

Interrogating Afrikology

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African discourses on Egyptology are becoming more firmly established and they often seek to counter the common Eurocentric bias that Africa had to history or culture worth discussing. African scholars of Egyptology in addition of some North Atlantic intellectuals are now claiming that Africa is in fact the Cradle of Humanity and hence the foremost vehicle of civilisation. Increasingly, research is deepening in this respect. But Dani Nabudere, an eminent Ugandan scholar (who passed away in 2011) is taking the project even further. Rather than stop with the task of proving the primacy of the Egyptian past and its numerous cultural and scientific achievements, Nabudere attempts to connect that illustrious past with the African present. This, remarkably, is what makes his project worthy of careful attention. And this is essentially what his philosophy of Afrikology entails; tracing the historical, cultural, scientific and social links between the Cradle of Humankind and the contemporary world with a view to healing the disruptive severances occasioned by violence, false thinking, war, loss and dispossession in order to accomplish an epistemological and psychic sense of wholeness for African collective self. Of course, this proposition has considerable importance as a philosophy of universalism and not just as an African project. Afrikology intends to transcend the dichotomies of inherited from Western epistemology (and culture as whole) that maintain a divide between mind and body or heart and mind and revert instead to an earlier conceptual tradition perfected in ancient Egypt that conceives of knowledge generation as a holistic enterprise where the fundamental binarisms of the Western universe do not really apply.

Nabudere's work not only foregrounds the significance of Egypt as a cultural fountainhead. Other parts of Africa such as Ethiopia contributed to the eventual flowering of Egypt as a beacon of civilisation. The common ancient practices of worshipping kings as gods, establishing and maintaining pantheons of gods, and elaborate ceremonies for the dead are all practices that first began in Ethiopia and which were carried on by the ancient Egyptians. Also, sign language was in existence in the hinterlands of Africa such as among the Pygmies and the Khoi-San of Southern Africa and parallels or even predates the representations of totemism, fetishism and the Egyptian hieroglyphic script.

Nabudere points out the groundbreaking impact of Egyptian hieroglyphics as being the essential backstory for European and Asian myths, legends and fairytales. Aryan philologists did not have the appropriate knowledge to unearth the connections between the Egyptian hieroglyphic script and the European appropriation of them. This failing

created a blind spot in the Western conception and generation of knowledge. As such, it resulted in the tendency for the Western mindset, to individualise the perception of natural phenomena. Nabudere re-reads Carl Gustav Jung's work on the formation of archetypes and supports the view that they were in first conceived in the hinterlands of Africa before they found their way into ancient Egypt and then eventually to other parts of the world. In several instances, Nabudere makes this sort of claims; that is, many of cultural and symbolic representations found in Egypt were in fact created in the hinterlands of Africa. Jung had a contrary reading of the ancient Egyptian world to those typical of Western Egyptologists. He was of the view that in order to understand the Western notion of the *collective unconscious* Western scholars had to look towards ancient Egypt and other parts of Africa. The founding elements of the Western psychoanalytic text such as ceremonies of rebirth, the pantheon of gods, divine animals, ancient myths and symbols, the sanctification of the tomb, the wonders of the pyramids, elaborate burial rites and the entire spectrum of the Egyptian collective unconscious are all dimensions of the Egyptian accomplishment that Jung deeply respected. Indeed the Egyptian civilisation which lasted for two thousand years provides the basis for understanding just how complex human societies can be.

In ancient Egypt, there occurred a quest never before experienced by humanity to establish a new approach to knowledge creation and generation. Pharaoh Shabaka of the twenty-fifth dynasty (770-657 BC) carried out what has been termed a 're-memorisation' of the past by appropriating and codifying ancient Memphite traditions; a project that eventually resulted in the *Memphite Theology*. In a related vein, Memphis was adopted as the capital of Egypt as the site of thorough-going cultural renaissance. The restoration of Memphis as the capital of ancient Egypt carried far-reaching connotations. It sought to establish Egypt as the Cradle of Civilisation apart from having profound architectural, intellectual as well as religious implications.

Nabudere also explains how the fundamental differences between Western and African epistemologies occurred. In ancient Egypt, the creation of the universe is attributed to Ptah who was self-created. In addition, Ptah is responsible for the creation of other gods. However, in the cosmology of ancient Greece to which the West draws much of its inspiration for its epistemological foundations, the cosmos was created out of the pendulum between nothing and nothingness. Herein lies the telling difference between ancient Egypt and ancient Greece. Greek philosophers such as Plato through the Theory of Forms instituted an abstract kind of thinking that did not quite exist in the more holistic ancient Egyptian approach to knowledge generation. Under the influence of Plato, a dichotomisation of perception in relation to natural phenomena occurred, that is, a separation between things and forms or between the written sign and the thing itself. This epistemic separation led to much of the sort of dialectical thought to be found in Western philosophy.

In ancient Egypt, after the creation of the universe by Ptah occurred, Thoth (or Tehuti) the Egyptian god of the tongue created the hieroglyphic script and in so doing developed an intimate relationship between the tongue and heart. In other words, thought springs from the human heart and the tongue articulates what the heart thinks. Here, no

binarisation of natural phenomena occurs as in Western dialectical thinking, instead a wholeness in thought and enunciation is maintained and it on this basis that Nabudere advances his philosophy of Afrikology which is not merely a re-memorisation of ancient Egyptian past but also a programme for a sustainable basis for knowledge generation in the contemporary world.

Much of the above can be found in Nabudere's work *Afrikology, Philosophy and Wholeness: An Epistemology* (2011). In what follows I will give a much closer and detailed reading of the text in order to 1] give some idea as to the viability of Afrikology as an epistemological approach; 2] to situate Nabudere's work within a tradition of similar African epistemologies and 3] generally to provide an outline by which to interrogate the strengths and weaknesses of Nabudere's propositions.

Nabudere's cites Charles Taylor in alluding to the current malaise within epistemology. This in turn has placed contemporary society under tremendous strain as evidenced in disturbing forms of alienation, violence and fragmentation. The dissolution of epistemology can be traced back to the misrepresentation and misunderstanding of ancient Egyptian civilisation by scholars of ancient Greece. Nabudere urges a return to the initial locus of the misunderstanding and this proposition forms a key component of his notion of Afrikology. Apart from its role as an epistemological construct Afrikology is also meant to provide a therapeutic function in healing chronic societal dysfunction and fragmentation. Hence rather than perceiving knowledge through a materialist lens, it needs instead to be viewed as serving an unambiguous cultural and spiritual role. As mentioned earlier, Nabudere constantly stresses the point that most of the cultural traits or archetypes we commonly associate with ancient Egypt such as the cult of gods, the offering of sacrifices and the place of divinity in everyday life can in fact be traced to ancient Ethiopia.

Carl Jung explains that in order to understand his definition of what he calls "the collective unconscious" which he claims is manifest within the entire spectrum of humanity we only need to turn to the archetypes of ancient Egypt such as "the divine kingship, the festival of renewal, the gods, the divine animals, the symbolism of the tomb, the evolution of burial customs, the Temple, the ancient Egyptian psyche and experiences of the species, the pyramids and the texts in the Temples".¹ However, some Eurocentric Egyptologists have sought to undermine the position of ancient Egypt as the Cradle of Humankind and instead attempted to push Asia into greater prominence. External factors- the intervention of foreign forces- also sought to undermine ancient Egypt as prime locus of archetypes until Pharoah Shabaka of the Cushite (Nubian and Ethiopian) dynasties instigated what is regarded as the first African renaissance. The renaissance was aimed at cultural and intellectual retrieval as contained in the *Memphite Manifesto* which became available in 716 BC. Memphis became the capital of ancient Egypt. This period is equated with the birth of consciousness, the beginning of the notion of political organisation and the re-memorisation of the past.

¹ Dani W Nabudere, *Afrikology, Philosophy and Wholeness: An Epistemology*, Pretoria: Africa Institute of South Africa, 2011, p.10

In this elaborate project of cultural retrieval, it was re-discovered and re-affirmed that “Ptah, the primordial deity, is self-created and is also a creator of the other gods. He is [...] the ruler over the unified Kingdom and King of Lower and Upper Egypt and its renewed unification in the hands of Horus. Thus, for the Egyptians, unlike the Greeks, the Cosmos was not suspended between nothing and nothingness, nor did it emerge from nothingness. It was a self-created universe from the oneness that was continuous”.²

It is from this elemental context that the question of knowledge and its generation and dissemination ought to be understood. The *episteme* of ancient Egypt made no distinction between the mind and the body. Instead knowledge and language were perceived as corporeal phenomena. The heart formulates a concept or unit of knowledge which it then releases to tongue for proclamation.

Thoth is the ancient Egyptian god of the tongue as well as the hieroglyphic script. The question of knowledge generation involved both conceptual and phonetic dimensions. Written signs represented precisely what they were supposed to. However, in ancient Greece things and what they represented (forms) were quite distinct and hence the introduction of abstract dialectical thought in the Greek *episteme*. It is also believed that Thoth was in fact a human being with mystical properties. Thoth was subsequently appropriated by both the Greeks and Romans and named after their own gods. In Greece he was called Hermes, son of Zeus, the foremost messenger of the gods and the god of oratory.

The Romans referred to Thoth as Hermes Trismegistus which meant ‘Hermes the thrice great’, ‘the great one’, ‘the greatest’, and ‘the Master of Masters’, ‘the author of astrology, magic and alchemy’.³ Thoth is ascribed the invention of writing, medicine, chemistry, law, rhetoric, applied mathematics, astronomy, astrology and metaphysics. In addition, he is credited to have written 1100 books and published 20,000 works in various fields of intellection. However this prodigious intellection production is devoid of individualism and is instead a product of the collective knowledge amassed by ancient Africans. Hermeneutics which is the practice of interpreting a variety of texts is also associated with Thoth. Being a messenger that operates in the divide between men and gods Thoth was deemed a skillful interpreter of messages. The art of interpretation is also central to the practices of chicane which attempt “to go beyond the traditional culture and the limits of divination itself by using hermeneutics to interpret these practices and ideas connected with them. Hermeneutic intervention here includes not only the interpretation of recorded historical consciousness, but also the interpretive process to enter the realm of ‘symbolic interpretation’ and ‘double-thinking which [...] is a mode of ‘shifting yet discriminating definitions and fluid associations that underlie the Chicane practice’”.⁴

² Ibid. p.18

³ Ibid. p.22

⁴ Ibid. pp. 47-48

Individualism in intellectual fields such alchemical studies began with the Greeks which provides a contrast to African forms of orality where individualised authorship continues to be somewhat foreign. As Nabudere reminds us, a Kiganda proverb of modern Uganda states, ' *amagezi ssi goomu*, which means knowledge (wisdom) is not the property of a single individual.⁵ Scholars such as Samir Amin have claimed Plato misunderstood the knowledge systems of ancient Egypt and in so doing developed processes of thought based solely on reason. Aristotle on his part developed a classificatory grid based on the Platonic model. It has been propounded that Plato's *Republic* is an Athenian reformulation of Egyptian caste system. This reformulation had profound consequences in the history of epistemology. As such it has been noted:

Greek philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle are correctly blamed for having created a false hierarchisation of principles arising out of their search for 'perfect' knowledge due to their inadequate experiences in Egypt. Plato, in particular, is blamed for having created a hierarchisation and distinction between ideas, or *forms* and *things*, and between *outside* and *inside* of things- and hence between *virtue* and *knowledge*. From now on in the Greek understanding, the *thing* and its *form* (the idea) were no longer organically linked.⁶

This in turn led to the binarisation of epistemic phenomena and hence the dichotomy between appearance and reality, the conditioned and the unconditioned, the absolute and the relative, the subject and the object and so on and so forth. This epistemic development is often traced back to Plato who misread the *Memphite Theology* in providing a large part of the foundations of Greek philosophy thus providing the essential impetus for Western thought as a whole. This dual mode of reflection in which the thing is separate from the ideal is known as the dialectic.

The Greek misrepresentation of ancient Egyptian systems of thought was not itself a wholesale rejection of those systems. Indeed as Cheikh Anta Diop has argued Greek philosophy is drawn primarily from Egyptian cosmologies. For instance, the Greek philosophical concept known *logos* (whose employment is attributed to Heraclitus and Plato actually originates from the ancient Nubian word *Ra*. Just as Diop, Nabudere argues that the fragmentation of knowledge forms can only be reversed only if the momentum and dominance of Platonian-Cartesian epistemology cease. A number of times Nabudere mentions the work of the Copenhagen school of quantum mechanics and physics with its admission of multiple conceptions of reality as a way out of the impasse inherent in the Western epistemological model. As such, a transdisciplinary conception of reality encompassing the gains quantum mechanics is also recommended as an alternative to Cartesian epistemic culture.

⁵ Ibid. p.24

⁶ Ibid.p.27

Nabudere also argues that the practice of divination and shamanism espouses a transdisciplinarity capable of not only improving but also transforming contemporary epistemology. Shamanism is present in many cultures but in contemporary times it is commonly associated with religion or quasi-religious rites even though shamanic practices had in the past been associated with immunology and psychobiology. We are to appreciate that “the shaman operates by using techniques of ecstasy and the power to leave his body at will during a trancelike state. In cultures where shamanism occurs, sickness is usually thought of as a soul loss and it is thus the shaman’s task to enter the spirit world, capture the soul and reintegrate it in the body. A person becomes a shaman either by inheritance or self-election. Thus, in shamanism or divination, there are no boundaries between the spirit, the mind or the body”.⁷ Shamanism is based merely on religious faith but carries within it an elaborate epistemological system that has deep and ancient foundations in human existence itself. The passage below captures what being a shaman entails:

At the heart of shamanic practice is the active pursuit of knowledge. This take many forms: through calendrical study, divination and prophecy Shamans seek knowledge of the future; and through recitations of myths, epics, charms, spells, songs and the genealogies of previous Shamans, the pass along knowledge of the past and of the spirit world. And since Shamans everywhere seek to know more than they have experienced in their everyday waking lives, they may extend their wisdom through dream journeys that provide a thousand years of human living into a single day.⁸

Shamans as such do conform with the accepted linearity of time and instead strive to meld with universal consciousness.⁹ They possess the powers to control random events, heal the ill, cure stress and anxiety and bring about healthy community relations. These general therapeutic functions lead to wholesome deliberations within the community and reduce instances of despondency, psychic tumult and alienation.

Widespread social fragmentation is believed to have been caused by the fundamental divide that exists between the mind and the body in Western culture and the reluctance or inability to conceive the spirit world as being embedded within the condition of the human.¹⁰ Disciplines such postcolonial theory emphasise the presence of multiple knowledge forms and traditions as opposed to mainstream

⁷ Ibid.p.40

⁸ B. Tedlock cited by Dani W. Nabudere, 2011 p.43

⁹ For more on shamanic practices visit <http://shamanism.wordpress> and <http://shamansdrum.org>

¹⁰ Dani W, Nabudere, 2011, p.45

Western scholarship which tends to view such repressed forms as being relativist and essentialist.

Just as to be found in practices of chicane, the shaman is thought to possess a double personality just as a trickster. In addition, a duality of consciousness straddles both the material and the spiritual worlds. The resilience of the trickster tradition was evident in the slave plantations of the New World where captive slaves were able to find solace in sorcery, magic, mystical invocations and the enchantment of the spirit world in the face of the daily brutalities of slave existence. Through the agency of memory, the inversions of mimicry and the invocations of the spirit world, slaves in American plantations were not only able to establish and maintain some degree of psychic equilibrium but perhaps more important, were able to create modern African-American culture as we know it. Furthermore, this resistance against Western hegemony formed the basis for the emergence and development for the ideology of pan-Africanism.

There are reasons to believe that shamanism is making its way into mainstream culture through sometimes remarkable means. Harry Smith, an American archivist, artist and experimental filmmaker was commissioned by a record label-Folkways-to produce an anthology of American folk music which would otherwise have been lost in the frenzy of the World War II. Smith delivered eighty-four songs along a system of ordering based on ancient Egyptian cosmology. Ballads were classified as green/water, social music came under the heading red/fire and songs with the rubric blue/air. The cover art carried a seventeenth century engraving of the celestial monochord which represented Pythagorean music theory. The anthology was released in 1952. Smith archivist mind also organised his anthology using ideas drawn from hermetic philosophy and especially the work of the Elizabethan philosopher and the author of *History of the Macrocosm and Microcosm* (1617). Shortly afterwards, a cult grew around Smith's anthology that went on to influence the folk boom in the United States in the 1960s that produced figures such as Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, Jerry Garcia, John Fahey and others in the process. In this way, Smith's work found its way into influential artistic circles and most especially the counterculture in the United States beginning from the 1950s. Eventually, Smith ended his days as a shaman-in-residence at the Naropa Institute in Boulder Colorado.

Ancient rock art reveals much about shamanism. Formerly, Western interpretations of ancient African rock art state that the forms evident in the practice were in fact stylised human beings. However, recent research ascribes the forms found in rock art to hallucinatory experiences of shamans as opposed to being literal representations of the material world. Apart from being representations of hallucinatory and spiritual states rock art contain 'the shamanic roots of modern religion.'¹¹ Shamans of advanced age who were unable to endure the rigours of all night long sessions in trance accomplished states of heightened consciousness with

¹¹ Ibid. p.60

the aid of psilocybin or magic mushrooms as it is more commonly known. The trancelike states were akin to spiritual journeys in which shamans consulted with deities and departed on account of their communities. They then returned to the material world with renewed psychic energies with which they healed the infirm, restored communal harmony and brought random elements under control.

One of Nabudere's central arguments is that African cosmologies and epistemologies can be harnessed within the context of postmodernity for a new cultural synthesis as a panacea for the current existential malaise that afflicts the contemporary world. He further states that if a recourse to the cultural accomplishments of ancient Greece has been possible the same should be true about ancient inner Africa. In his view postmodern rationality has failed and in order to address this failure an existential symbiosis between humankind and nature would have to be re-discovered as it happened in pre-Athenian times. Under the Greek epistemological model abstract rationality became the basis for the construction of knowledge and experience was in turn undervalued. Kant's critique of pure reason is a continuation of the ancient Greek model and found acolytes in Fichte, Schelling, Schleiermacher and Hegel. But this model is now being challenged by advances in quantum mechanics and physics which are highlighting the interconnectedness between humankind and nature. Nabudere argues that there are fallacies in Western traditions of rationality stemming from Plato's misunderstanding ancient Egyptian cosmologies:

It follows that the Greeks' attempt to philosophise without an adequate understanding of Egyptian sources was bound to be misleading to their successors. Since their lack of understanding of the source of knowledge in its origin was fatal in their own context, it was also bound to pass on the weaknesses to their European successors. This is made clearer when referring to Diop's reflection on the Greeks' emulation of the African philosophy. Indeed, as Diop has demonstrated, the Greek scholars had embraced ancient Egyptian wisdom, but later abstracted aspects of that knowledge to develop their own system of 'reasoning' as [...] in the case of Plato.¹²

The Greek dialectical method draws much from the cosmological forms of inner Africa in which creation is believed to be founded on a dual mode. Ra, the Egyptian deity is believed to have created four divine pairs: *Shu* and *Tefnu*, *Geb* and *Nut* and in this combination we find the four elements (air, water, earth and fire) that are central in the corpus of the pre-Socratic philosophers: Thales, Anaximander, Heraclitus, Parmenides and Anaxagoras.¹³ The original African model that provided the basis for this framework occurs in pairs: *Osiris* and *Isis*, *Seth* and *Nephthys*.

¹² Ibid. p.76

¹³ Ibid.

Having criticised the epistemological tradition developed by Platonian-Cartesian-Kantian thought for causing much of the fragmentation and alienation in the contemporary world, Nabudere urges a return to an ethos of Nubian interconnectedness and complementarities. He is aware that this project of cultural retrieval would be an arduous task: “a return to the ancient Egyptian or ‘inner Africa’ system of ancient times is not possible in its pure form”.¹⁴ The Platonian-Cartesian-Kantian model on which much of Western thought is based, in Nabudere’s view, is deeply flawed and in order to overcome its shortcomings and also to discern the antecedents of the crisis of contemporary reason, we are urged to return to the being of language. In this particular instance, the languages of Africa are offered as a beacon that possesses the wholeness and interconnectedness inherent in pre-Socratic existential relations and epistemic frameworks. Scholars of inner Africa believe that the heart is the locus of reason but when Platonian epistemology separated things from their forms a dialectical method of reasoning emerged and created a profound division between humankind and nature thereby leading to chronic fragmentation, the sterility of dialectical thinking, meaningless hierarchisation and epistemic absolutism.

Not all of Nabudere’s proposals about the return to an ethos of wholeness and interconnectedness are convincing. He mentions the employment of African languages as a possible way of attaining that goal but has very little to say about the logistic requirements involved in such a project: “It follows [...] that it is through languages and traditions based on those languages that humanity can dialogue with one another and come to a consensus about a new future. Hence, the recognition and development of African languages through which the overwhelming masses of the African people are able to communicate are the preconditions for bringing about a true human understanding and discourse with other cultures and civilisations.”¹⁵ Obviously, this proposal involves numerous daunting practical concerns that Nabudere is silent about. Also, we need more evidence on the ravages of “the paradigm of oppositionality”¹⁶ on which most of the contemporary traditions of rationality are based.

But there is progressive element about Nabudere’s work. Once again he re-affirms that invaluable contributions of scholars such as Cheikh Anta Diop¹⁷ and T. Obenga whose problematisations and interrogations of origins of African thought systems have demonstrated that there is much depth to discovered in those traditions. When this approach is juxtaposed along the work of African philosophers such as Peter O. Bodunrin a superficiality and artificiality become evident in the latter’s thought. African philosophers of the analytic school adopted wholesale the Cartesian model of analysis thereby contributing to the excesses of dialectical thought. On his part, Nabudere believes

¹⁴ Ibid. p.71

¹⁵ Ibid. p.90

¹⁶ Ibid. p.103

¹⁷ See for instance, Cheikh Anta Diop, *The African Origin of Civilization*. Mercer Cook trans. Connecticut: Lawrence Hill and Company. 1974.

the hermeneutic approach can lead to “the recovery of knowledge” as well as constitute an antidote to the paradigm of oppositionality in which most of the canons of rationality are mired. Also by adopting a hermeneutic approach, the centrality of Thoth as an interpreter of mystical messages is again brought to fore just as the value of shamanic and trickster traditions are re-asserted. The repressed histories of those traditions are likely to enrich the common fount of our humanity. Indeed the consequences of Nabudere’s propositions are bound to be far-reaching. He advocates a re-ordering of the Western epistemological model, in fact, what his argument amount to is indeed a destruction of the entire model. Of course this is easier said than done. Perhaps it would be more feasible to construct a parallel universe based on his holistic epistemological approach. The baggage of the Western intellectual culture is much too entrenched and entangled in the history of humanity as whole that is it certain that its destruction may constitute a destruction of most of the archive of human intellectual culture itself. Nabudere unearths some quite interesting aspects of ancient African systems of thought. But his advocacy of a return to those forms as an existential priority is no more convincing than Kwasi Wiredu’s project of conceptual decolonisation in African thought which poses numerous logistical challenges.¹⁸ As mentioned earlier, the point would be to build a parallel universe away from the debunked Cartesian structure and then wait and see how it thrives.

¹⁸ Kwasi Wiredu *Philosophy and an African Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980; Kwasi Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars: An African Perspective*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996; Sanya Osha, ‘Kwasi Wiredu: Philosophy in the African Way’ (September-October) 2005; Sanya Osha, *Kwasi Wiredu and Beyond: The Text, Writing and Thought in Africa*, Dakar: Codesria, 2005.