

# African and Afrikaner ‘ways of knowing’

## Truth and the problems of superstition and ‘blood knowledge’

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*Abstract:* The approbation, in the last few decades, of ‘African ways of knowing’ and, more recently, the critical emphasis on ‘knowledge in the blood’—which refers to ‘deeply entrenched’ and ‘received knowledge’, notably of (white) Afrikaners—give rise to all kinds of questions and concerns. What makes certain ways of knowing and kinds of knowledge ‘African’ and ‘Afrikaner’, respectively? What do these ideas cover and include, and what falls outside their respective ambits? What functions are served by appealing to these notions? Amongst other things, the idea of ‘African ways of knowing’ constitutes part of a challenge to occidental belief systems, science, education and ethics. Theorists who single out certain ways of knowing as distinctly and uniquely ‘African’ or characteristically ‘Afrikaner’, respectively, not only emphasise their significance in post-colonialist and antiracist discourse but also maintain that the study of these is of profound relevance to educational and socio-political transformation. In this paper, I examine the notions in question, by seeking to understand how those who employ them might see them as plausible, before referring them to a particular epistemological framework. Problems that need to be addressed include relativism about knowledge and truth, as well as elevation of all kinds of beliefs—notably superstitions and racial prejudices—to the status of knowledge, for any real and sustainable transformation to occur.

*Keywords:* African ways of knowing; belief; justification; ‘knowledge in the blood’; prejudice; relativism; superstition; truth.

‘Imfihlakalo yaseMhlabezi iqiniso’. (‘The truth is the world’s secret’. – Zulu proverb)

## Introduction

In 1996, Credo Mutwa<sup>1</sup> published *Isilwane/The Animal*, essentially an account of ‘the reverence in which animals are held according to African ritual and tradition’ (Mutwa 1996: back cover blurb). Among the many fascinating ‘traditional tales’ contained in the book is Mutwa’s account of why the cat is ‘more than just a pet’ (Mutwa 1996: 30): ‘treating a cat properly guarantees that it will protect you against the *tokoloshe* and the *mantindane*’ (Mutwa 1996: 31). He goes on to provide the following account, which is worth quoting in virtual entirety:

From the Cape right up to Zaire, there is a fearful creature known as the *tokoloshe*. It is short, thickset, round-headed and furry, with a round snout and a pair of glowing, bright red eyes. It has pointed ears and a thick, bony ridge extending from above its forehead to the nape of its neck. This creature, short though it is, is extremely aggressive and viciously cruel. It specialises in sexually assaulting women and challenges benighted travellers to stick fights which it triumphantly wins (Ibid.).

Mutwa writes that in the course of his career as a traditional healer, he has ‘come across many women who have been sexually molested and even raped by this terrible creature, which moves in the shadowy field where the real and the unreal, the visible and the invisible meet’ (Ibid.). ‘As a *sanusi*’, Mutwa has

treated many men who have been beaten and frightened out of their wits by the *tokoloshe*. However, there are some people, especially white sceptics, who believe that the *tokoloshe* is nothing more than a figment of African superstition and fertile imagination (Mutwa 1996: 32).

Referring to the fact that he possesses ‘over fifty years of experience’, Mutwa feels impelled to

appeal to these sceptics to think again. The *tokoloshe* is real – it does exist. I have seen the way it injures men and women who are unfortunate enough to fall into its clutches. When Africans fear the *tokoloshe* they are not fearing a figment of their imaginations. Instead of being laughed off by sceptics, the *tokoloshe* deserves investigation (Ibid.).

‘There is another creature’, he reports,

which is not unlike the *tokoloshe* in its love of inflicting bodily harm, and which is also greatly feared. ... Like the *tokoloshe*, the *mantindane* stands about three-and-a-half feet tall. Unlike the *tokoloshe*, which is a powerfully built, almost chimpanzee-like creature, it appears extremely frail. It has a large, bald, egg-shaped head which can be as large as a fully grown watermelon, and it has very weak-looking jaws. Its mouth is little more than a slit and the nose is rudimentary, with nostrils like comma-shaped holes. The creature's eyes are very strange and resemble beans. They are slanted and covered with what looks like thick, jet-black plastic or horn. It has a very thin neck, narrow shoulders and long, thin arms, and its hands, although resembling those of a human being, are very thin and long. Its long, thin and bony fingers have more joints than those of a human being. The creature's two spindly legs end in long, delicate feet. The *mantindane* is civilised and highly intelligent, and unlike the *tokoloshe*, which appears stark-naked, it always wears some type of garment that reaches from its neck and covers its limbs completely. The colour of this creature's skin is a strange greyish white with slight pink overtones. Like the *tokoloshe*, the *mantindane* treats human beings who fall into its hands cruelly and with utter contempt. It kidnaps males and females and scoops out flesh from their legs, thighs and even buttocks and upper arms. Unlike the *tokoloshe* which is solitary, *mantindane* operate in groups. There can be as many as twenty of these vicious creatures in one group.

Sometimes a gang of *mantindane* will kidnap a person and ill-treat him or her. They will then release the person, only to kidnap them again a few months or even a few years later (Ibid.).

Mutwa states that he has 'met many black men and women throughout Africa who have been kidnapped by these creatures several times, and who bear scars on their bodies that testify to their terrible ordeals at the hands of these strange and fearful beings' (Ibid.). 'I have personally fallen victim to *mantindane*', he reports, '— not once, but three times—and I still carry scars on my body that testify to the truth of what I say' (Ibid.)

Mutwa's account is noteworthy, in the present context, for its implicit acknowledgement of the conditions that are generally assumed to have to be in place when we make knowledge claims: belief, truth and appropriate justification ('experience', evidence, testimony; also see Ryle 1963: 129-130, 146, 154-155). Clearly, 'many black men and women throughout Africa' believe that the *tokoloshe* and *mantindane* are real, that they exist. Equally clearly, beliefs in these creatures might be put to educational use in terms of comparative studies of cultural creativity and myth-making (see Lillejord &

Mkabela 2004). Do these beliefs constitute ‘African ways of *knowing*’, however, and can (and should) they be taught as ‘African *knowledge*’? Before one can even begin to answer these questions, one ought to be clear about what is involved in judging others’ knowledge claims, especially if these ‘others’ adhere to what would appear to be substantially different epistemological traditions. Am I inflicting ‘epistemic harm’ on someone when I judge her beliefs to be untrue and/or lacking in adequate justification? When I refer to the tokoloshe or mantindane as ‘a figment of African superstition and fertile imagination’, does this constitute ‘epistemic injustice’ towards those who hold the beliefs in question? Evidently, the most desirable way of proceeding would be by trying to understand how those who have certain beliefs could see them as plausible, to grasp the concepts they use. An obvious starting-point appears to be the consideration of ‘African ways of knowing’, and of the component concepts and examples, especially as expounded by certain representative theorists.

### The idea of ‘African ways of knowing’

With post-colonialist and antiracist discourse characterising, if not most then certainly the latter half of, the 20th century, there has been a ‘back-to-the-roots’ celebration of ‘the African’, in Africa as elsewhere. In postcolonial southern Africa especially, it has been coupled with invocation of a particular idea. The ‘African Renaissance’ is understood, among other things, as a process of reclamation of indigenous or traditional African ‘ways’—of knowing, seeing, doing and valuing —, a process of promotion of ‘African culture’. According to Molefi K. Asante,

the critique of Western and Westernised epistemologies constitutes an important part of African epistemology. Moreover, in the postcolonial era world, where the limitations of the dominant Western concepts have become obvious, it is imperative ... to decolonise knowledge, by exploring different ways of knowing (Asante 2005: 40).

Asante goes on to explain that ‘African epistemology comprises four basic African ways of *knowing* that can be separated into three categories, the supernatural, the natural, and the paranormal paths to knowledge’. The supernatural mode ‘includes divination ... and revelation (i.e., messages revealed in dreams and visions)’ (Ibid.). These two ‘cognitive modes’ involve ‘the intervention of supernatural

beings—spirits, ancestors, dead relatives, gods, goddesses—who impart knowledge' to living humans 'directly through a dream or vision', or 'indirectly through mediums, diviners, animals, extraordinary life events, or natural phenomena that require a special kind of information' (Ibid.). In the natural way of knowing, writes Asante, 'human beings gain knowledge by using their natural faculties and abilities, including intuition ..., which consists of the work of the human heart (i.e., feeling and insight), and reason, which consists of a natural investigation of reality through the human intellect and logical thought process' (Ibid.). The third category, the paranormal mode, comprises 'extrasensory perception (ESP), which includes such modes as clairvoyance and telepathy' (Asante 2005: 41). Following George J. Sefa Dei's argument for the place of spirituality in education and schooling (Dei 2002: 1, 2, 10; Dei 2004), Constantine Ngara illustrates the need for a spirituality-centered thought and wisdom as a definite paradigm of knowing in Africa. Examples of 'ways of knowing' applicable to modern life in Africa are *taboo-based knowing*, 'herbal knowledge' or *indigenous healing wisdom*, *faith-based knowing*, and *political wisdom* (coupled with *prophetic wisdom*) (Ngara 2007: 14-16). Nashon, Anderson and Wright refer to these ways of knowing as 'knowing through taboos, through collective wisdom and experience, knowing through faith, and knowing through communication (spiritual wisdom)', respectively (Nashon *et al* 2007: 1, 2). 'African spiritual ways of knowing', writes Dei,

are intimately bound up with the affirmation of self and indigenous subjectivity. Many African ways of knowing affirm that personal subjectivity and emotionality must be legitimised, [t]hereby asserting that the subjectivity/objectivity and rationality/irrationality splits are false. In fact, while spiritual knowledge challenges subject-object dualism, it simultaneously upholds "objectivity" to the subjective experience and similarly some "subjectivity" to the objective reality. The subjective is capable of comprehending the "objective universe" (Dei 2004: 340; see also Dei 2002: 4).

To sum up, then, these appear to be the most significant characteristics of 'African ways of knowing': epistemic and conceptual decolonisation; self-affirmation; inclusion or reintroduction of spirituality and faith in education and schooling; emphasis on intuition in knowledge production; and emphasis on relationality—not only between human beings, and between human beings and ancestors, spirits, gods and goddesses, but also between subject and object, the

rational and the irrational etc. The first of these, epistemic and conceptual decolonisation, arguably entails all the other characteristics, while the last three appear to constitute different senses of ‘holism’ in epistemic activity.

Definitions of ‘African ways of knowing’ characteristically focus on ‘African’ or ‘indigenous’ (see, for example, Mudimbe 1988, Bakari 1997, Owuor 2007 and Dei 2004)<sup>2</sup>—as if these were the difficult or controversial terms. They are commonly coupled with ‘traditional’, ‘local’, and the like, and contrasted with ‘universal’, ‘global’, ‘world’, ‘cosmopolitan’, ‘Western’, ‘Eurocentric’ etc. To date, no pertinent policy document, statement or article has yielded the understanding of ‘knowing’ or ‘knowledge’ the respective authors are working with—as if these concepts were simple and uncontroversial. I contend that they are not, and that a careful account of ‘knowing’ and ‘knowledge’ will reveal ‘African ways of knowing’ to be something of a misnomer.

### ‘Ways of knowing’

Claudia Ruitenberg (2008) has recently provided some reasons for concern about the plausibility of the notion of ‘ways of knowing’. Drawing on the work of R.S. Peters (1970) and analytic philosophers Gilbert Ryle (1963) and Richard Robinson (1971), she argues that the phrase is not only vague but also fraught with all kinds of linguistic and conceptual difficulties. She questions the continuing use of this ‘ambiguous’ and ‘vague’ phrase, for example by feminist and Africanist scholars, especially when ‘more precise descriptions are available, such as “sources of knowledge”, “forms of representation”, “ways of learning”, and “regimes of truth”’ (Ruitenberg 2008: 306, 307).

Why is reference to ‘ways of knowing’ problematic? In essence, ‘know’ and ‘knowledge’ signal states, rather than activities. Knowledge, according to Robinson,

is never an act, or any kind of event. ... Although [it] is not an event, it has events closely connected with itself, notably its origin, that is the coming to know or learning, and its ending, that is the being forgotten or otherwise ceasing, and its recalls or realisations whenever we bring to mind or remember what we know. ... there is no actual as opposed to habitual present tense of the verb “to know” in English (Robinson 1971: 17).

In a related move, Peters employs Ryle's distinction between 'achievement words' and 'task words' (Ryle 1963: 143-147, 155). The latter refer to activities, while the former designate the results of these activities. Thus, 'teaching' and 'learning' are task words, while education is the (possible) result of these, i.e., an achievement word (Peters 1970: 26). Similarly, knowledge is not a task word. It *may be* the result of both teaching and learning, just as it may result from 'reading', 'listening', 'seeking', etc. But, even if these difficulties are acknowledged, does the linguistic and conceptual awkwardness of a phrase (in the English language) suffice to threaten the validity of the idea it expresses?

Ruitenbergh is careful not to leap to this conclusion. Instead, she examines the idea of 'ways of knowing' and asks what it is meant to convey and to do, i.e., what claims or demands it is used to 'make (and mask)' and what effects it is meant to bring about (Ruitenbergh 2008: 309). It appears, she says, that claims about 'ways of knowing' often mask claims about and in favour of particular worldviews and 'issues far beyond epistemology' (Ibid., 309, 310). Indeed, a conflation of ontology and epistemology is manifest in Asante's assertion, 'African ontology involves the interconnectedness of all reality, thus African epistemology is grounded in holistic reason' (Asante 2005: 42). Similarly, although less explicitly than Asante, Dei speaks of 'the struggle to affirm diverse forms of knowledge as a way to transform education at the school site into learning experiences that are interconnected with the individual and collective reality or realities of the learner in a locality' (Dei 2004: 338).<sup>3</sup> Ruitenbergh argues, correctly I believe, that the phrase 'ways of knowing' covers<sup>4</sup> various ideas, like 'spiritual beliefs, beliefs about the individuality or relationality of human beings, and beliefs about the relation between reason and emotion ... under a single verb with a long history in Western epistemology' (Ruitenbergh 2008: 311). 'The phrase "ways of knowing"', she says, 'may sound epistemological, but frequently signals a concern with the broader ontological and metaphysical beliefs of worldviews' (Ibid., 316).

There are arguably two ways of framing claims about different 'ways of knowing': the first considers these as 'shorthand for the larger worldviews of which epistemologies are a part' (Ibid., 312), while the second treats claims about different 'ways of knowing' as claims about 'epistemological diversity' (Ibid., 313). However, while this would enable the distinction between epistemology, on the one hand, and ontology and metaphysics, on the other, the idea of 'episte-

mological diversity' is anything but uncontroversial—as I will demonstrate later.

A problem with Ruitenberg's analysis is that her favoured substitutes for 'ways of knowing' are every bit as problematic—if not more so. Thus, she approvingly quotes Michel Foucault's 'critique of epistemological hegemony', his analysis of 'how knowledge and truth are always part of systems of power' (Ibid., 315):

Each society has its own regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true (Foucault 1984: 73).

At least two concerns arise in this regard. The ideas of 'regimes of truth' and "'general politics" of truth' not only indicate a category mistake (in treating epistemological matters as necessarily inseparable from matters of social justice), but they also involve relativism about truth. Is Foucault able to make these sorts of assertions consistently? If he is correct, then this is so only on the basis of his particular society's regime or 'general politics' of truth—in which case the question arises why others (i.e., those who do not belong to his particular society) ought to find his analysis compelling. If he is saying, however, that this particular truth holds transsocietally, then he has in effect opened the door to the (strong) possibility of there being *other* truths that are not confined to the contexts of society or culture. Either way, then, this account loses much of its intended force.

The other descriptions offered by Ruitenberg may be less contentious, conceptually, but they cannot work as substitutes for 'ways of knowing'. 'Sources of knowledge', for example, are different from 'kinds of knowledge'. The former include observation, sensation, reasoning, testimony, memory and the like, while the latter include theoretical (or propositional), practical and acquaintance-type knowledge—clearly not the same. What about 'ways of learning'? 'Ways of learning' may also be, but are not necessarily, ways of acquiring knowledge. 'Learning how' may be said to lead to 'knowing how', but the same is not true for 'learning that' and 'knowing that'. What is learned may be false, or insufficiently justified. *Learning that* the *tokoloshe* and *mantindane* 'are real' does not imply *knowing that* they are. (In addition, assuming the plausibility of Peters's analysis, 'learning' designates a task, unlike 'knowledge'—which constitutes an

achievement; see also Ryle 1963: 28-32). 'Forms of representation', similarly, is hardly a 'more precise' phrase than 'ways of knowing'—over and above the consideration that 'representation' and 'knowing' can hardly be treated as synonyms. Apart from these problems of substitution, Ruitenberg fails to consider the ramifications of referring to, for example, 'women's sources of knowledge', 'indigenous ways of learning' or 'African forms of representation', let alone women's/indigenous/ African regimes, or 'general politics', of truth.

The response, then, could simply be the following. It appears to be possible to understand the admittedly awkward phrase 'ways of knowing' in an extra-epistemological (and extra-ontological), more practical way—especially given the fact that 'ways of knowing' and 'knowledge (systems)' are usually treated as conceptually distinct, mentioned separately.<sup>5</sup> 'Ways of knowing' would then refer not to 'systems/ forms of belief', 'world views', 'ways of being' and the like, but to 'ways of doing', practices, skills, etc. Either that—or one might simply refer to 'African knowledge (systems)' and, if need be, distinguish between practical and theoretical knowledge: between skills or practices, on the one hand, and knowledge proper, on the other—where the latter also appears to underlie claims about 'epistemological diversity'. If one opts for this interpretation, however, there are additional problems. Before elaborating on these, however, I wish to wish to examine a recent account of 'Afrikaner knowledge', or 'knowledge in the blood', which will enable me to establish a particular epistemological framework as a viable alternative to Ruitenberg's.

### **'Afrikaner ways of knowing' or 'blood knowledge'**

'Knowledge in the blood' is also the title of Jonathan Jansen's captivating book.<sup>6</sup> The phrase in question is taken from a poem by Macdara Woods. In response to Jansen's request, the Irish poet explained 'knowledge in the blood' as the

sum total of what we learn (or have to learn—from experience), of love, disappointment, age, loss, and how this knowledge can both make the necessary ongoing human reaffirmation of life and hope possible and at the same time hinder it. ... It is almost as though we are carrying psychological antibodies inside us. The knowledge in the blood, however it got there, is as ingrained as a disease—although at the same time it can be truly benign. In this sense the knowledge (which we have been gathering since childhood, as well as having it handed down from before) can be—

even at its best—as pitilessly indifferent, as ultimately powerful, and as random in why it propels us in any particular direction, as a microbe (Woods; quoted in Jansen 2009: 170-171).

With Jansen, the phrase ‘knowledge in the blood’ receives a rather specific application. For him, it means

knowledge embedded in the emotional, psychic, spiritual, social, political, and psychological lives of a community. Such is the knowledge transmitted faithfully to the second generation of Afrikaner students. It is not, therefore, knowledge that simply dissipates like the morning mist under the pressing sunshine of a *new regime of truth*; if it were, then curriculum change would be a relatively straightforward matter (Jansen 2009: 171; emphasis mine).<sup>7</sup>

‘Knowledge in the blood’, adds Jansen, ‘is habitual’. By this he means a ‘knowledge that has long been routinised in how the second generation sees the world and themselves, and how they understand others’ (Ibid.). It is a

knowledge that reacts against and resists rival knowledge, for this *inherited truth* was conceived and delivered in the face of enemies—the English imperialists, the barbarous blacks, the atheistic communists ... The phrase draws attention to *deeply rooted knowledge* that ... is not easily changed (Ibid., emphasis added).

With regard to curriculum change in particular, Afrikaner ‘responsiveness to the new authorities’, to ‘the formal demands of reconstruction’, should not be construed as a change in ‘deep-rooted assumptions and beliefs about history, identity, knowledge, and change: the curriculum is, at base, an institutional subject’. Apart from seeing it as inscribed in the course syllabus, this also entails regarding the curriculum as involving

An understanding of knowledge encoded in the dominant beliefs, values and behaviors deeply embedded in all aspects in all aspects of institutional life. Knowledge therefore becomes both what is formally designated for learning, such as the course syllabus, and what are widely understood within the institution to be *acceptable forms of knowledge* and *recognised ways of knowing* that distinguish one university type (such as the Afrikaans universities) from others (Ibid., 171, 172; emphasis added).

Jansen’s project in the book is to attempt to understand the ‘indirect knowledge’ that continues to guide the attitudes and behaviour of

young Afrikaners, with no direct, personal experience of the events of the (pre-apartheid and apartheid) past. What accounts for white Afrikaans-speaking people, born around the time of the unbanning of political organisations like the ANC and Nelson Mandela's release from prison, having 'firm knowledge' about a past they never experienced, holding 'rigid views about the present' (especially with regard to black people), and conveying 'fatalistic views about the future' (Ibid., 51)? Jansen refers to the received, 'racial knowledge of the Apartheid state' (Ibid., 115) also as 'bitter knowledge' (Ibid., 114-144 *passim*). Respectful disruption of this received, 'indirect' knowledge is connected, amongst other things, with the necessity to understand its power, says Jansen (Ibid., 260-262). This constitutes a key element of the second part of his project: to understand how a post-conflict pedagogy contributes to change.<sup>8</sup>

Compelling as they are, what interests me is not so much Jansen's ideas in the latter regard, but rather his use (one might also call it 'misuse' or at least 'overuse') of 'knowledge' and 'truth'. He employs the terms 'knowledge' and 'knowing' in such a vast and varied number of ways that one is ultimately unsure what, for Jansen, constitutes knowledge proper and what, if anything, distinguishes it from (mere) belief, assumption, prejudice, dogma, and the like. On this account, everything is broadcast as 'knowledge'—only the adjectives and other descriptors change: this makes for a fairly comprehensive dilution of the idea in question. Equally disconcertingly, his reference to 'truth' appears to involve the assumption that there exist, either consecutively or concurrently, different regimes of truth, that one people's truth is not necessarily (indeed, is frequently not) that of another—which is a rather hazardous epistemological position to occupy, to say the least. Are the 'forms of knowledge' acceptable to, and the 'ways of knowing' recognised by, Afrikaners really *knowledge* and ways of *knowing*? The same question can be asked about 'knowledge in the blood'. The following analysis will go some way towards accounting for my misgivings about Jansen's overly generous bestowal of epistemic (i.e., cognitive) status.

### **An analysis of 'knowledge'**

When one speaks of 'knowledge' in any educationally and/ or socio-politically relevant way, a distinction is traditionally made (as I have indicated above) between theoretical and practical knowledge, i.e., between 'knowledge-that' and 'knowledge-how', or 'knowing-that'

and ‘knowing-how’.<sup>9</sup> Practical knowledge refers to skills and abilities, whereas theoretical knowledge constitutes the ‘real stuff’ of epistemology, concerning not only what I can know but also—and more to the point here—under what circumstances or conditions I can claim to know that something is or is not the case. In order to know that something is the case, the following conditions must be met: I must have an appropriate (and fairly strong) belief in this regard, my belief must be true, and it must be adequately justified. ‘Adequate justification’ straddles the subjective and objective conditions of knowledge, ‘belief’ and ‘truth’, respectively. ‘Adequacy’ is determined by three sets of considerations: the kind of justification it is, its degree, and the context of justification. Different *kinds* of justification include observation, sense experience, introspection, memory, oral and written testimony, and different (deductive and non-deductive) kinds of reasoning. As far as the requisite *degree* of justification is concerned, minimal justification is clearly not enough, while conclusive justification is usually not available. Normally (other than in mathematics and in deductive logic) we accept justification that is less than conclusive, i.e., reasons that are nonetheless compelling.

I have provided a fairly detailed account of the importance of *context* elsewhere (Horsthemke 2007: 22-25). Considerations of context bear on the attribution of knowledge insofar as it concerns not only self- but also (and especially) other-ascription, the framing question being: ‘Under what circumstances can I/ others be said to know?’ Attribution of knowledge is context-sensitive—which exemplifies what might be called the ‘social component’ of knowledge. What does this mean? Apart from being a matter of degree and of kind, adequacy of justification is also determined by application of different standards, according to age, social and geographic context, access, availability of information, etc. These standards are applied more strictly in some cases, more leniently in others. The justification condition therefore permits some kind of leeway. What counts as adequate justification in the case of a young child/ learner or person from a remote rural area, with limited opportunities, resources or access to information, will arguably differ from that required of an older, more mature child/ learner or person from an industrialised, technologically advanced/ privileged, urban background. With increasing maturity and/or exposure, the standards of knowledge ascription are raised, the demands regarding adequacy of justification tightened.

Nonetheless, in all the different cases, the justified belief must be true. There can be no leniency *vis-à-vis* the truth requirement. In the

absence of truth, one cannot meaningfully speak of, or attribute, knowledge. The important point for educators is that what counts as suitable justification depends on who is providing the justification and in what context. One of the responsibilities of an educator is to appraise learners' knowledge in a way that is sensitive both to their level of understanding and to the context of appraisal. A further (related) responsibility is to develop learners' grasp of the standards of adequacy in different learning areas. Again, what is required is not conclusive justification, or perfect reasons, but *compelling* reasons. An important feature of what constitutes compelling reasons is that they are reliably produced. If reasons are not reliably produced, they cannot function as justification for one's belief/s. What does 'reliably produced' mean? For one thing, one's sense experiences and observations must be reliably connected to the world; one's sense organs must be intact, and so on. For another, one's reasoning must be of a requisite standard—sufficiently critical, rigorous, adequately and appropriately informed, and so on.

This analysis of adequate justification indicates why reference to it must be context-sensitive. Neither our reasoning nor our sense experiences and observations are infallible. Nonetheless, if they are generally reliable sources of justification, the reasons they produce might be called 'compelling'. If reference to compelling reasons is context-sensitive, this does not mean that the criteria for knowledge-ascription change with each particular individual, social group, etc., or that *knowledge* itself is relative, ambiguous between various concepts, each based on a different standard.

### **The problem of prejudice, and the argument from 'epistemic injustice'**

The problem with Jansen's account of 'knowledge in the blood' is that all kinds of bigotry and prejudice are elevated to the status of 'knowledge'. Prejudice is manifestly not knowledge, precisely because it involves judging before the pertinent evidence is in. Yet, 'prejudgment' is not necessarily irrational either. Indeed, it may be informed by a defensible preference and may often have prudential value. Thus, being vigilant in given circumstances may involve prejudice (insofar as I prejudge a certain situation), but it has undeniable survival value in South Africa. More pernicious forms of prejudice are those that involve injustice and harm.

'Epistemic injustice', argues Miranda Fricker, is a distinct kind of injustice. She distinguishes between two kinds, 'testimonial injustice' and 'hermeneutical injustice', each of which consists, 'most fundamentally, in a wrong done to someone specifically in their capacity as a knower' (Fricker 2007: 1; see also p. 21). Central to her analysis is the notion of (social) 'power', which Fricker defines as 'a socially situated capacity to control others' actions' (Ibid., 4). Power works 'to create or preserve a given social order', and is displayed in various forms of enablement, on the one hand, and disbelief, misinterpretation and silencing, on the other. It involves the conferral on certain individuals or groups, *qua* persons of that kind, 'a *credibility excess*' or 'a *credibility deficit*' (Ibid., 21). Fricker's interest resides specifically with 'identity power' and the harms it produces through the manifestation of 'identity prejudices'. The latter are responsible for denying credibility to, or withholding it from, certain persons on the basis of their being members of a certain 'social type' (Ibid.). Thus, testimonial injustice involves rejecting the credibility of their knowledge claims, while hermeneutical injustice involves a general failure of marshalling the conceptual resources necessary for understanding and interpreting these knowledge claims. The result is that these people are hindered in their self-development and in their attainment of full human worth: they are 'prevented from becoming who they are' (Ibid., 5). In white patriarchal societies, these 'epistemic humiliations' (Ibid., 51)<sup>10</sup> carry the power to destroy a would-be (black or female) knower's confidence to engage in the trustful conversations (Ibid., 52-53) that characterise well-functioning epistemic communities. As Fricker suggests, they can 'inhibit the very formation of self' (Ibid., 55). Although they are experienced (and may be performed) individually, testimonial and hermeneutical injustice constitute not only individual harms: they originate within a social fabric of which the biases and prejudices that enliven and perpetuate them are a characteristic part. Contesting such injustices and harms, according to Fricker, requires 'collective social political change' (Ibid., 8).

Given how prejudice affects various levels of credibility, and given that the rejection of 'African ways of knowing' has sometimes been part of a hegemonic discourse and constituted epistemic injustice, the question might now be raised whether my critique of this notion (and its affiliates, like 'indigenous knowledge') is not part of this discourse. I do not believe it is. If 'credibility deficit' is a matter of epistemic injustice, then why should 'credibility excess' (giving previously 'epistemologically humiliated' people or groups lots of

credibility) not also constitute epistemic harm? More fundamentally, surely there is a difference between criticising someone's view on the mere grounds that she is black, or a woman, and criticising the views held or expressed by someone, who happens to be black or a woman, on the grounds of faulty or fallacious reasoning. Nonsense is not culturally, racially or sexually specific. Indeed, although she gestures in the direction of a basic 'do no harm' principle (Ibid., 85), Fricker herself insists that a "'vulgar" relativist' resistance to passing moral judgment on other cultures 'is incoherent' (Ibid., 106).

### **The problem of relativism**

The problem of relativism appears to pertain both to African and Afrikaner knowledge. If knowledge and truth did differ from individual to individual, society to society, culture to culture (assuming that assertions to this effect would not present insurmountable consistency problems for the advocacy of African and Afrikaner knowledge and truth—this relates to Fricker's reference to 'incoherence'), then it would be presumptuous to pass judgment on another's knowledge claim. Thus, it would be very difficult to judge (positively *or* negatively) the 'God-sponsored' segregationist views of staunchly Calvinist-Christian Afrikaners,<sup>11</sup> or Mutwa's assertions about the tokoloshe and mantindane, or to determine the veracity of beliefs in ancestral reward and retribution.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, in order to decide what is true or false, one would merely have to consult the beliefs prevalent in one's own society (we might recall the beliefs of white Afrikaner supremacists in this regard). Finally, one could not really say whether any progress has been taking place in a society, in terms of advancement in knowledge. Thus, one would be committed to the position that evolutionary theory cannot be held to have contributed to scientific and epistemic progress, *vis-à-vis* religious doctrines like creationism or intelligent-design, or that the heliocentric view of the universe does not constitute a substantial improvement on the geocentric view. (Similar considerations would pertain to normative talk about reform and transformation—for example, educational and socio-political transformation, in Africa as elsewhere.)

### The problem of superstition

The second problem is that of superstition. Of course, it might be argued now (see, for example, Asante 2005: 41) that the term ‘superstition’ has been and continues to be widely abused as a hegemonic tool, that is, in order to discredit any view or opinion that is unorthodox or that fails to conform to the standards or paradigms of occidental rationality.<sup>13</sup> Granted, some manifestations of the latter are highly dubious. After all, the evils of ‘Western’ expansionism—colonialism, racism (both manifest in apartheid legislation), the massive subjugation and exploitation of entire cultures, nonhuman animals and the natural environment<sup>14</sup>—deserve to be condemned in the strongest possible terms. This requires an approach that is capable of pinpointing and unravelling the inconsistencies and, indeed, *irrational* attitudes in question. Bearing in mind these concerns, I will—in what follows—use the term ‘superstition’ to refer to ‘more or less widely held but unjustified/ insufficiently justified and false idea or belief’.

The problem with ‘African ways of knowing’, understood in terms of claims about epistemological diversity, is that anything that is honestly and (more or less) justifiably believed and advanced as a knowledge claim could count as knowledge proper. There would be no way to distinguish between knowledge and superstition. Acceptance of the idea of African ways of knowing would render difficult, if not impossible, a distinction between knowledge and superstition, or other kinds of irrational belief. Apart from the previously cited account of the tokoloshe and mantindane, other examples of superstition include the misconceptions that underlie the refusal of many South African men to undergo a vasectomy (which is seen to threaten or undermine their masculinity and virility)—as well as the belief/s that HIV/ AIDS is caused by witches and can be prevented or cured through sexual intercourse with a virgin. Similar considerations also pertain to ‘knowledge in the blood’. According to a widespread belief, ‘the Afrikaner was planted by God at the southern tip of Africa to spread the light of the gospel and civilisation on a dark continent; the Afrikaner is exclusively a white race and those who are not of pure white blood are excluded’ (Jansen 2009: 292n.24; see also p. 158).

### The *esprit sorcier* and the African Renaissance

The most conspicuous examples of superstition are found in witchcraft beliefs<sup>15</sup> and witchcraft accusations. President of the Zimbabwe National Traditional Healers Association Gordon Chavunduka sees the July 2006 amendment to Zimbabwe's Witchcraft Suppression Act, which in effect legalises accusations of witchcraft,<sup>16</sup> as a 'step in the right direction towards asserting our culture that has been trampled upon by successive colonial governments' (quoted in Kumar 2006: 26). The amendment, then, is seen as an endorsement of 'African (or traditional) knowledge', worldviews, practices and values. It also implies a distinction between traditional ways of knowing that are good or beneficial (such as traditional healers' medicinal and herbal knowledge, divination practices, etc.) and those that are bad or harmful (witchcraft and other occult practices, like the use of human body parts; see Becker *passim*).

Bartholomäus Grill quotes Valentin Yves Mudimbe as calling the *esprit sorcier*, belief in witchcraft, one of the greatest obstructions to development (Grill 2005: 1). Witchcraft belief, says Grill, pertains to all African peoples, cultures, and strata and levels of society. Witchcraft belief, according to Grill, becomes an instrument of social control, of terror, that strengthens power and property relations, that prevents upward social mobility and punishes the industrious, mentally immobilises people and thus obstructs the development of modern *homo oeconomicus* (Ibid., 3). Not only outsiders, strangers and individualists are accused of witchcraft but also those who are successful and good-looking, who happen to be adversaries—be it in sport, romance or business (and conversely, of course, those who happen to be economically unsuccessful, and who are consequently blamed for the community's misfortune or lack of success; see Becker 2007b: 164).

In general opposition to indigenous knowledge apologists, Anthony Holiday argues that African beliefs and practices, taking for granted traditional customs (*lobola*, or 'bride wealth', initiation rites, and the like), 'undemocratic traditional authority and African systems of jurisprudence', treating 'the pronouncements of sangomas [as] a kind of holy writ', etc. are all 'inimical to the scientific spirit'. He claims that it is a matter of 'choice between two antagonistic forms of life. One must die if the other is to flourish' (Holiday 2006: 11).

Elsewhere, Grill seems to postulate a 'third alternative', the possibility of which Holiday denies. Describing an incident involving traditional healing, Grill contends:

It is beyond our rational world, yet the result achieved validates the old medical adage, 'He who heals is right'. ... The traditional healer has, in a way, also healed me – or rather, he has cured me of the occidental obsession with knowledge, the need to penetrate and dissect everything intellectually. In Africa, one learns to live with question marks. One understands what one cannot understand—and over the years one becomes more circumspect and cautious, perhaps even more lenient in one's judgments about the continent (Grill 2003: 12).

Apart from holding despotic and corrupt governments in Africa responsible for the suffering of ordinary people, Chandra Kumar also blames 'Eurocentric rationalism', the 'Men of ... Economic Reason', and Western rationality for its contribution to witch hysteria, by promoting economic conditions that favour the West (Kumar 2006: 26). The worse off people are, the more prone they are to beliefs in the occult, the paranormal, 'diabolical forces' responsible for their misery. Kumar quotes Chavunduka, who acknowledges the conditions that underlie witch hysteria: for him, 'the cause is economic' and 'the worse the economy gets, the more political tension there is in society, the more frustrated and frightened people get' (Ibid.). True: globalisation may well be colonialism's modern heir. Yet, Kumar's equation is as problematic as the one he confronts, namely that it is superstition/ African 'unreason' that is the major (if not the sole) cause of Africa's misery, and that it is attributable to lack of education or of 'basic scientific literacy' (Richard Petraitis, quoted in Kumar 2006; see also Holiday 2006: 11). It is problematic because Kumar falls into the trap of implicitly portraying ordinary Africans as victims and recipients, to whom considerations of agency and responsibility do not apply. Moreover, like Grill, he fails to distinguish sufficiently between 'witchcraft beliefs' and 'witchcraft accusations'. I will address these two problems in turn.

Axelle Kabou, in her much-maligned pamphlet 'Et si l'Afrique refusait le développement?' ('And if Africa refused development?'; Kabou 1991), blames not only power-crazy heads of state and the corrupt elites for the plight of the continent, but also ordinary people, each and every individual. According to Kabou, Africans still believe that the world owes them salvation of the continent, as belated compensation for past injustices, their victim- and beggar mentality being strengthened by the sentimental humanitarianism of naïve white aid workers. Africans should look in the mirror, in order to realise their own part in this misery. Yet, writes Kabou, they refuse to do this. It is invariably the others who are to blame, foreign compa-

nies, the unjust global system of trade, the World Bank, the debt and poverty trap—not to mention the inherited burdens of colonialism. The black elites and the white helpers are united in their dogma that there exists a century-old plot by the white man against the black man, while they refuse to contemplate the more complex causes of this perpetual crisis.

Many consider Kabou's claim, that 'Africa-this-wonderful-continent-that-was-in-perfect-harmony-before-the-invasion-of-the-colonisers' is an anti-colonialist myth and has nothing to do with reality, downright blasphemous. Certainly, her pamphlet is not without stereotyping, of 'the Africans' as such. She tends to neglect the external factors of this chronic crisis, like the deprivation syndrome that white rule has left behind in the collective psyche. She also forgets that Africa lacks the springboard for the huge leap from agrarian society to industrial society. Modernisation was forced onto a continent that was unable to support it, socio-structurally and culturally, while the existing entrepreneurship and infrastructure were systematically undermined and destroyed by the colonial masters (Grill 2003: 115). There is no room for such historical subtleties in Kabou's general account. Nonetheless, no serious debate about the problems facing Africa can afford to ignore her fundamental thesis. She refers not only to the *failed* modernisation of postcolonial Africa but to modernisation that was *refused*, Africans being the only people on earth who still think that others must take care of their development. Kabou does not simply intend to condemn her African contemporaries. She wants to rouse them into shaking off their 'unbearable mediocrity'. Indeed, the demand for self-criticism makes her argument compelling. Unlike (for example) Kumar's, it takes ordinary Africans seriously, as agents in their own right, rather than portraying them as will- and helpless victims or puppets at the mercy of the powers-that-be (corrupt leaders the wealthy black elites, foreign companies, the World Bank, etc.) and as suffering under the unjust global system of trade, the debt and poverty trap—not to mention the inherited burdens of colonialism.

Stephen Ellis and Gerrie Ter Haar are in agreement with Kumar's contention that legislation like the amendment to the Witchcraft Suppression Act in Zimbabwe enables the suffering masses to blame 'their troubles on diabolical forces rather than on the government and business interests that profit from their misery' (Kumar 2006: 26): 'Popular beliefs in witchcraft have become a convenient cover for cynical political manipulations' (Ellis and Ter Haar 2004: 150). Yet,

their analysis of the pertinent conflicts is a little subtler than Kumar's. For one thing, they draw an analytical distinction between

witchcraft beliefs—the content of which, as with other forms of spiritual belief, cannot be empirically tested—and witchcraft accusations that may follow from such belief. Witchcraft accusations, unlike witchcraft beliefs, can be empirically observed, and the ensuing actions analysed (Ibid., 149).

According to Ellis and Ter Haar, 'discussions in Africa on how to deal with witchcraft accusations often take on a culturalist tone that some people feel to be appropriate in a postcolonial age' (Ibid., 153). The common view is that witchcraft beliefs are authentically African and that witchcraft 'really' exists in Africa. As a consequence, governments in postcolonial Africa should be free to devise mechanisms—both in terms of legislation and policing—for dealing with these phenomena. 'In South Africa, only recently freed from the rule of a white minority, this approach is sometimes said to be in keeping with the idea of African Renaissance, launched by the government as a project for the regeneration of the continent' (Ibid.). In this regard, Ellis and Ter Haar worry about the proliferation of all kinds of 'illiberal attitudes' and beliefs that are claimed to be 'authentically African and therefore justifiable in the new age' (Ibid.). So much the worse for liberal attitudes, someone like Kumar would probably respond. It is clear, however, that governments need to take witchcraft fears and their implications and consequences seriously. Neither amendments to existing legislation like in Zimbabwe nor the verdict that these fears should be ignored appear to be an appropriate response to the cause of such considerable personal and social misery.

What to do, then? Ellis and Ter Haar suggest that the

most desirable course might be for the state to retain the principle of religious freedom, including the freedom of people to believe in witchcraft as in other religious construct. This demonstrates in concrete terms the importance of making an analytical distinction between witchcraft belief and witchcraft accusations ... The state would be well advised, thus, to observe debates on witchcraft beliefs with a view to intervening when there seems to be a real risk of a criminal action such as physical assault (Ellis and Ter Haar 2004: 153-154; see also Becker 2007b: 165, 166).

Ellis and Ter Haar's appears to be at best a short-term solution—it is a response only to the symptoms of the problem, one that fails to

get to its roots. I submit that, in the longer term, nothing short of a radical commitment to the alleviation of poverty and to education for global citizenship (for example, the teaching of critical thinking skills) will do. If anything, reference to 'African ways of knowing', moves like the July 2006 amendment to Zimbabwe's Witchcraft Suppression Act, etc. are more likely to contribute to the ongoing underdevelopment of Africa and to its increasing marginalisation.

### **Concluding remarks: The exigencies of 'truth'**

When Didier Kaphagawani explains that, in his home language Chewa, '(w)hat is true is what is seen ... or perceived by either an individual or a collection of individuals' (Kaphagawani 1998: 241), he clearly confuses truth and justification. Observation and perception are sources of justification and knowledge. Given the possibility of observational error and perceptual relativity, they are not identical with truth as such. Even consensus among all individuals about what they perceive does not amount to truth, the way things really are.

The challenge for anyone who disagrees with the present analysis would be to furnish an understanding of knowledge, knowing and truth that is both coherent and consistent. 'The truth' may be the world's secret—but we can learn to avoid falsehoods and error and, in so doing, get closer to the way things really are—or were, for that matter.

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## Notes

1. Mutwa, according to the publicity information on the back cover, is a 'well-known wise man of Africa and sanusi (uppermost sangoma) of all sangomas [traditional healers] in southern Africa, [and] respected and well-known by people across the world'.
2. Dei (Dei 2004: 339) employs the following account:  
 Indigenous knowledge is knowledge arising with the long-term occupancy of place. ... It is knowledge unique to a given culture or society characterized by the common sense ideas, thoughts, values of people formed as a result of the sustained interactions of society, nature and culture[,] before quoting Roberts's definition of indigenous knowledge as knowledge "accumulated by a group of people, not necessarily indigenous, who, by centuries of unbroken residence, develop an in-depth understanding of their particular place in their particular world" (ibid.; Roberts 1998: 59).
3. Given that Dei is referring here to *traditional* African forms of knowledge, I am unsure to what extent they could contribute towards *transformation*—i.e., as opposed to '*retroformation*'.
4. Ruitenbergh uses the words 'hides' and, elsewhere, 'masks'. I am not sure whether these apply to the accounts of 'African ways of knowing' provided by Asante, Dei and others. I suspect not—hence my preference for the broader (and perhaps more equivocal) term 'covers'.
5. Dei, for example, speaks of a transformation of education and schooling that includes 'diverse forms of knowledge and ways of knowing' (Dei 2004: 339).
6. Formerly (notably at the time of writing the book) dean of the University of Pretoria's Faculty of Education, Jansen is currently the vice-chancellor of the University of the Free State.
7. It is worth noting the Foucauldian phrase here. I must confess to never ceasing to be amazed at how this kind of confused relativism continues to hold eminent thinkers in thrall.
8. On parallels between Jansen's experiences and his own as rector at the University of the Western Cape, see also Jakes Gerwel (Gerwel 2009).
9. A third sense is constituted by 'knowledge' and 'knowing' in the acquaintance or familiarity sense, as in 'knowledge of a place', 'knowing a person' etc.—which, however, I take to be less pertinent here.
10. Fricker borrows the notion of epistemic humiliation from Simone de Beauvoir.
11. Jansen refers, in this regard, to 'divine knowledge' (see Jansen 2009: 157-162). See also Jansen 2009: 158, 292n.24.
12. For example, Dei writes that 'the living are emboldened by ancestral knowledge and the wisdom of the dead', and that  
 ancestral spirits are living knowledges. They are acknowledged as guardians of the living. They provide knowledge, wisdom and advice and regulate living practice. (Dei 2004: 356; see also Dei 2002: 6)
13. The Latin term '*superstitio*', referring to a concept that first surfaced in the 15th century, was used initially to denigrate as "false belief" any view or opinion that diverged from official Christian doctrine and orthodoxy.
14. The most significant current example of complacency and arrogance on the part of some of the economic superpowers must be their refusal to take seriously the

- impending environmental and energy crises or to initiate and abide by substantial measures to curb global warming.
15. Take, for example, the cases of 'muti murder' and the use of human body parts that Becker has reported on and analysed in considerable detail. There are at least three distinct kinds of superstition that pervade these practices (and these are beliefs that are held not only by the practitioners but by the majority of the population of sub-Saharan Africa; see Becker 2007b: 165): 1) that this kind of *muti* (or 'medicine') works; 2) that the vocalization of the victim—which expresses his/ her 'life essence'—enhances the power of the 'medicine' that is ideally taken from the (still) living person; and 3) that the discovery of the body (after the requisite parts, bones or organs have been removed, and the victim has—as is common—been left to bleed to death) secures additional effectiveness (Becker 2007b: 159).
  16. Given pertinent 'evidence', the amendment permits the state to convict and punish a person when it considers her witchcraft harmful (see Kumar 2006: 26). The South African Witchcraft Suppression (No. 3 of 1957, last amended in 1997) only mentions 'the practice of witchcraft and similar practices'. It also fails to make a sufficiently clear distinction between *using* 'witchcraft' or 'supernatural means' and *pretending* or *professing* to do so.

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