrender the control of their own destinies to the gods (*chi*). It is instructive, as Achebe indicates, that they resorted to the epistemological tool of proverbs and pithy sayings to provide the balance, thus retaining much of their destiny in their own hands. With the idea of "Onye kwe chi ya ekwe," the Igbo become co-creators of their destinies, and perhaps even have greater influence than the gods. And so, the Igbo developed an organized and civilized society without monarchies (Basden 2005: 133; Henderson 1972; Nzimiro 1972; Ottenberg 2006: 55, 70; Cf. Ifemesia 1979: 48–54; Oriji 2011); and by the same epistemic temperament, they made sure the gods were kept under check and, to some extent, they even dictated what the gods did (Achebe 2016: 26–27, 161). The point of the foregoing is that a people with such thought-pattern cannot be deemed "notoriously religious" à la Mbiti, and that the Igbo thought-pattern may be more fruitfully analyzed in terms of epistemology.

At this juncture, I wish to take the discussion to the next level by showing how the epistemic idiom could help African scholarship form an emancipatory synergy with the Latin American counterparts against the subalternization of knowledges from the Global South—something that I believe would be less likely if we were stuck in the idiom of ontology, metaphysics, *ujamaa* socialism or religion.

Synergizing with Latin American "Comrades"

From the arguments outlined so far, there is no doubt that the whole question of status of African knowledges and knowledge-productions vis-à-vis the global politics of knowledge has been implicated. The key benefit of seeing the African sense of interconnectedness in knowledge terms is precisely that it immediately brings the politics of knowledge in the modern world into sharp relief. Moreover, it is beneficial for the formation of emancipatory alliances with other parts of the world that have similarly been shortchanged in this politics of knowledge. I explore in what follows the possible synergy between Africa and Latin America in this respect.

Apart from the "liberation theology," one of the greatest contributions of Latin America to modern scholarship, as I see it, is the now topical concept of "coloniality" and its epistemic dimensions. This has been championed by the members of the Coloniality/Modernity Collective (as they are known), involving scholars like Anibal Quijano, Enrique Dussel, Walter Mignolo, and Ramón Grosfoguel. They have produced a whole corpus of literature addressing the epistemic injustice produced and reproduced by the structures of coloniality/modernity. The term "coloniality" itself originated from the Peruvian intellectual, Anibal Quijano, who uses it to describe how modernity, from its effective take-off in the sixteenth century, was at the same time the birth of a certain global "model of power" that has continued to define the world ever afterwards. This "power" is simultaneously colonial, capitalist, racist in character—and possesses wide-raging epistemic ramifications. As Quijano argues, "[t]he coloniality of power is tied up with the concentration in Europe of capital, wages, the market of capital. . . . In this sense, modernity was also colonial from its point of departure. This helps explain why the global process of modernization had a much more direct and immediate impact in Europe" (Quijano 2000: 548).

In other words, Europe (and later, the Western World widely speaking) who established the earliest economic leverage in the emergent capitalist economy reinforced its hegemony, not only with military might and colonialist incursions into other parts of the world, but also with a racist ideology of intellectual and biological superiority. All-round global imbalance gradually took shape. But the epistemic dimension of this imbalance, which is my main concern, is that knowledges from the Global South are systemically subjugated and regarded as "inferior" while those of the Global North are validated and promoted by mechanisms of coloniality. The former is then relegated to the status of "subaltern" knowledges.

Quijano's concept of "coloniality" and its epistemic ramifications form the basis of further theorization by the other members of the Coloniality/Modernity Collective. Mignolo, for instance, speaks of the "colonial matrix of power," which, following Quijano, took shape with the emergence of capitalist modernity in the late fifteenth century and the early sixteenth century. Modernity is inseparable from coloniality, for "there is no modernity without coloniality (Mignolo 2011: 85), and vice versa. They are two sides of the same coin, though he suggests that coloniality is the "darker" side. For Mignolo, it would be tantamount to playing the ostrich if we do not recognize that coloniality holds sway in the today's world; the "colonial difference," as he calls it, is too glaring to go unnoticed, since it explains a range of political, economic, and epistemic advantages the Developed World has over the Global South (Mignolo 2011). In the epistemic sphere, he maintains that there is a "complicity between the structure of knowledge and the modern world system" (Mignolo 2000: 276).

As could be seen from Quijano and Mignolo, the concept of "coloniality" is much more than the direct military and administrative occupation of a foreign territory that goes by the name "colonialism." This idea is very much shared by all the members of the Collective, who note that, though coloniality may have taken the shape of "colonialism" at some historical juncture, the former predates the latter and has actually outlived it. As Ramón Grosfoguel (2009: 22) argues, after the "juridical-political decolonization we have moved from a period of global colonialism to the current period of global coloniality." And Quijano (2007: 170) calls coloniality the "most general form of domination in the world today."

The point of the foregoing analysis of the concept of coloniality is to show how it is steeped in the epistemic discourse. It is perhaps on these grounds that the Portuguese scholar, Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2018: 20), who shares a lot of intellectual affinity with the Coloniality/Modernity Collective, calls coloniality the "most fundamental epistemological fiat of the Western-centric modernity." "Epistemological fiat" in this sense means that it is a "given," as it were; therefore, to understand the dynamics of our world today is to understand this epistemological fiat. We must recognize it if we are to be realistic about the politics of knowledge in the world of today. I do think that it is only by making coloniality a theoretical point of departure that the members of the Latin America Coloniality/Modernity Collective are able to propose certain recommendations—again steeped in epistemology—aimed at addressing the epistemic injustice in the modern world. Down the line, it will be demonstrated that the theoretical framework of these Latin American scholars could synergize with the African notion of interconnectedness, conceived as a mode of knowing (and not as an ontology or a metaphysics), in this regard.

Now, having underlined the epistemic character of coloniality, the key proposal that runs through Quijano, Dussel, Mignolo and Grosfoguel by way of redressing the epistemic balance of modernity is this: reject the very logic of Western epistemic hegemony and start validating and valorizing subalternized knowledges from the Global South. For instance, Dussel speaks of a "philosophy of liberation" (perhaps following the lead of the Latin American "liberation theology" of Gustavo Gutierrez), aimed at accomplishing this epistemic "liberation" by reasserting non-Western epistemic alterity (Dussel 1985, 1995, 1996). All the theory and praxis of liberation belong to the process of "decoloniality," as Mignolo calls it, a process that is, in the main, an epistemic struggle rather than a political one (Mignolo 2011: 53–54). Decoloniality is an exercise in "epistemic disobedience." This involves changing the terms of conversation (Mignolo 2011: 190), rejecting the very logic of coloniality that makes the West dictate upon the rest of the world on what "true knowledge" and "right thinking" consist in. To change the terms of conversation is to reject being told what "progress," "development," "reason," etc. might mean.

This is precisely where I think the African sense of interconnectedness could join forces with such analogous subalternized knowledges as the Andean *sumak kawsay* and *suma kamana* to lead the way, not just to an alternative notion of development but indeed an "alternative-to-development" (Escobar 1997: 221). "Development" as a word has been corrupted by the ideological biases of Western capitalism, the same capitalism that reproduces a lopsided world that places the Global South at a disadvantage. Staying within the same logic of development would not only see Africa and Latin America continue to play catch-up with the West, it would also continue to subject them to the dictates of the West, who is a more experienced player in the Capitalist macabre game. But "alternative to development" leads to a more fundamental question of why "development" or "progress" would qualify *at all* as an ideal or goal of modern life. *Sumak kawsay* (Quechua) and *suma kamana* (Aymara), rendered as "vivir bien" (living well) indeed make "living in harmony" or "living in fullness" with Pachamama (Mother Earth) the sole goal of life (Mignolo 2011: 255, see also 307–08). So, for the Andean people, progress or development does not quite make sense as the goal of life; rather, what matters is *harmony* and *fullness/plenitude* with nature. And I here contend that there is no better way of changing the terms of conversation for the purpose of redressing the epistemic balance than validating and valorizing such Andean thought-patterns.

Like *sumak kawsay* and *suma kamana*, *ubuntu*, an expression of the African sense of interconnectedness and solidarity, also stresses harmony. It is not the aim of this paper to delve into a full discourse on *ubuntu*; there are a lot of materials out there on *ubuntu*. I treat it here only insofar as it is an instance of the African sense of interconnectedness that could synergize with Andean knowledges as a bulwark against epistemic coloniality. *Ubuntu* is particularly attractive because it has been recognized and theorized as an "epistemology," an idiom I have found useful for the present purposes. It is significant that, contrary to the tendency to reduce African thought to ontology and metaphysics, Mogobe Ramose (2005: 35–36; see also 4, 7), the foremost scholarly proponent of *ubuntu*, also sees it in terms of epistemology. It is that unique *mode of perceiving* the world by which the African *sees* the bond of kinship that binds all humans; this same bond exists between humans and nature. Because it is a "lived knowledge" (Sousa Santos 2018: 43; 2014: 158, 159) and not some academic knowledge, it inspires the social virtues of solidarity and mutual solicitude in social living.

Again, in line with the key claim of this article, the solidarity that is *ubuntu* is being recognized not merely as a "form of knowledge" (Sousa Sanotos 2014: 156), but as a form of knowledge with emancipatory potentials: "Knowledge-as-emancipation entails a trajectory between a state of ignorance that I call colonialism and a state of knowing that I call solidarity" (Sousa Santos, 2014: 139). This solidarity is also extended to Mother Nature, who will invariably haunt humans

should they fail to accord her the befitting respect. *Ubuntu*, as lived knowledge, does not separate thought from life; indeed, the two are merged in that vision of living in harmony with the entire creation, a vision similarly embodied in *sumak kawsay* and *suma kamana*.

It, therefore, makes sense to suggest that this holistic vision of interconnectedness would be a fitting counterpoint to the individualizing character of Western modes of perception, a type of myopia produced and reproduced by capitalism. It makes sense to even suggest that it is this myopia, this partial view of reality, that has brought so much suffering and pain to our world, especially to people of the Global South. Thus, there is an existential task for people of the Global South, namely, that of validating and promoting their alternative ways of knowing, which could translate into alternative modernities, as an emancipatory move against Western hegemonic epistemology and modernity. Partha Chatterjee's (1997: 275) submission to this effect sums up this point:

> Somehow, from the very beginning, we had made a shrewd guess that given the close complicity between modern knowledge and modern regimes of power, we would forever remain consumers of universal modernity; never would be taken as serious producers. It is for this reason that we have tried, for over a hundred years, to take our eyes away from this chimera of universal modernity and clear up a space where we might become the creators of our own modernity.

Seen from this perspective, the emancipatory potentials of the holistic vision of interconnectedness, embodied in *ubuntu* and the Andean thought-patterns, could hardly be gainsaid.

Conclusion

In the foregoing discussion, I set out in search of a useful philosophical idiom with which to couch the sense of interconnectedness in African thought. This search has become critical, now more than ever, not only because the sense of interconnectedness is one of the most celebrated features of African thought, but also because some idioms might prove more useful than others in bringing out its full significance.

It is true that every idiom has its potential merits and should not be discarded offhandedly. But I have privileged the epistemic/epistemological idiom on the ground that it is both appropriate and useful for the formulation of emancipatory demands against global epistemic injustice suffered by African (and other subalternized) knowledges. As I have shown, the other contesting idioms, like those of ontology, metaphysics and religion, have a common pitfall of not recognizing that the sense of interconnectedness is basically a mode of knowing; worse still, they

tend to hypostasize and render it static and sterile, such that it cannot possibly enter into any meaningful dialogue with analogous ways of knowing.

On the contrary, recognizing the epistemic character of the sense of interconnectedness opens it up for a meaningful dialogue with cognate ways of knowing and thinking from other climes. This point is further established through the synergy forged between the African sense of interconnectedness (represented by *ubuntu*) and the Andean notions of *sumak kawsay* and *suma kamana*. When fully explored, especially drawing on relevant African scholarship and those of the Latin American scholars of the Modernity/Coloniality Collective, they represent a formidable bulwark against the epistemic injustice in a modern world defined by coloniality.

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