Salvaging African Perspectives of Reality via Afro-centric and Intersubjective
Methodologies[1]

Benson A. Mulemi
Catholic University of Eastern Africa
Department of Social Sciences

Abstract

Cultural studies by local and foreign social scientists put the African continent on the
world ethnographic map. However various inaccuracies and misrepresentations punctuate
attempts at depicting African socio-cultural phenomena reliably. Researchers and local
African people may realize errors in published work but these often pass uncorrected.
Some social and cultural anthropologists attribute deficiency in current representation of
social and cultural images of Africa on philosophical and linguistic gaps between the
researchers and the researched. This results in the trend where *etic* perspective is ever
overshadowing the *emic* point of view about local phenomena. This paper assesses the
relevance of Afrocentricity and intersubjectivity as methodological approaches to
construction of good-enough representation of African reality. The paper discusses how
Africa can be made central in the study of African experiences as well as how the
ethnographic data collected can be interpreted from an African perspective. Co-
production of knowledge drawing on shared experiences of reality, language and
worldviews can facilitate correction of African reality as presented in past ethnographies
and ethnology. This calls for an analysis of shared meanings in representation of local
realities in terms that underpin authentic African experiences. The paper shows that
making people objects rather than subjects of research contribute to misrepresentation of
indigenous social and cultural realities. The central proposition of this article is that
interactions between researchers and the researched influence the quality of ethnographic
data produced. Consideration of this factor in contemporary African cultural studies can
facilitate correction of mistranslations and misrepresentation of African realities.

Introduction

African history, ethnography and ethnology that form the basis of current images of

Africa resulted from Euro-American scholarship. The representations of Africa still draw

on accounts of non-western societies from the etic perspective of foreign scholars. While

it is expected that native Africanists more accurately represent African reality, a large

proportion of them are trained in western perspectives that may be sources of error. Pre-

colonial and colonial scholarship on Africa reflects ethnographic assumptions and

theorizing shaped by interpretations and theories generated from non-African contexts.

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However a large amount of the anthropological literature on Africa cannot be easily falsified or evaluated objectively by native ethnologists or ethnographers because they accept available descriptions and analyses uncritically (Owusu 1978). Early ethnographies of Africa were guided by structural functionalist perspectives that assumed that African cultures were homogeneous, static and isolated from the rest of the world. These characterise Eurocentric views and low quality data that became the foundations of images about Africa in Western and local scholarship. Similarly, researchers' incompetence in local languages renders most ethnological and ethnographic work on Africa unreliable.

This paper discusses the sources of misinterpretation and misrepresentation of African realities in past and present social and cultural researches. The second part assesses the role of Afrocentric approaches in ameliorating the representation of Africa in the world ethnographic map. The third part evaluates the place of intersubjectivity in attempts at improving the quality of data and translating African experience more accurately. It proposes that intersubjectivity and Afrocentric methodologies can facilitate co-production of knowledge that can inform development initiatives and processes in Africa devoid of colonial and neo-colonial biases. The perceived historic obligation of Europe to Africa and other non-western societies—to civilize and convert natives—shape the tone of representation of the natives' experiences. Descriptions of African experiences drew on ad hoc ethnographic records of missionaries, traders, travellers and arm chair anthropologists. European audience was the main consumer of accounts on native cultures. They considered the accounts reliable description of the *primitive*, *barbarous*, *savage* and *backward* peoples, whose wellbeing was the responsibility of western civilisation (Fortes 1953). Researchers sought to describe the non-western cultures of which little or nothing was known to Europeans (Owusu 1978:312). The Eurocentric views of non-western peoples were elaborated in reference to theories such as structural functionalism to construct the developer's reality of the situation (cf. Ferguson and Lohmann 1994, Ferguson 1994). In this regard, anthropological description of Africa in western scholarship justified the European 'enterprise of civilisation', especially development as defined in terms of modernisation and by extension, westernisation.

Distortion of African realities in past and present ethnography and ethnology could therefore be either related to the deliberate political economy of knowledge production or the deficiencies of the ethnographic methodologies and instruments, including the approach of the ethnographers.

Distortions and misinterpretations in African ethnography

Research and publication of classic texts during pre-independence and immediate post-independence decades produced the knowledge base used to date in African studies. African socio-cultural studies at home and abroad rely on these texts as the reliable sources on African personality and experience. These sources depict the African socio-cultural scene and experiences as either static or phenomena of the past. This attitude has ever since depicted Africa as a subject rather than the object of study that contributed to representation of local realities from the western perspectives. In fact, the anthropology of Africa has for a long time been largely a European project, dominated by European scholars who defined what Anthropology is (cf Owusu 1978). In this regard, anthropological paradigms and ethnographic findings are mostly determined by European (and American) scholars. This has implications for the rate at which the voices of African ethnographers can be genuinely heard in existing images and analysis of Africa. The post-colonial discussions that take place between the native and foreign researchers are geographically located within the western world and its academic institutions (Drozdikova 2001). This contributes to inequality in the data and information that constrains the production of scientific knowledge by indigenous African people (cf. Schipper 1999). The accessible ethnographies are however uncritically accepted by local readers partly because they are written in western anthropological concepts. Similarly, due to the diversity of African cultures, published material may be presumed to be applicable in other societies.

Misrepresentation of African realities could result from either deliberate research bias or methodological and theoretical limitations. The key methodological problem related to ethnography of indigenous cultures is limited data quality control. According to Owusu (1978), the problem, over time could be attributed to lack of familiarity with local

worldview, languages and dialects. This accounts for errors in the translation and interpretation of local cultures. These factors influence ethnographic data collection, organization and presentation. While early foreign ethnologists and ethno-historians managed prolonged fieldwork, they were not able to get the best possible command of the languages to grasp, interpret and represent the cultural reality adequately. Thus key ethnographies of Africa that inform the construction of local realities to date were published in the colonial period without the benefit of elicitation of nuance in local discourses. Mastery of local vernaculars is important in ethnography for a number of important needs—to ask questions correctly, establish rapport, give accurate instructions as well as interpret, code and analyze data.

Distortions of African realities result from not only foreign researches inadequate grasp of the local languages, but also lack of linguistic and conceptual equivalents in English or other 'languages of science'. This pursuit in ethnography yielded the attempts at establishing a comparative science of culture. The methodological limitations to this mission can reliably account for misrepresentation of non-western realities. As an example, different cultures conceptualise phenomena of the same kind, such as colour categories in different ways. This results in conceptual relativity deriving from the grammatical structures of the languages involved (cf Cohen and Narrol 1973). Western categories have for a long time been used in the translation of terms in African and other non-western societies, often leading to the use of inappropriate terms and categories. In view of this, definitions of institutions, such as marriage and family, or traits such as myths have been problematic as these cultural traits can not be represented adequately in universal categories. This contributes to distortion of cultural facts and the quality of data.

The search for universal 'scientific categories in culture' contributes to mistranslation. This constitutes part of the dilemma encountered in comparative cultural studies. Cross-cultural comparisons with a view to finding universally appropriate institutional types lead to systematic distortion of indigenous concepts to fit western-social science types. Cognitive and linguistic gaps between the researcher and the research subjects shape the

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process of misinterpretation of accessible cultural data. Similarly, over reliance on established scientific rather than culture-bound theories confound attempts to represent uniqueness of diverse cultural realities as found in the multicultural settings of Africa. As such homogeneity in African cultural elements may be imposed in the data organisation and interpretation.

There is, therefore a need to be sceptical about the quality of representations of African realities in both past and present ethnographic and historical sources. Owusu (1978: 315) argues that only a few ethnographers, if any, working in Africa from the 1920s to 1950s, including senior anthropologists whose work laid the foundation of African studies, had any appreciable control of native African languages. The capability of foreign Africanists to use local languages efficiently requires several years of stay among the target and related peoples before embarking on studying the culture. However many past and contemporary accounts of African cultures and experiences draw on ephemeral interactions, typical of the hasty journalistic one-sided representations of African images in the media. Available accounts carry not only the researchers' and methodological shortcomings, but also native informant biases. Methodological deficiencies include inadequate selection of ethnographic sites, informants and socio-cultural domains for conceptual analysis. According to Narrol (1962, 1970), informant error results from at least three sources: the distorting effects of indigenous culture theory or stereotype; poor choice of informants by the ethnographer and the distorting influence of poor memory of the details of particular distinctive events.

Afro-centricity and African studies
The preceding discussion indicate that a great deal of the literature on African culture and education can be ideologically traced back to the emergence of "knowledge" about indigenous peoples in the context of European imperialism and expansion (Mkabela 2005). Africans and their experiences were largely appraised in European contexts and not in terms of their own. Conversely, Afrocentrism is an orientation toward data in which the researcher assumes the right and responsibility to articulate research subjects' reality from the emic perspectives drawing on their own ideals and values. As a

methodological approach to the study of African social and cultural realities, Afrocentricity is a reaction to the distortions of Eurocentric perspectives of phenomena in local African environments. Important literatures on Africa and non-European societies lack the voices of the natives and are dominated by European views of the phenomena under study. The proposal for Afrocentric research methodology is based on the thesis that Eurocentric research criteria of objectivity, reliability and validity are inadequate and incorrect, especially for research involving human experiences (Reviere 2001:709). Approaches to African studies and development removed African experiences from their contexts of actual social, cultural, political, philosophical, and economic analyses.

Afrocentric methodology should consider relevant research questions reasonably and in actual fact, especially those that are anchored on popular assumptions about race, culture and African social and intellectual capacities. The Afrocentric approach to data collection and analysis support goals of practical ethnography - to prioritise people's felt need for improved well-being rather than theory construction or knowledge production. Beginning research from the often Eurocentric theoretical models, then moving to addressing people's needs often contributes to distortion of reality because Eurocentric interpretations may not be applicable to African contexts. Eurocentric approaches do not conform to people-centred research envisaged in the cannons of Afrocentrism. Data on African cultural studies should be examined from the perspective of Africans as subjects and human agents rather than as objects within European theories. Implementation of Afrocentric methodology thus implies that the researcher and the researched have an interactive role in the production of theoretical and applied knowledge.

Role of the researcher and the researched
The Afrocentric method suggests cultural and social immersion as opposed to pure scientific detachment in attempts to study, understand and represent phenomena. Conversely, Eurocentric methodologies in African studies since the colonial times proceeded from viewing Africa as objects rather than subjects of study. The researcher must have familiarity with the history, language, philosophy, and myths of the people being studied (Mkabela 2005, Owusu 1978). The researcher gets immersed in the

situation and phenomena being researched. The main concern for the researcher should be an understanding of the social phenomenon from the actor's perspective, through participation in the lives of the actors (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). This calls for the researcher to empathize and identify with the research subjects to appreciate how they see things and construct reality. This can reduce the imposition of the researcher's point of view in interpretation and presentation of the results. Although most foreign Africanists attempt participant observation, the fieldwork duration is not sufficient for them to fully grasp the intricacies of African worldview.

The researcher does not necessarily have to be indigenous to understand indigenous knowledge systems (cf.Mkabela 2005). While it is true that the indigenous African researcher may be privileged with tools of language, closeness to the experiences of indigenous communities and perspectives, they do not necessarily have privileged analytical skills. However, understanding of cultural frameworks requires indigenous African people's involvement and control of research (Cunningham & Durie, 1998). Trained native researchers can make contributions to correcting the errors that result from linguistic and psychological gaps that separate researchers and the researched.

The Afrocentric methodology entails close connection between the purpose of research and the comprehensive discourse that emerges from within actual contexts. Therefore, the inclusion of the personal experience of the researcher on his or her final ethnographic presentation is important. However, the researcher is not the final authority, but a co-producer of the cultural knowledge, with the researched. This perspective is important in attempts to salvage indigenous African realities and cultures from misrepresentations found in existing ethnological, ethnographic and historical texts. The Afrocentric paradigm advocates the incorporation of an African viewpoint that can create Africa's own intellectual perspective (Mkabela 2005, Asante 1990). African experiences are best articulated by those directly involved. This approach encourages researchers to look at African cultures and history from their own centres or locations. In this way, African life and living can be validated, regenerated, created and perpetuated- whole, unhindered, informed by African perspective or point of view (Bekerie 1994).

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African studies should revitalise the agency of Africans as primary and central agents of making their histories, and telling their own stories. The notion of experts on Africa still privileges the work of non-Africans, tending to deny local intellectuals space in debates about their own cultural ecologies. This is enhanced by the location of the most vibrant African studies centres outside Africa. Ironically, some African scholars get the impression that location of African studies centres on the African continent is inappropriate. While it is true that some foreign Africanists contribute tremendously to the quality of scholarship on African phenomena, it is also true that some create knowledge hegemony that prevent the voices of local intellectuals from being heard. This dominance is reflected in the authorship and editorship of many academic publications on Africa, which are located outside Africa. Arguably, gate-keeping in prestigious periodicals and journals suppresses publication of alternative views to widely accepted hypotheses about Africa and Africans. Scientific ethnocentrism creeps into African scholarship as Eurocentric views on African cultures and development are perpetuated by both local and foreign researchers. This type of ethnocentrism may propagate obsolete theoretical frameworks such as functionalism and modernisation to support the view of African social and cultural structure as unproductive and uneconomic. Arguably, the scientific ethnocentrism in the study of African cultures and economy may still propagate of westernisation (de-culturation and Europeanization) as most appropriate frameworks of African cultural and socio-economic analyses and development.

Afrocentrism and representation of African experiences
Asante (1987, 1990) and Reviere (2001) link Afrocentric methodology to a theory of Afrocentrism. This theoretical formulation draws on shared African values expressed in local languages and popular discourse. The values characterise some common denominators of African worldview. Afrocentric methodology presents a plea to ethnographers to draw on these principles as they seek entrée into the physical and lived experiences of research subjects with regard to social, cultural, economic and political variables. In West Africa, for example, local vernaculars, such as the Bambara in Mali, a type of Manding language and the Dogon languages have rich concepts, especially *Ma'at* and *Nommo* that typify Afrocentrism. These principles can underpin the Afrocentric

methodology. *Ma'at* connotes the quest for justice, truth and harmony. Reviere (2001:725) equates this to the research exercise itself, in harmony with the researcher, as a tool in the pursuit of justice, truth and the final purpose of helping to create a fairer and just society. *Nommo* refers to the creative force of words—the productive word—as creation of knowledge that augments positive human relations. Thus, knowledge production on Africa can be embedded in the interpretation of local concepts and data elicitation processes they imply. This indicates the need for conceptual overhaul with regard to the methodologies that over-rely on non-African research categories and related conceptual terminologies that guide data collection and interpretation.

Kiswahili, a native lingua franca in East and Central Africa as other African languages present further conceptual resources that can enrich the Afrocentric methodology. Reviere (2001) identifies five research criteria form five Swahili words; *Ukweli*, *Kujitoa*, *ujamaa* and *haki, and uvumilivu*. We use the first four to elaborate on some Afrocentric principles that research and processes of production of knowledge on African realities can consider. The notion of *ukweli* denotes 'truth' and the constant quest for it. This depends of the level at which individuals are immersed in cultures and social events under study. The quest for and elicitation of *ukweli* relies on a researcher's skills of rapport and trust building, and direct non-participant and participant observation. These skills can increase grasp of experiences of the research subjects and support the search and elicitation of the *truth.*

Being grounded in local experiences helps correct errors related to confusion about ideal and real culture in African ethnography. Verification of 'ethnographic truth' not only depends on the researcher's rapport with the research subjects, but also on the level at which the local people consider her or him an 'initiated member' of the community to access privileged truth for unrestricted reporting. Due to limited access to ethnographic sites, local peoples' experiences and worldviews, current representation of African experience need to be approached with scepticism. Cultural analysis is intrinsically incomplete and essentially contestable (Geertz 1973:29) as these are based on interpretation of the researchers. Similarly, the claim of knowledge about people and their

realities need to be modest because this is not reliably possible, especially as claimed by researchers who are not members of societies they study.

Arguably, what researchers on Africa observe, reflect upon and report about remains inherently incomplete. This is due to the limitations to knowing people, especially by outsiders. More specifically, researchers in foreign cultural ecologies may lack the qualities and skills necessary for elicitation and representation of *the truth*. Sangree (1966), for example, confessed that he was unable to verify some of his ethnographic data among the Tiriki of Western Kenya, as key informants and opinion leaders confirmed that the versions of some of his accounts were not true, but they would not tell him the truth, anyway. Similarly, Evans-Pritchard in his research among the Nuer of Sudan acknowledged, readers of African ethnography by foreign researchers should be ware of the probability of erroneous and misleading results. However, he held that the quality of such work should be appraised by the obstacles the researcher has overcome and the hardships he or she has endured (Evans-Pritchard 1940: 9). Despite the acknowledgement or even denial of the possibility of flawed and misleading results in classical ethnographies of Africa, courses in African studies, anthropology and ethnology at home and abroad still uncritically use these classics as foundational books about peoples and cultures of Africa.

Many classic ethnographies of Africa paid lip service to the ideal of objectivity and the pursuit of truth (Owusu 1978). It should be noted that the process of searching the truth in cultural studies combines personal interpretation of the researcher, informants, and their shared subjective experiences; that is, intersubjectivity that will be discussed in the next section. Reporting *the truth* for construction of culture theory and knowledge requires acknowledgement of the fact that the process of cultural interpretation is subjective. Both native and outsider researchers bring their own subjectivities to the data collection and interpretation process thereby contributing to the deviation from the truth (c.f Asante 1988). While objectivity in the science of culture and social realities of Africa is impossible for ethnologists and ethnographers to sustain, they should be judged on the fairness and honesty of their work (Reviere 2001). Nevertheless, classical and some

contemporary ethnographies of Africa may have elements of self-imposed and proclaimed principles of science and scholarship, which turn out to reflect not only personal biases, but also differences in conceptual and cultural backgrounds.

Kujitoa is the Kiswahili expression of the Afrocentric value of altruistic engagement in a socially beneficial activity. With regard to knowledge production on people, this calls for consideration of how knowledge is ordered and used rather than concentration on detachment and objectivity as applied in natural sciences. Eurocentric concept of objective, dispassionate, and value-free research is operationally invalid in the study of people and their cultures. With this kind of emphasis, what passed as objectivity in classical African ethnography may turn out to be European subjectivity (Asante 1990). A critical view of African ethnography should draw on the understanding that results of social and cultural studies are not necessarily actual truths. Researcher's perceptions and own conceptions of the objects of research and conclusions may be punctuated by emotional or personal biases. To Reviere (2001), the Afrocentric idea of *kujitoa* may improve the quality of ethnographic data because it involves reflexivity, and self-criticism or self-reflection. This helps readers and audiences to distinguish between the voices of researchers and the perspectives of the researched or 'experience experts' (cf Van der Geest 2007) in ethnographic results. Contrary to what many people know today, 'the experience experts' on a number of issues on popular images and representation of Africa are not the local people's but the views of western researchers and those trained in western perspectives of reality.

The principles of *ujamaa* and *haki* entail safeguarding community and justice. The community interacts on the basic values of family and incorporation new members. The value of *ujamaa* and *haki* gives an individual the chance to become *a person* through the people or community. This is the foundation of sharing that is strengthened by hospitality and generosity. This further reflects the Afrocentric ethic of *Ubuntu*—the humanist philosophy concerned with people's allegiances and relations to each other. From this perspective, an Afrocentric methodology is characterised by attempts to foster reciprocal relations between the researchers and participants. The distinction does not necessarily

privilege either party to the research process. African cultures cherish collective values, particularly a shared sense of responsibility. The collective ethic recognises that survival derives from group harmony and all actions are within a cooperative context, which seeks to maintain the harmony and balance of an interrelated and essentially egalitarian system. It always stresses humanness (*ubuntu*) which is characterised by generosity, love, maturity, hospitality, politeness, understanding, and humility (Mkabela & Luthuli, 1997). Methodologically, cultural studies can draw on these cannons and transform them into collaborative and co-operative research for the community and individuals. Participation of local communities in the research and collectively validating the outcome would guide the research toward emic representation.

Eurocentric methodology tends to create inequality between the 'theory experts' and the 'experience experts'; the research subjects. This separation privileges the researcher's goal for theory formation over the needs of the researched, that is, solving their existential problems. As pointed out by Owusu (1978), and Spradley (1980), research that begins with the desire for theory formation is not people-centred; and this contradicts the cannons of *ujamaa* and *haki*. This approach not only fails to address the felt-needs of the researched but also imposes theoretical frameworks on data interpretation, thereby de-contextualising experiences and distorting indigenous knowledge structure. Current images of Africa in local and Western scholarship show a contradiction of the Afrocentric ethic of sharing and participation. Essentially, researchers have conducted their surveys, interviews and observation and returned to their African studies centres abroad to analyse and write their findings. The concepts they use reveal their provenance: the mindset of anthropologists, sociologists and other scholars acting as gatekeepers for western theoretical hegemony. Conversely, Afrocentric methodology highlights the need for participatory knowledge production where more culture-bound and experience-near concepts of reality are given space for expression. Intersubjectivity is therefore one of the closest methodological tool for remedying distorted and misrepresented African social and cultural images.

Intersubjectivity and African socio-cultural studies

Intersubjectivity is an important methodological dimension of anthropological research and understanding study results. The definition of intersubjectivity can be drawn from three 'traditions' (Tankink and Vysma 2006); that is, the philosophical, psychoanalytic and sociological traditions. In the first place, it is the process through which people from birth develop their own consciousness and subjectivity. Children, for instance, acquire their subjectivity as part of a process that shape shared consciousness through interaction with adults. As such, intersubjectivity precedes subjectivity, and creates it. From the psychoanalytic tradition, intersubjectivity entails the process of cognitive and emotional communication between the analysed subject and the analyser (van der Geest 2007).

The sociological school of thought refer to intersubjectivity in relation to epistemological issues. For example, the concept relates to how people are able to communicate without drifting into disorderly relativism in spite of pervasive subjectivity in social worlds (cf Tankink and Vysma 2006). Alternatively, it refers to question of how one person can represent the experience of another person in its authentic manner. That is, how can I know "… the inner experience of the Other as he or she knows it? (Jackson 1998:10). These issues of relativism and empathy are crucial in interpretation of social, cultural and experiential data. Intersubjectivity is therefore an important methodological tool in anthropology in general, and for improvement of representation of African realities in contemporary academic and practical development scholarship.

Intersubjectivity is relevant to quests for amelioration of studies on representation in various ways. First, it points to the fact that the reality we present is as it appears to us. This means that we can not fully represent reality as it is. Therefore, there are bound to be varying degrees of accuracy in the representation of 'the other'. This is because every experience of the world is a human experience and involves a process of meaning production (van der Geest 2007: 10).This further means that presentation of reality can not be separated from human experience. Consequently, present images of the world and representation of reality bear the subjectivity of the researcher's observation, interpretation and presence. Data on socio-cultural realities should thus be scrutinised in

terms of the degrees to which the researcher's subjectivity either deviated from or tallied with local versions of experience. Subjectivity of anthropological researchers facilitates their understanding of the perspectives of the research subjects. The researchers know what they attempt to represent through their subjective experiences of everyday reality (ibid, p.11).

Good enough representation of reality entails reciprocal process of inquiry, where the researcher is ready and willing to learn from and understand (from interpretation of subjective reality of the researched), the emic perspective of reality. This is the hallmark of intersubjectivity, which entails patience, interaction, openness, dialogue, presence and participation. These aspects of intersubjectivity coincide with the tenets of the earlier discussed Afrocentric methodology. More specifically, the abovementioned aspects of intersubjectivity translate into tools of a participatory method of cultural studies that can salvage the representation of African realities of the world as perceived by the Africans. The next level is reflection, to make sense of the experience drawing on the subjectivity of the researcher and the research subjects. The 'other' (the research subject) thus becomes a 'you' (the researcher). In this sense, intersubjectivity implies a "second person perspective", which is hardly a complete perspective of reality as it is (cf.De Quincey 2006). Intersubjectivity entails participation, which includes interaction; a process where social categories sometimes become inflexible and overwhelming, sometimes fluid and contestable.

Intersubjectivity and participation yield shared reality and categories which may be fluid and open for new interpretation. When people (in general social settings), and researcher and the researched interact, certain subjective situations become available, which are either taken on or rejected by either parties. This process has been referred to as subjectivity (Davies & Harré 2000). Inter-subjectivity stresses the relational aspect of becoming a subject. This implies that the researcher does not attempt to appear as an invisible anonymous voice of authority, but as a real historical individual with concrete specific desires and interests. Errors in many early products of Eurocentric scholarship which formed the foundation of current images of Africa can be attributed to the position

of the researchers. Some of the researchers did armchair studies of Africa, drawing on secondary literature that had been exported to the centres of African studies outside the continent. Conversely, quality of data on African reality will always require the researcher to become immersed in the situation and the phenomenon examined. This is essential for researchers who are more concerned with an understanding of social phenomena from the actor's perspective (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). In such research, the researcher empathizes and identifies with the people being studied in order to understand how they see things.

Conclusions

Existing representation and images of Africa rely on Eurocentric ethnography and sociology of Africa. This scholarship depicts the constraints of colonialism and the difficulties of studying and translating African realities to the western world. Unfamiliarity with local languages and worldview, particularly among Western and other foreign researchers account for mistranslation of African realties since colonial times. As such, European and other foreign scholars, given their very different backgrounds, language problems, cognitive orientations, and intellectual and other interests, as was the case in the colonial era, may not be assigned the responsibility of trusted or unquestioned guardians of Africa's collective memory (Owusu 1978:326). While past western ethnographic theories, data and accounts provide useful foundation for African studies, contemporary native and foreign scholars should be critical as they incorporate them in the comparative science of culture.

The proposition of an Afrocentric methodology can contribute to efforts to remedy issues of mistranslation and misrepresentation in African studies. Cannons of Afrocentrism, such as relational co-production of knowledge, quest for justice, truth and harmony underpin the Afrocentric methodology. These principles may bring non-African and African experts as well as all segments of local communities into cooperative research endeavours to generate ethnographic records and validate the results. As such, production of truth about Africa and other non-western fields of scholarship may be less a function of world power structure. This structure is responsible for misrepresentation of non-

western experiences due to scientific hegemonies and ethnocentrism that privilege the perspectives of Western scholars and westernised natives. The Afrocentric methodology further calls for mastery of local languages by western ethnographers and other foreign social scientists conducting research in Africa. The dominance of Western perspectives in African studies can also be controlled through collaborative research in which competent native research associates and informants are enlisted in social, cultural and development projects.

Institutes of African studies worldwide should re-think the definitions of 'African experts' or 'ethnographic experts' on Africa. A large proportion of the non-African experts of African studies in institutions, both at home and abroad may fail the test of good enough grasp of local vernaculars, daily life experiences and indigenous worldview. Research funding in African studies need to consider developing the capacities of native African scholars to ameliorate the emic perspectives in the presentation of African realities and experiences from African perspectives. In addition, the Afrocetnric approach can form the intellectual and humanistic basis for open and informed intellectual dialogue between foreign and native Africanists. In such an exchange, foreign Africanists should be open to critique of their interpretation and translation of African cultures. This dialogue should be anchored on the awareness and application of intersubjectivity as a tool of social science (cultural research). In this regard, social scientists—both African and non-African—need to give the local people a chance to contribute to their monographs as the 'experience experts'.

Afrocentricity and intersubjectivity are important methodological tools that can improve the quality of data collection and interpretation. These approaches make us aware of the fact that current images and representations of Africa hardly capture the exact reality and experiences from the African perspective. The strength of these methodologies is to be found in their discretion and awareness of the incompleteness of attempts to present reality of people characterised by socio-cultural and ecological diversity and dynamism. The Africanist who honestly tries to present realities of Africa pointing the linguistic, cognitive and theoretical limitations to such a project gives a foundation for improved

interpretation. Awareness of subjective interruption in interpretation should not be an indirect claim of 'true' understanding or final authoritative and scientific translation of socio-cultural reality. What social scientists observe, experience, and reflect upon is and remains inherently incomplete.

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