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Review

Episteme and the study of the African Religious Heritage: Towards the use of relative epistemologies

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ABSTRACT: The African religious experience and heritage have been a focal point of enquiry for many centuries. Unfortunately, the depiction of such an African cultural and religious heritage have often been characterized by misconceptions and elaborate distortions. These appear to be a result of detached approaches that western scholars used in the interrogation or evaluation of the African religious heritage. Most of these approaches centred on cultural absolutism rather than relativism. In such forms of inquiry, western ideals and culture became a rubric or a point of reference for evaluating non-western cultures, specifically the African religious heritage. Using a qualitative research method, characterised by document analysis, this paper critically debates against the use of cultural absolutism rather than relativism in the evaluation of the African religious heritage, and advocates for the use of relative epistemologies for the exploration of indigenous religions.

Keywords: Absolutism, African traditional religion, epistemology, relativism, religious heritage.

INTRODUCTION

There seems to be a growing discomfort from Africans with the manner in which the African cultural and religious heritage has been misinterpreted, distorted and represented by western scholarship (Mugambi, 2002). This includes the presentation of Christianity in Africa, by missionaries, in western apparel (Lado, 2006). Fasholé-Luke (1978, p. 366), for instance, citing Desmond Tutu, notes that "African theologians have set about demonstrating that the African religious experience and heritage were not illusory, and that they should have formed the vehicle for conveying the Gospel verities to Africa". Thus, African theologians and scholars alike seem to think that it is the rehabilitation of the African cultural and religious heritage that can bring back the self-respect of Africans (Fasholé-Luke, 1978). Against this background, it appears that African scholars are of the notion that the rehabilitation of the African cultural and religious heritage should take place (Bediako, 1994). This paper critical evaluates the claims of such a call and questions whether the use of absolutism rather relativism is still a beneficial approach towards the study of indigenous cultures and religious expressions.

THE AFRICAN HERITAGE AND RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

The African heritage and religious experience is something of a sensible analogue rather than a conventional pragmatism that is contained somewhere in an inscribed source. It is not something which may readily be retrieved or accessed in order to be engaged. Nor can it be found in literary sources that intend to provide clarity on different sets of belief systems and religious practices, or how they work. It does not pride itself with ancient historical texts that seek to unfold the experiences, observations or insights of the African experiencers, when locating the meanings gained from the varied and relative activities of life. Rather, it is a system that has been traditionally transmitted by words, symbols and actions that are often modelled after the ancient traditions and customs of the African forefathers.

Thus, the African religious experience and heritage is not something that can readily be accessed and sufficiently grasped by an outsider apart from the disclosure of the experiencer. In that case, one can argue

that the African cultural and religious heritage is relative rather than conventional in nature. It follows an oral tradition[1] rather than a textual tradition (Cox, 1996). The non-textuality of the African cultural and religious heritage has, however, tended to make it seem "as if standing intrinsically at a hopeless disadvantage" (Oden, 2007, p.26). This is because the comparison of orality against textuality always seems to be tilted and unfair (Oden, 2007), as it favours those traditions that have written sources than those orally transmitted.

In such comparisons, the orality of the African heritage and religious experience seems to be of less value than the textually preserved forms, such as found in western literary sources, which in most cases, appear to be more authoritative. To this sticky situation, of unfair playing fields, Oden (2007) notes that the cultural and intellectual richness of narrative Africans are wrongly thought to be largely primitive[2]. In line with this perception, western scholars, including missionaries, tried to change so many facets of the African religious experience and heritage (Mills, 1995). They tried to change the Africans' "cosmology, ethics, marriage, gender relations, agriculture, state structure, legal systems, folk-ways, ceremonies, rites of passage, clothing, forms of speech – that one might conclude, but mistakenly, that they rejected African culture in its entirety" (Elphick, 2012, p.65).

Even though western scholars tried to change a great deal of the African cultural and religious heritage, one has to acknowledge that they also tried to promote and preserve those traits of the African culture that they deemed to be admirable (Elphick, 2012). These includes the African concept of "*Ubuntu*[3]", which scholars like Jarvis (2009) argue should be the trademark of African Christianity. In essence, the African cultural and religious heritage incorporates into its system a number of traditional beliefs, customs, and socio-religious practices. These are, namely: the historical, cultural and religious heritages.

Facets of the African heritage

The African heritage, as Mbiti (1975) noted, is composed of different facets, which together make-up a whole. These are, namely: the historical, cultural, and religious facets of the African socio-religious and cultural heritage. These should not be understood as separate but as complementary for they constitute the African cultural and religious heritage. The *historical facet* of the African heritage concerns itself with the origins of humanity, which Kruger et al. (2012), argue can be traced back to Africa. Much of what is known today about this facet is said to come from scientific enquires, which took upon the form of archaeology (Mbiti, 1975). Accordingly, it is through archaeological finds that one may endeavour to substantiate the unwritten records and existence of ancient civilization within the African landscape.

These archaeological source materials therefore shed more light on the historical developments pertaining to the origins of human species in Africa rather than a collection of historic textual sources. This is primarily because the art of writing, which may have captured or recorded these prehistoric[4] origins of humanity came to the fore much later, in the dawn of commerce and trade in the ancient civilizations of the Near East, China and Middle America (Hultkrantz, 1993). Thus, archaeological finds do provide some valuable information regarding the historical developments that took place in African at a particular historical context.

Apart from archaeological finds, the rich heritage of what past generations of African people thought, did and experienced, was passed on and preserved through the system of oral tradition. This is a special tradition, which forms a long line that links African forefathers and mothers with their descendants who now feel proud of it (Mbiti, 1975). As part of this tradition, African forefathers and mothers developed artistic languages and crafts, deepening their thinking and ideals of the world and transferred these architypes to their descendants. Their religious and mystic ideas spread, as they danced and sang, travelled far and wide, and moved along with the pattern of life, which their ancestors had left them (Mbiti, 1975).

In that manner, the historical facet of the African heritage was uniquely recorded, preserved and handed down to next generations. The transmission of historical data however, through oral tradition, was not an unceremonious and haphazard practice, which any person could engage in. It was rather a formalised system, from which special keepers of knowledge, through oral means, were tasked to

[1]William Moss and Peter Mazikana (1986) define "oral tradition" as those recollections of the past, orally transmitted and recounted, that arise naturally within and from the dynamics of a culture. They are shared widely throughout the culture by word of mouth even though they may be entrusted to particular people for safekeeping, transmittal, recitation, and narration. They are organic expressions of the identity, purpose, functions, customs, and generational continuity of the culture in which they occur. They would exist, and indeed they have existed in the absence of written notes or other more sophisticated recording devices. They are not direct experiences of the narrators, and they must be transmitted by word of mouth to qualify as oral tradition.

[2]James Cox (1998) makes a similar argument. He argues that the primacy of the oral in religions does not represent an early, preliterate phase in the development of the universal religions. This is because most world religions give priority to the spoken over the written word. He says this is true for religions like Islam, which emphasizes the revelation as it is recorded in written form: "the written form, however, represents what Muhammad heard and was ordered to 'recite'. Faithful Muslims ever since have put the words of the *Qur'an* to memory so they can speak the holy word" (Cox, 1998, p.21).

[3]*Ubuntu* is a Nguni term, which means "humanity". In most case, it is translated to mean: "I am because we are" or as "humanity towards others". The term is also used in a philosophical sense to mean: "the belief in a universal bond of sharing that connects all humanity" (Shutte, 2009, pp.85-99).

[4]Ake Hultkrantz (1993) states that the term 'prehistoric' refers to the time before there were any written sources or records about myths, rituals, and beliefs.

memorise, recite historical events and other relevant information (Mbiti 1975). The manner in which this special historical information was transmitted often included traditional forms of record keeping, such as oral history, fables and folktales, proverbs, epic narrations, genealogies, and songs.

Oral history[5]*:* is an African form of oral tradition in which the recording, preservation and interpretation of historical information, based on storytelling, personal experiences and opinions take place. It, time and again, assumes the form of eye-witness accounts, from past events, but can also include folklores, myths, songs and stories that are passed down from one generation to the next[6]. *Fables and folktales*[7]*:* are putative forms of speech that are full of wisdom. They are generally used to convey a moral or to teach a lesson. These lessons often encourage bravery, honesty, respect or goodwill, as they are accompanied by rewards.

Proverbs: are a figure of speech that can convey wisdom sayings, advice, warnings, truth, ideas or life lessons. *Epic narrations*: are tales about the exploits of heroes or heroines who once lived and played a significant role in a people's history. Their exploits are often exaggerated to create more impact. *Genealogies*: are the detailed histories of a dynasty or a people. They are often specific, providing historical information with dates and important names. *Songs*: are a form of melody that occupy an important place in oral tradition. Songs are sung in all moments of life, particularly on occasions of ritual ceremonies. These, therefore, were the primary forms of passing on the historical information, which was firmly preserved by special keepers of oral tradition, and so continually transmitted from one generation to the next.

The *cultural facet,* as the second dimension of the African heritage, concerns itself with the various forms of cultural undertakings and expressions. As Mbiti (1975, p.7) intensely alluded, "every people has a culture, and culture is changing all the time, whether slowly or rapidly". Such an awareness therefore implies that the understanding of culture is not the same but varies from one group to another. Highlighting the variations of culture, Raiter and Wilson (2005, p.122) stated that culture pertains to "those ideas, beliefs, feelings, values, and institutions, which are learned, and by which a group of people order their lives and interpret their experiences, and which give them an identity distinct from other groups".

These communally shared components further sets one group apart from the other. In terms of transmission and practice, these communally shared components are learnt and adopted by younger generations, especially children, through observation and imitation at an early age. Unfolding this process, Fafunwa (1974, p.48) noted that: "Culture, in traditional society, is not taught; it is caught. The child observes, imbibes and mimics the action of his elders and siblings. He watches the naming ceremonies, religious services, marriage rituals, funeral obsequies. He witnesses the coronation of a king or chief, the annual yam festival, the annual dance and acrobatic displays of guilds and age groups or his relations in the activities. The child in a traditional society cannot escape his cultural and physical environments".

This assertion suggests that each person, who grows up within a particular social context, is likely to be infused with the cultural undertakings and expressions of that particular society. Therefore, this makes culture a relative practice, which cannot be generalised. However, in broad terms, the concept of culture, as Mugambi (2002, p.516) noted, may basically refer to "the totality of a people's way of life". In that sense, the word "culture" covers many things. These may include "the way people live, behave and act, and their physical as well as their intellectual achievements" (Mbiti, 1975, p.7). These however, are not limits to the understanding of culture.

Mbiti (1975, pp.7-8) asserted that the practice of culture may manifest itself in various forms, including the following: "In art and literature, dance, music and drama, in the styles of building houses and of people's clothing, in social organization and political systems, in religion, ethics, morals and philosophy, in the customs and institutions of the people, in their values and laws, and in their economic life". Thus, the cultural facet, in the facets of the African heritage, looks at the embodiment of a

[5]William Moss and Peter Mazikana (1986) asserts that "oral history" is usually identified as an activity, a detached and academic process of inquiry into the memories of people who have experienced the recent past directly. This inquiry and the responses it generates are recorded to supplement written records that have been found wanting in some measure for historical analysis.

[6]Jan Vansina (1965) is said to offer a comprehensive classification of oral traditions by Moss and Mazikana (1986). This is because Vansina categorised oral traditions into five major groups: The first group consists of formulae - stereotyped phrases used in special circumstances. These include titles describing a person's status; slogans describing the character of a group of people; didactic formulae such as proverbs, riddles, sayings, and epigrams; and ritual formulae used in religious ceremonies or rites of magic. The second category is comprised of poetry. This is seen as a tradition in a fixed form, which form is considered along with the content as artistic by the society in which it exists and is transmitted. Poems are further divided into official and private poems. Official poetry includes songs and poems providing historical accounts, panegyric poetry for praise, religious poetry for prayer, hymns, and dogmatic texts. Personal poetry is composed to give free expression to feelings. The third category is lists of place names, such as sites passed through during a period of migration, and lists of personal names. Genealogies are included in this category. Tales, the fourth group, consist of testimonies in prose with free form text. They are varied in nature and include general, local, and family history; myths or didactic tales intended for instruction or explanation of the world, the culture, and society; and artistic tales meant to please the listener. The final category consists of commentaries which include legal precedents supplying directives for solving legal problems and thereby creating law; explanatory commentaries recited at the same time as the historical traditions to which they are attached; and occasional commentaries made only in answer to a question but nevertheless existing primarily as a record of historical facts and not merely in order to provide explanations (see also, Monica King, 2006).

[7]James Cox (1998) further asserts that Folktales are prose narratives regarded as fiction. Although they are often told for entertainment, they usually carry a moral and may be set in any time or place.

group's cultural heritage and how such a culture is continuously preserved, expressed and passed on to the next generations, over a period of time.

The *religious facet,* as the third and last facet of the African heritage, is closely aligned to the cultural facet (Sarpong, 2004). This is because religion permeates to all aspects of the human life. In fact, Sarpong (2004, p.94) argues that "the Supreme Being, creator of heaven and earth, is the universal norm of behaviour, the one who tells us what is of value and what is not". In that sense, God is intrinsically a positive reinforcement for ethical conduct, as He is the universal norm of behaviour. Africans, as Sarpong (2004) argued, are not exempt from this awareness. They live in a universe that is governed by laws, rituals and taboos that emanate from God, the Supreme Being, who seeks to regulate their behaviour.

Expressing this sentiment, Mndende (2009, pp.112-113) asserted that the "people who practice African Traditional Religion (ATR) believe in the existence of the Supernatural Power, who created life and the earth". Although this Supernatural Power is believed to be everywhere in creation, it is also believed that creation began in the Spiritual World. The Spiritual World is considered to be holy as "it is where the laws, rituals and taboos that control the welfare of the physical world originated" (Mndende, 2009, pp.112-113).

The Supernatural Power is said to have made all the laws that regulate life; therefore, these laws are to be strictly obeyed (Mndende 2009). The Supreme Being, in this regard, is understood to be the regulator of behaviour within the context of the African Traditional Religion. That is probably why scholars such as Mbiti (1975, p.10) stated that religion "has dominated the thinking of African peoples to such an extent that it has shaped their cultures, their social life, their political organizations and economics activities". Religion, therefore, is a system that finds an expression within the various aspects of life, including culture. To most indigenous Africans, especially those living in Africa south of the Sahara, the embodiment of this religious facet is grounded in the doctrines and teachings of the African Traditional Religion.

As a religion that is poised of the responses of the indigenous people to the great awareness of the Supreme Being, the ATR dominates all the aspects of life, including cultural undertakings and social expressions (Kanu, 2014). The religious facet of the African heritage therefore, is deeply rooted in the lived experiences of the African people. It entails the manner in which African people relate to the universe, both spiritual and physical, and how they permit their religious awareness to shape their cultures, their social lives, their politics and economical activities (Mbiti, 1975).

Against this backdrop, the notions of religion and culture are often used interchangeably or tend to overlap. This occurs when the elements of one system, say religion, are used to explain the elements of another, culture. In such a situation, the African Traditional Religion is perceived to be the embodiment of the African culture, whereas the African culture is seen as a true reflection of the African Traditional Religion. The comingling or overlap of religion and culture has led some scholars to classify the African Traditional Religion as "culture", even though this is deemed as unacceptable by African religionists (Mndende, 2009).

In line with these various facets of the African heritage – the historical, cultural and religious; one ought not to consider each facet as representing the African heritage. All three facets must be accounted for in the proper depiction of the African heritage. That is, if the African heritage is to be adequately described, one must take into account the three outlined facets, which are inseparable even though each exists to fulfil or serve a specific goal. These goals form a link from which a greater purpose is derived – that of tracing and recounting a peoples' sense of identity; providing guidelines to socially accepted standards of conduct; and the outlining of various forms of worship within an African milieu.

Scholarship of the African religious heritage

The embodiment of the African religious heritage, since the late nineteenth century, has largely been under the influence of Christianized scholarship[8]. A vast number of scholars, who have written extensively about the African religious heritage, particularly the African Traditional Religion, are non-practitioners and mostly professed the Christian faith (Mndende, 2009). The scholastic study of the African Traditional Religion by non-practitioners, in itself, is not an issue. The problem only "arises when the representation of the African Traditional Religion begins to show some elements of bias and does not adequately reflect the premise of the religion" (Mokhoathi, 2017a, p.10).

Unfortunately, a lot of scholarly works produced by Christian scholars has taken this direction. Westerlund (1985, p.59), for instance, asserted that: "Although scholars of religion have primarily aimed at description and understanding, or depicting an 'inside view' of African religions, they have clearly been influenced by theological biases and thus tended to 'Christianize' these religions". The christianization of African religions, particularly the African Traditional Religion is an illustration of epistemic injustice to the religion. This is because the African Traditional Religion is perceived as insufficient and must be measured against something greater – that is Christianity. This is where the problem of cultural absolutism features strongly.

Cultural absolutism postulates that "an action is moral or immoral by an absolutely right standard" (Park, 2011, p.160). The central variance between a moral and immoral

[8]One may bring to attention the works of the following Christian scholars: Geoffrey E. Porrinder (1962); Marthinus L. Daneel (1973); Wilhelm. V. Van Deventer (1991); John Mbiti (1975), and others.

act is that a moral act meets the absolutely right standards, while an immoral act does not. The implications of this interpretation are that an absolutely right standard transcends all cultures, even if all comparative cultures disapprove of it. For instance, “one culture might be considered to be morally better than another, depending on whether or not its moral standards adhere more closely to the absolutely right standards than those of its competitor” (Park, 2011, p.160). In this view, an absolutely right standard is not evaluated against the moral codes of a particular society, but against the normative standards of a dominant culture, which its standards are set as universal.

This is the epistemic view which most European colonizers and Christian missionaries upheld in the consideration of the African religious heritage. They saw the “African culture not only as lower than the Western culture, but also as undesirable and even dangerous to converted Africans” (Oduro et al., 2008, p.37). They regarded the religious piety of Africans as “wholly erroneous, idolatrous, superstitious, and necromantic” (Sanou, 2013, p.7). They basically denied that there is anything that is of God in non-Christian religions (Nxumalo, 1980). In this case, they believed that the western culture was morally better than the African, and reasoned that the Christian moral standards adhere more closely to the absolutely right standards than those of the African Traditional Religion.

In contrast to this, cultural relativism postulates that what makes an action right is that it is approved by one’s culture (Schick and Vaughn, 2010). This implies that “the moral code of a society determines what is right within the society; that is, if the moral code of a society says that a certain action is right, then, that action is right, at least within the society” (Rachels and Rachels, 2010, p.16). Corroborating this notion, Harman (2008, p.11), stated that “there is no single true morality”. Specifically, because there are various moral frameworks, from which none “is more correct than the others”.

For this perception, it becomes apparent that “there is no objective standard that can be used to judge one society’s code as better than another” (Rachels and Rachels, 2010, p.16). In that regard, Mndende (2009) argued that the taking of western culture and Christianity as the single true morality tended to undermine the essence of indigenous spirituality. She contends that the work of some Christian scholars often falsely refer to the African Traditional Religion as “ancestor worship characterized by spirit possession, secular spirituality, nature religion, primal religion or just African culture” (Mndende, 2009, p.6). This is evident in works of some Christian scholars such as Dionne Crafford (2015), who regarded Christianity as the ideal benchmark from which the quintessence of African Traditional Religions may be disparagingly judged.

This is an epistemic injustice, which undermines the unassailability of the African Traditional Religion, since it is recurrently disapproved and adjudged against Christian viewpoints and standards. It is an *episteme* because the notion of *episteme* involves the evaluative process of abstract reasoning about idealised, disembodied, universal concepts, and its methods are deduction and often generalised (Wears, 2004, p.15). As a manner of knowing or legitimate form of knowledge, *episteme*, together with its parallel concept, *techne*, have dominated Western thought since the Renaissance. Taken together therefore, *episteme* and *techne* “are judgments about how knowledge is to be verified, codified, and expressed, once it has been discovered” (Wears, 2004, p.15).

Since there are no scientific grounds or standards in which to verify, codify or objectively express the reliability of the African religious heritage, European scholars resorted to open-ended, yet derisive concepts such as superstition, idolatry or primitivism in the description of indigenous spiritualties. These became a general category in which the African religious experience was codified or known, even though this has some distorted form of ‘legitimised’ knowledge. It is therefore, this distorted form of ‘legitimised’ knowledge that must be questioned. Relative epistemic paradigms must come to play in order to reconstruct these distortions. Aydede (1998, p.16), citing Aristotle, argued that one can only know (*epistatai*) a thing *simpliciter* when one knows the appropriate explanation of it and knows that the thing “cannot be otherwise”.

The descriptions that most western scholars, including some African Christian scholars, gave to the African Traditional Religion were “otherwise”. Hence Mndende (2009, p.6) disputes that these scholars still regard the indigenous spirituality of Africans as “ancestor worship characterized by spirit possession, secular spirituality, nature religion, primal religion or just African culture”. The knowledge (*episteme*) of the African religious heritage must be transformed, more so within the democratic sphere where religious rights are promoted. The African Traditional Religion, in particular, has suffered greatly from this epistemic injustice, as it is mostly Christianised or judged against Christian standards (Westerlund, 1985).

PHENOMENOLOGY AS AN ARCHITYPE OF A RELATIVE *EPISTEME*

What is to be done with this kind of epistemic injustice, particularly in the knowing of the African religious heritage? It is therefore suggested that the students of religion should, even more seriously, continue to explore the viability of relative epistemic rather than absolute paradigms in which to engage indigenous spirituality. This is necessary because relative epistemologies provide researchers an ample opportunity to unearth the uniqueness of each religious tradition, which is in no manner objective (Harman, 2008). Thus, a relative approach to the study of indigenous religions, such as the African Traditional Religion, seems to be necessary and

phenomenology is an example of such an *episteme*.

Phenomenology, as a philosophical concept, is said to be founded by Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), even though there are other prominent exponents who contributed immensely towards its development (Thompson and Zahavi, 2007; Moran, 2000). According to Kafle (2011, p.181), phenomenology is "an umbrella term encompassing both a philosophical movement and a range of research approaches". Therefore, when applied to research, phenomenology refers to the study of phenomena: "their nature and meanings" (Finlay, 2009, p.6). But as a philosophical construct, phenomenology is a theoretical premise which focus on people's perceptions of the world in which they live, and what it means to them (Langdridge, 2007).

Thus, phenomenology is concerned with the investigation of essence, or the essential meaning of phenomena (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p.7). '*Essence'*, in this regard, as defined by Heidegger (1977, p.3) refers to the essential meaning of a phenomenon: "that which makes a thing what it is". In other words, one may argue that phenomenology finds no reality outside the experiences of the experiencer, and basically rests upon the views of the practitioners, as experiencers, rather than those of outsiders as observers. As a method of enquiry, phenomenology generally relies on relativism rather than absolutism, as the process of knowing.

The main reason for advocating for phenomenology, as an architype of a relative *episteme*, is that it follows a systematic process (i.e. phenomenological stages), which seeks to prevent biased perceptions from tempering with the data obtained from the studied phenomena. This systematic process comprises of the consideration of the following phenomenological stages: (1) performing an *epoché*, (2) empathetic interpolation, (3) describing the phenomena, (4) naming the phenomena, (5) describing inter-relationships and processes, and (6) constructing a paradigmatic model. There are several phenomenological stages, but the scope is limited to these 6 stages for the purpose of maintaining clarity within the bounds of this paper.

The first phenomenological stage involves the bracketing of predetermined assumptions, by the researcher, towards the phenomenon understudy. Phenomenologists refer to this as performing an *epoché* (Cox, 1998). Derived from the German philosopher, Edmund Husserl (1859–1938), the term *epoché* was used by phenomenologists to suspend all judgements associated with what Husserl called the 'natural attitude' (Cox, 2012). Husserl regarded the suspension of one's judgement from the scientific enquiry as "bracketing", or putting one's judgements "into brackets" (Husserl, 1931, p.111). "Bracketing" is a term which Husserl borrowed from Mathematics.

For instance, Cox (2012, p.26) notes that when solving an algebraic equation: "The mathematician places the various components of the formula into brackets and works on solving each problem placed in brackets one at a time so that, at the conclusion, each limited solution can be applied to resolving the problem of the entire equation. In a similar way, although Husserl did not use the *epoché* to doubt the existence of the external world, he suspended judgements about it so that, like a mathematician, attention could be focused on another part of the equation, in this case, on an analysis of the phenomena of perception as they appear in the individual's consciousness".

By putting 'into brackets' any preconceived assumptions about the investigated phenomena, the researcher "allows pure phenomena to speak for themselves" (Cox, 2012, p.26). This implies that the suspension of personal beliefs, and withholding of judgements permits the pure transfer of data which is to be analysed from the view of the experiencers as insiders. Following Husserl, prominent historians and philosophers of religion, such as Gerardus van der Leeuw (1890–1950), and William Brede Kristensen (1867–1953), upheld the performance of an *epoché* in scientific inquiry (James 1995, p. 144).

The main reason for this was that the performance of an *epoché* required that the researcher suspend their assumptions, without denying them, but bracketing them out, for a time, in order to keep an open-mind towards the religious phenomena understudy (Daniel, 2012). Thus, the 'bracketing' of one's preconceived ideas in a scientific enquiry gives the researcher an opportunity to meaningfully grasp the reality of the experiencers understudy, as insiders, and enables the researcher to take the particular views of the experiencers as giving an inside view. The performance of an *epoché* is therefore necessary in the exploration of indigenous religions, since the embodiment of African spirituality currently falls under the influence of Christianised scholarship or influenced by non-practitioners.

Empathetic interpolation, as the second phenomenological stage, refers to the process whereby "observers (or researcher) seek to enter empathetically into the religious experiences of the adherents they are studying" (Cox, 1998, p.5). This begins by cultivating a feeling of empathy for what is studied or happening, no matter how strange, bizarre or alien it is, in the lives of the practitioners. Empathy, in this context, "requires that observers endeavor to understand what it would be to experience the world the way the religious practitioners do" (Cox, 1998, p.5). In other words, the researchers of a particular phenomena must begin a process whereby they insert themselves into the context of the practitioners in order to obtain an outlook consistent with that of their worldview.

Only then can the researchers begin to empathise with the feelings of the experiencers as they start to see things the way the experiencers do. Davies (1991, p.5) conveys this idea in the following manner: "The meaning of things is not inherent in objects, but is actually located in the individual's inner life. The researcher's task is to understand reality as it is, actively and consciously created by subjects, not as a pure entity that exists 'out there'". This

implies that some 'things' are not simply things, but rather become 'things' in the act of perception and naming (Davies, 1991). This basic naming is shaped and distorted by all kinds of cultural and religious influences on the knowing subject or experiencer (Willis, 2001).

In this context, the phenomenological agenda is to attempt to understand and describe phenomena exactly as they appear in the individual's consciousness (Willis, 2001). Thus, in the process of empathetic interpolation, *epoché* and empathy are meticulously aligned. The 'bracketing' of preconceived assumptions is performed in order that an empathic attitude may be employed (Cox, 1998). However, empathy can never be achieved completely if one is not actually a believer or practitioner of the phenomena understudy. Therefore, the notion of interpolation is also required. According to Cox (1998, p.5), interpolation implies "that what seems strange or foreign needs to be inserted or fit into one's own experience in order to achieve understanding of it".

In this instance, the researcher employs an existential realism and inserts it to the strange or foreign phenomena understudy in order to understand it. For example, the Christian idea of spirit possession may be inserted into the strange or foreign experience of ancestral possession for *Sangomas*[9], as a framework which may provide an understanding of the phenomena of ancestral calling. If such a link may be drawn, then the process of interpolation, which enables the researcher to recognise "a framework of intension" among believers, has begun (van der Leeuw, 1938, p.675).

For Cox (2012), intentionality, does not only require the active involvement of the researcher but also includes the acts of a believing community – what it intends by its myths, rituals and symbols, which must be understood by the researcher if genuine understanding is to be achieved. The recognition of the prerequisite for this method permits the researcher to apply an empathetic interpolation. This is because interpolation allows the researcher to understand the strange or foreign phenomena understudy through the framework of another experience. Thus, the purpose of performing an *epoché* and empathetic interpolation is "to provide researchers with a clear method for entering into the religious experience of those they are seeking to understand" (Cox, 1998, p.6).

Describing a phenomena, as the third phenomenological stage, regards the art of portraying what one has observed. This means that description is the essential task of classical phenomenology (Willis, 2001). It pertains to the process that the researcher undertakes to depict "what is occurring from the inside and which help those who are on the outside to understand" (Cox, 1998, p.7). Heaney (1990, p.89) refers to description as "revelation" because it literally implies the removing of the veil which may obscure or disguise the realities of the world. Thus, the description of a phenomena presents the reader with a clear picture of what has been observed, what is actually happening, and the terminology that is used to explicate that phenomena.

In other words, phenomenological descriptions are "overloaded with details which in themselves portray what is happening without distorting the phenomena from the believer's point of view" (Cox, 1998, p.7). This process, however, is not simplistic. But it poses some challenges. Crotty (1996, p. 280) sums up these challenges in the following manner:

"The difficulty does not lie merely in seeing "what lies before our eyes" (which Husserl saw as a "hard demand"), or knowing "precisely what we see" (Merleau-Ponty said there was nothing more difficult to know than that). Additionally, we will also experience great difficulty in actually describing what we have succeeded in seeing and knowing. When we attempt to describe what we have never had to describe before, language fails us. We find our descriptions incoherent, fragmentary, and not a little "mysterious". We find ourselves lost for words, forced to invent words and bend existing words to bear the meanings we need them to carry for us. This has always been characteristic of phenomenological description. We may have to be quite inventive and creative in this respect".

This citation breaks into surface two fundamental challenges regarding the description of phenomena. The first regards the challenge of reproducing an adequate, or perhaps better put, of painting a clear picture of the realism understudy. The second relates to the limits of language in portraying the phenomena understudy. Both of these components are imperative in the description of indigenous religions, particularly the African Traditional Religion. This is because the African Traditional Religion is based on oral tradition and does not have a universal pattern from which its several forms of expression may be categorised.

Unlike Christianity, which rests upon the moral basis of scripture and its interpretation to determine and assess those components which fall outside or within the will of God, the African Traditional Religion does not have such prescriptive guide. Its moral guides are communicated through symbols (including taboos) and ritual practices. These often take various forms and are not prescriptive but relative – each symbols carries a particular message (e.g. a snake may symbolise the visitation of ancestors if found inside the house), and each ritual is conducted to fulfil a specific purpose (e.g. purification rituals, birth rituals, etc.).

With relativism however, comes the issue of variance

[9]A *Sangoma* or diviner is the most senior of the traditional healers (Truter, 2007). She or he is a person who defines an illness (diagnostician) and also divines the circumstances of the illness in the cultural context. Diviners are known by different names. For example, they are known as *Igqirha* in Xhosa, *Ngaka* in Northern Sotho, *Selaoli* in Southern Sotho, and *Mungome* in Venda and Tsonga. But most South Africans generally refer to them as *Sangomas*—from the Zulu word *Izangoma* (Mokhoathi, 2017b).

and transactionality. In relation to variance, one finds the same category of divination classified into various groupings, such as *Xhosa* systems of divination, *Zulu* systems of divination or other ethnic systems of divination. With regard to transactionality, one finds the same practices or ritualistic components of slaughtering involved in all these various groups, including the use of some terms such as *Sangoma,* which is applicable whether one is Xhosa or Zulu. Thus, many aspects of the religious experience of African religious heritage are relative but also transactional. These naturally overflow into the socio-cultural heritage of Africans, so that there is no dichotomy between the religious and cultural life.

This implies that the African religious heritage incorporates into its system a number of traditional beliefs, customs, and socio-cultural practices, which may be characterised as neutral, rather than purely religious or cultural. In this context, one cannot clearly separate the religious aspects of the African Traditional Religion from the purely African cultural aspects. Indeed, African scholars such as Mbiti (1975) noted that the African traditional heritage is composed of three dissimilar facets – namely: the historical, cultural and religious heritages, but all these three facets are closely intertwined and cannot be comprehensively detached from the other. This makes the African religious heritage a phenomena that falls outside or beyond the scope of popular description and generally accepted vocabulary. Therefore, its embodiment requires that it be described and interpreted within the socio-religious context of the practitioners, who can better describe the processes that operate within.

Naming the phenomena is the fourth phenomenological stage towards the understanding of the African religious heritage. That is, after describing what has been observed, the researcher must then aim to provide names for the studied experience. These names, according to Cox (1998, p. 7), are “given in order to facilitate communication and to help build understandings of various types of phenomena”. This process is similar to what is known as labelling, except that labelling (or the theory of labelling) pertains to the study of deviance or deviant behaviours in sociology (Becker, 1991). Naming the phenomena, therefore, encompasses the putting of labels to the experiences and activities of experiencers so that they may be better classified or categorised.

This task however, is not easy. Cox (1998, p.7) notes that “selecting the names can be risky since what we label an activity might distort what actually is happening or how it is experienced from a believer’s perspective”. This may be true in the case of indigenous religions, since the naming process may sometimes distort what is actually happening, or fail to adequately describe the experienced realism from the viewpoint of the experiencers. This means that there is a greater need for accurate descriptions, and the naming of religious phenomena within the African context because African religious expressions lack a developed vocabulary since they have been marginalised, and have been in the shadows of Christianity for too long (Daniel, 2012).

Naming the phenomena therefore grants the students of religion an opportunity to explore the ‘inner’ descriptions of a religious phenomenon, and how it has been named or referenced by the experiencers of such a phenomenon. In this instance, phenomenology provides a suitable context from which the students of religions may begin to rediscover and accurately name the various African religious phenomena and their features. Cox (1998, p.7), however, cautions that “the words used to name or to group the phenomena of religion should be chosen carefully to avoid prejudicial language so as not to impede the observer’s capacity to apprehend the phenomena as they are”. The students of religion therefore must carefully choose and use names that are referenced by experiencers, as insiders, in order to facilitate better communication and to help build an understanding of the various features of the studied phenomena.

The fifth phenomenological stage involves the describing of inter-relationships and processes. This regards the description of common systems which the phenomenon undergoes due to historical developments, intellectual developments, social changes, and other dynamic factors that govern the people’s environment (Cox, 1998). Remarking on inter-relationships, Scheler (1973, p.520) stated that: “Not only does everyone discover himself against a background of, and at the same time as a “member” of, a totality of interconnections of experience which have somehow become concentrated, and which are called in their temporal extension history, in their simultaneous extension social unity; but as a moral subject in this whole, everyone is also given as a “person acting with others,” as a “man with others,” and as “co-responsible” for everything morally relevant in this totality”.

This means that the totality of human life is experienced, not only as experiencing-for-oneself, but also for a collective, as experiencing-with-others or with-something, such as the environment in which one exists (Schütz, 1964). Thus, the ‘totality of interactions’, which emanates out of co-dependence with others, and of living within a particular environment informs the experiences that the experiencers encounter. Hence Schütz (1964, p.251) noted that: “The subjective meaning the group has for its members consists in their knowledge of a common situation, and with it a common system of typifications and relevances. The system of typifications and relevances shared with other members of the group defines the social roles, positions and statuses of each”.

For this awareness, students of religion must take into account the common systems which inform the experiences of the experiencers. During this process, Schütz (1964, p.92) suggests that researchers must consider the cultural pattern of group life: “Following the customary terminology, it uses the term “cultural pattern of group life” for designating all the peculiar valuations, institutions, and systems of orientation and guidance (such

as the folkways, mores, laws, habits, customs, etiquette, fashions) which, in the common opinion of sociologists of our time characterise – if not constitute – any social group at a given moment in its history".

Further providing a context from which this impression may be understood, Cox (1998, p.8) offered the following description, as an example:

"What an observer describes, moreover, will always be linked to historical processes and to current social circumstances. For example, when the medium who had become possessed during the *mutoro* ritual was interviewed, it observed that part of her message related to the traditional role of chiefs in Zimbabwe and how that had been gradually eroding as decision-making had been transferred to village councils frequently comprised of political appointees. These changes had occurred since Independence in 1980 resulting in some cases in an erosion of traditional sources of authority. The medium interviewed believed that the consequences of such changes meant that the ancestors guarding the land had not been honoured sufficiently nor consulted on important matters. The failure to honour and consult the ancestors had produced the drought. It would be impossible to comprehend such an interpretation of current circumstances without understanding how religious beliefs and practices interact dynamically with historical, social, political, and economic processes".

Cox (1998), in this citation, shows that what the researchers aim to describe about the studied phenomena is always linked or connected to historical processes and current social circumstances. In light of this illustrative narrative, one sees the shifting role of the medium, and the unique interpretation which is offered by the medium to explicate the outcomes of that shift. In the first instance, the medium was actively involved in the decision-making processes of the country (in this case, Zimbabwe), as the representative of the ancestors, through the means of traditional leadership (the chiefs). With the rise of village councils, a political process which replaced traditional leadership, the medium believed that the land had not been sufficiently honoured because she was withdrawn from the decision-making processes, as the representative of the ancestors.

The shifting of powers, from traditional governance through the rulership of chiefs, to political processes through the leadership of village councils, appears to signify the abandonment of ancestors by the medium, since the ancestors are not consulted for political decisions. On the second instance, the medium interpreted the immediate occurrence of draught as the consequence or penalty of excluding the representation of the ancestors in the decision-making processes in the country. In this case, there appears to be an inter-relationship between the political processes (the replacement of traditional leadership by village councils), and the immediate social circumstances (the occurrence of drought as the result of change of powers, from which the representation of ancestors was withdrawn).

For any other person, there appears to be no inter-relationships between the change of powers and the immediate social circumstances of drought. The occurrence of drought may have been perceived as a spontaneous phenomenon, which had nothing to do with political processes in the country. But the medium saw inter-relationships between the change of power and the occurrence of drought. Thus, the describing of inter-relationships and processes must take into account the description of common systems, which the phenomenon undergoes due to these historical developments, intellectual developments, social changes, and other dynamic factors that may be governing the people's environment.

The last phenomenological stage concerns the constructing of a paradigmatic model. This regards the building of "a model which can be used to analyse any religious tradition", including the religious tradition of the experiencers (Cox, 1998, p.8). This paradigmatic model permits the researcher to make contrasts between various religious traditions in order to demonstrate how such comparisons elucidate the phenomenon understudy. Even though this is a strenuous and not exhaustive process, it however, provides a framework from which the various facets of the phenomenon understudy may be integrated into a complete picture for comprehension.

Cox (1998, p.9), for instance, noted that "the paradigmatic model provides, therefore, a common framework for the study of any one particular religion or aspects of it and for the comparison of religions or aspects of them". This process therefore, permits the researcher to relate various aspects, or any one aspect of a particular religion with the aspects of the phenomenon understudy. Thus, through the construction of a paradigmatic model, the researcher gets to evaluate the various components of one or more religious traditions against the religion(s) understudy.

CONCLUSION

The use of relative rather than absolute epistemologies appears to be a viable approach in which to develop indigenous knowledges and their scholarship, and can also serve as a tool to reconstruct the *episteme* of the African religious heritage. Precisely, because the African religious heritage is deemed to be lacking in scientific rigor from which it can be verified, codified or objectively expressed as reliable. The use of scientific methods and relative epistemologies in the exploration of indigenous traditions may be the answer to the issue of epistemic injustice, which tends to undermine the unassailability of the African religious heritage, particularly the African Traditional Religion. That is, relative epistemologies, as a

manner of knowing, may offer reasonable judgments about how knowledge is to be verified, codified, and expressed, once it has been discovered. This process may also dismiss the general use of derisive concepts such as superstition, idolatry or primitivism in the description of indigenous spiritualties. Phenomenology, both as a philosophical concept and as a range of research approaches, may offer a conducive ground in which this scientific exploration may take place.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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