

# UNDERSTANDING AIDS PANDEMIC BEYOND THE SCIENTIFIC EXPLANATION: AN AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE

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## Abstract

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*Currently, the fight against the AIDS pandemic in Africa depends unilaterally on scientific knowledge that is based on methods of observation and experimentation. This one-sided approach prevents people from knowing and understanding the pandemic holistically. Consequently, medical doctors fail to play their preventive and curative roles against the pandemic. Preventive and curative scientific efforts have been made to address the problem but all in vain. If the approach to the pandemic remains only scientific, the world in general and Africa in particular will continue to suffer from the pandemic. I argue that the spiritual cause of AIDS as understood by Africans beyond the scientific explanation is also important for knowing and understanding the pandemic holistically.*

**Keywords:** AIDS pandemic, scientific explanation, African Onto-epistemology, African philosophy

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## Introduction

In the area of health sciences, knowledge of the cause of the Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) is unilaterally explained through the scientific methods of observation and experimentation as if there are no other alternatives. Contrary to scientific methods which ascribe the cause of the pandemic to the material cause (AIDS virus), Africans ascribe the cause of the pandemic to the spiritual cause (either God or ancestors). Today, it is not yet known with certainty whether the AIDS pandemic has been caused by the AIDS virus, God or ancestors. The uncertainty prevents some people from clearly understanding the pandemic holistically. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to investigate the spiritual cause of the AIDS epidemic which is left open by science.

The cardinal factor which magnifies the uncertainty is that the discussion about the cause of the AIDS pandemic is dominated by the scientific knowledge alone. The purpose of this paper is to synthesise both the scientific and African onto-epistemological explanations of the cause of the pandemic. In so doing, I will demonstrate that both explanations are equally important.

My justification of the equal importance is that, scientific knowledge is necessary for knowing the material cause while the African onto-epistemology is necessary for knowing the spiritual cause of the epidemic. If both methods are considered equally important, the cause of the epidemic could be known with certainty. That is to say, equal consideration of both the material and spiritual causes of the epidemic could make many people understand AIDS pandemic holistically. This would make the prevention and cure of the HIV/AIDS easier. Let us consider the scientific explanation of AIDS.

## **The scientific explanation of AIDS pandemic**

Clifford (1998: 476) observes that from the scientific perspective, AIDS is caused by the virus which attacks the white blood cells which produce antibodies in the bloodstream. According to May (1998: 458), AIDS is defined as the advanced stage of Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) which is found in the blood and sexual fluids of a person living with HIV and in the breast milk of an infected woman. It is transmitted through sexual contact, mother to child during pregnancy, at birth or breastfeeding. Conway (1998:496) argues that, "It is not transmitted by shaking hands, sharing a drinking glass or even by being sneezed on."

Scientific research has revealed that many known cases of AIDS are thought to have been contracted by means of homosexuality (ibid, 493). However, there are also cases of heterosexual activities. Tauer (1998, 514) argues that despite the scientific findings that homosexuality contributes positively to the spread of the AIDS virus, homosexuality is also considered as a right of gay and lesbian people and it has been legalised in some countries such as South Africa. The legalisation has contributed to the spread of AIDS that ultimately causes death. Now the questions are: How can a State legalise a deadly behavior? Is it not an attempt to promote death over life?

Contrary to the promotion of the pandemic through the legalisation of homosexuality, a preventive strategy of Abstinence, Be faithful and Condomise (ABC) has been encouraged by medical doctors but has failed. Dube (2013: 193) observes that; "The widely publicised ABC prevention strategy, Abstain, Be faithful and Condomise, had no effect." Furthermore women, men and children continue to be raped by people who have HIV virus in their blood and sexual fluids. Parallel to the failure of this preventive strategy, is the continuous infection because of the absence of the AIDS cure. Harris and Holm (1998:463) argue that, "There is no cure, and the HIV-infected person is infectious throughout all phases of the infection." From the foregoing, it is crystal clear that science on own its own has failed to prevent and cure the AIDS epidemic hence an alternative it is required. Christokis (1998: 525) notes that,

Proper conduct of an AIDS vaccine trial must be informed by not only the epidemiology and biology of HIV infection in different settings, but also by the ethical norms and cultural constraints prevailing in such settings.

Even though the scientific knowledge has not yet established the cure and effective preventive strategies AIDS, this does not mean that it is totally useless. Scientific knowledge is also important for at least two reasons. First, science is able to detect the material/physical cause of AIDS. Second, science can observe and experiment with the behavior of the virus. However, the major weakness of science is that it cannot observe and experiment with the spiritual cause of AIDS virus. For example, science cannot observe and experiment how God and ancestors cause AIDS. This weakness requires an alternative explanation which is provided by African philosophy.

## **Trends of African Philosophy**

Literature on African philosophy outlines four types of African philosophy which played a significant role in shaping African worldview. Africans in particular, philosophise through the use of the following four methods: ethnophilosophy, philosophic sagacity, nationalistic-ideological philosophy and professional philosophy. Kaphagawani (1998: 88) notes that "Then

ethnophilosophy, philosophic sagacity, nationalistic-ideological philosophy and professional philosophy turn out to be bivalent: they represent types of African philosophy on the one hand, and methods of philosophizing in Africa on the other.”

### *Ethnophilosophy*

According to Imbo (1998: 53-54), the term “ethnophilosophy” was initially introduced as defamation by professional philosophers in order to undermine the African worldview and cherish the western worldview. Moreover, Imbo (1998: 55) observes that;

The case of ethnophilosophy is its function as a descriptive anthropology. In contrast to the discursive, analytical philosophy, ethnophilosophy treats as philosophy the indigenous cosmologies, the traditional beliefs, myths and cosmology are believed to be interwoven into a complex ritual of practices that are the manifestation of philosophy.

Masolo (1994: 160) argues that, ethnophilosophy is an unwritten method of African philosophy which is understood to have a role of describing the African way of life. For example, it describes the African cosmology and beliefs. The descriptive role is done through the use of language which is full and rich with proverbs, culture, morality, myths and folktales to mention a few which teach one’s place in the community. The anthropocentric character of ethnophilosophy is realised from the use of the Sesotho maxim: “*motho ke motho ka batho*” According to Ramose (1999: 42), this means “to affirm one’s humanity of others and, on that basis, establish humane relations with them.” Therefore, the descriptive role of ethnophilosophy through the use of language positively describes the African way of life hence it can also describe the cosmology and beliefs of the AIDS pandemic.

### *Philosophic Sagacity*

The term “philosophic sagacity” is derived from the word “Sage” which refers to a wise man such as Thales or Socrates who are very popular in the history of Western philosophy. Sages are men and women who demonstrate wisdom in many areas of life such as health, education, good governance, ethics and religion. African sages are understood to be men and women who think critically and independently for the good of the community. Van Niekerk (1998: 79) argues that, “Sages are critical and independent thinkers who know their own minds and who maintain a critical distance.” For example, as it happened in Greece where there had been philosophers such as Thales and Socrates, there had also been African philosophers such as *Morena* Mohlomi and *Morena* Moshoeshoe.

*Morena* Moshoeshoe is regarded as a great philosopher of the *Basotho* nation who deserves credit for his distinct wisdom more especially in political leadership. In the same manner, *Morena* Mohlomi deserves credit of being a *ngaka* (traditional doctor). In contemporary Africa, there are still African sages such as *lingaka* (traditional doctors) who can demonstrate knowledge of the spiritual cause of AIDS. Even though the traditional doctor can demonstrate knowledge it is believed that the healing power does not come from him/her but from the supernatural power. Ramose (1999: 79) argues that:

The underlying idea here is that the certainty that the patient will be cured cannot be provided by *ngaka* precisely because the latter functions merely as a conduit through which the healing powers flow from the supernatural or

unknown source. Accordingly, the patient must trust the *ngaka* and also believe that ultimately, the cure lies in the supernatural source.

### *Nationalist-ideological Philosophy*

The Nationalist-ideological philosophy is normally referred to as the philosophy of political emancipation from Western domination. Given its emancipatory function, it demands a social revolution that is influenced by intellectual revolution. According to Nkrumah (1998: 81), “social revolution must therefore have a standing firmly behind it, an intellectual revolution [sic] a revolution in which our thinking and philosophy is directed towards the redemption of our society.” Given that science has dominated African epistemology, the liberation of African epistemology must be guided by thought.

The struggle of emancipating Africa from the scientific domination is not yet over since the legacy of Western domination through science and technology is still seen in all walks of life including the health sector. For example, science is dominating the AIDS pandemic discourse to the exclusion of the traditional African worldview. This exclusion requires African traditional doctors to employ the Nationalistic-ideological philosophy to liberate the traditional African knowledge of AIDS from the domination of scientific knowledge. Ramose (1999: 103 argues that “(...) Africa must be informed by a new philosophical paradigm capable of refuting and dislodging the social epistemology of domination.”

### *Professional Philosophy*

According to Kaphagawani (1998, 97-98), professional philosophy is chiefly associated with philosophers such as Hountondji, Wiredu, Oruka and Bodunrin. These are African philosophers who received Western education and saw African philosophy through Western spectacles. Some of them see the need for writing philosophy as a prerequisite of African philosophy while others oppose the idea. Hountondji (1984: 33) defines African philosophy as “a set of texts specifically the set of texts written by Africans and described as philosophical by their authors themselves.” It is acknowledged that this definition is complex and has been debated for a long period but what is important is the need for writing philosophy. The need for writing is important since writing preserves information for future generations. Therefore, professional philosophy is needed in order to preserve African knowledge of the spiritual cause of AIDS for future generations. Having demonstrated the nature of African philosophy through its four trends, let us link African philosophy with African epistemology.

## **Linking African Philosophy with African Epistemology**

African epistemology is explained in relational terms with African philosophy. However, there had been a debate on whether African philosophy exists or does not exist. For example, according to Ochieng'-Odhiambo (1997: 1) some Western philosophers view Africans as incapable of engaging in philosophical modes of inquiry due to lack of reason and civilization. On the one hand, the rejection of the existence of African philosophy implies the rejection of African epistemology since they coexist. On the other hand, the argument which holds that there is an African philosophy implies the existence of African epistemology.

Kaphagawani (1998: 205) argues that given that the debate on the existence of African philosophy has been continuing for many decades, it is worth noting that the debate has inclined

to the position that African philosophy exists. It is from this understanding of the coexistence of African philosophy and African epistemology that I raise the question: what is the cause of AIDS and to what extent can African epistemology provide knowledge of the spiritual cause of the epidemic?

Generally, epistemology is the universal study of theories of knowledge by all human beings. Kaphagawani (1998: 206) argues that, “epistemology is a branch of philosophy whose main focus is to analyze and evaluate claims of knowledge. And to the extent that all humans have the capacity to know, epistemology is universal regardless of culture, tribe or race.” In other words, epistemology is the universal capacity to acquire knowledge. However, even though epistemology is the universal acquisition of knowledge, both Africans and non-Africans may claim to have a specific knowledge of something which is not known to the other.

Ruch and Anyanwu (1981, 80) argues that the specific knowledge which excludes other people is possible because of different methods used for acquiring knowledge that differs from one place to another due to cultural experiences. For example, what is known to the British could not be known to *Basotho* (plural of *Mosotho*) and vice versa. It is from this observation that what is known to the British but not known to *Basotho* could be called “British epistemology”. In the same manner, what is known to *Basotho* but not known to the British could also be called “*Basotho* epistemology”. In this article, the term “African epistemology” is used to explain the mode of acquiring knowledge in Africa due to African cultural experiences and knowledge. Therefore, African epistemology is explained in the context of the African cultural experiences and knowledge not otherwise.

According to Placide Tempels (1959:72-3), African epistemology could be explained in two ways: First, it is a true knowledge or wisdom which is ontological knowledge. This refers to knowledge of different forces in their hierarchy and interaction. The hierarchy of forces starts from God who is the Supreme Being. It extends down to ancestors, living human beings, animals, plants and non-living things respectively. Second, African epistemology is a force. This means that, according to Africans, knowledge is hierarchical in the sense that, the hierarchy determines the force of knowledge. This also means that, all beings in the hierarchy do not possess equal knowledge. For example, knowledge possessed by God is not equal to knowledge possessed by human beings.

From the foregoing, it could be concluded that African epistemology is explained in terms of the hierarchy of forces in their spiritual reality. Moreover, African epistemology is understood as the knowledge of the ontological hierarchy of forces as well as their interaction hence it is referred to as African onto-epistemology. It goes without any doubt that the ordering of forces is made for a purpose known to God. Given that He is the designer of the hierarchy of forces, every force in the hierarchy depends on Him hence He knows the cause of every force, event and purpose including the AIDS epidemic.

On the spiritual level, Bakari (1997) observes that Africans perceive the world in a different way compared to the worldview imposed on them by Europeans. Different worldviews imply different experience and knowledge of things. In agreement with Bakari, Mbiti (1996: 67) argues that African epistemology is different from western epistemology since it puts more emphasis on spirituality hence it sees the world in religious terms. In other words, it explains the world through its spiritual cause. Thus, nature in general is considered by Africans as one reality which possesses spiritual reality.

It follows then that the AIDS pandemic in African epistemology is understood and known to have been caused by a spiritual rather than a material cause. Having linked African epistemology with African philosophy, let us move the spiritual cause of the AIDS pandemic as understood by African epistemology.

### **Understanding the AIDS pandemic beyond the scientific explanation: An African perspective**

The quest for knowing the spiritual cause of the AIDS pandemic needs one to understand the African explanation of the hierarchy of forces. According to Tempels (1959: 61), in the hierarchy of forces (God, ancestors, humans, animals, plants and non-living beings), every being possesses vital force or life principle. Given that God is on top of the hierarchy, He has the power to strengthen or weaken the vital force possessed by lower beings. Life in general belongs to God since He is the creator of all beings. It is out of His divine Will that He strengthens and preserves life (ibid: 120). Therefore, anything, any action or behavior is good as long as it strengthens the vital force and the opposite is bad. Tempels (1959: 121) argues that;

Every act, every detail of behavior, every attitude and every human custom which militates against vital force or against the increase of the hierarchy of the “muntu” is bad. The destruction of life is a conspiracy against the Divine plan; and the “muntu” knows that such destruction is, above all else, ontological sacrilege: that it is for that reason immoral and therefore unjust.

This view carries two implications. First, the AIDS pandemic is bad because it diminishes the vital force instead of strengthening it. Second, homosexuality is also bad because it does not increase the vital force but diminishes it. Therefore, it could be safely concluded that both AIDS and homosexuality are morally bad since they diminish the vital force/life.

How then do AIDS and homosexuality diminish vital force? According to the African experience and wisdom, it was by divine design that God created Adam and Eve not Adam and Joseph or Eve and Mary as spouses respectively. According to Charles and Maclaren (1982: 120), the sole purpose of creating male and female was to establish an institution of marriage in which sex is allowed for procreation between spouses. This implies that heterosexuality is natural while homosexuality is unnatural. On the contrary, with the advent of human rights, modern human beings have been empowered to freely engage in homosexuality which in turn plays a vital role in spreading HIV/AIDS virus. Consequently, millions of people in the world in general and Africa in particular suffer and die due to HIV/AIDS. Tempels (1959: 46) further argues that;

Every illness, wound or disappointment, all suffering, depression or fatigue, every injustice and every failure: all these are held to be, and are spoken of by the Bantu as, diminution of vital force.

Living human beings are related to every being in the hierarchy of forces including ancestors. All form part of the web of life/force in a community. Ancestors have the capacity to influence current generations through their experience, teachings, suffering and wisdom. Bujo (1998, 55) notes that, “African communitarian ethics functions in solidarity with the deceased, who remain alive among their descendants through their experience, wisdom and suffering.” It is worth noting that the disrespect of the teachings and wisdom of ancestors is offensive on the part of ancestors since they expect their descendants to respect, promote and protect life.

Therefore, to discard heterosexuality which is natural and was practiced by our fore-fathers and foremothers is to offend ancestors. Consequently, illness such as HIV/AIDS, disappointment, all kinds of suffering which diminish vital force/life befall living human beings.

## Conclusion

The scientific explanation of the AIDS pandemic is not accurate on its own since it is limited by its methods of observation and experimentation. Science rejects anything beyond these, especially the spiritual reality that is considered vital in African onto-epistemology. Africans have abandoned the value of African philosophy and epistemology and have adopted the scientific methods which recognise only the material reality over the spiritual reality. Consequently, the spiritual reality is devalued and regarded as meaningless and useless. This makes it difficult for medical doctors to accurately prevent and cure HIV/AIDS.

Given that scientific knowledge fails to approach reality in its spiritual form, it also fails to explore the spiritual cause of the AIDS pandemic. It is only able to explore the material cause of the AIDS pandemic which is the HIV/AIDS virus. This failure calls for an alternative that can explain the spiritual aspect of the pandemic and such an alternative is the African onto-epistemology that should be adapted and integrated into scientific methods in order to complement scientific knowledge. This can positively help health professionals in understanding the cause of AIDS holistically. Consequently, it would be easier to find effective preventive and curative strategies of the pandemic.

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