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Autoethnography and African Epistemologies  
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Excerpt  
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## PART I

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### Introduction

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## Prologue: My Archive

As a collection, this archive is many things, a quality it demonstrates via its diverse manifestations. An archive as “schematics of self” can act as a “cognitive itinerary,” providing insights into the formation of the self, the journey toward understanding the self within and without, and the methods of self-construction that involve navigating temporal, spatial, ideational, and ideological conduits toward establishing self-consciousness. An archive in this sense serves as a collection of items with representative power that speaks to the process of self-definition; it provides illumination on patterns of personal growth, which can be mapped for reexperiencing or interrogating the formation of the self, since the self is a progressive construct, continual in its self-redefinition. Manifesting in material form as a collection, the archive can disclose the interconnections between intellection as an activity or tool of self-construction, consciousness as a source of power, and choices or actions that define and individuate persons. An archive can also exist as a tribute to an individual’s (intellectual) enterprise/industry; it can serve as a collection of materials that have past, present, and future significance, indicating touchstones that stand out in an enigmatic life, career, or that emphasize an ideology, idiosyncrasy, or proclivity. In this sense, the archive would be the material realization of a cognitive itinerary.

An archive’s impact on liminal spaces, which human consciousness inhabits, is also pivotal to its significance as part of a matrix, a system. The human world is a composite system of relations where things, people, and events react to one another: each part works in tandem with the other to ensure effective functioning and the progress of nature and the species habituated within it. These relations afford human reality the luxury of continuity, even in the midst of ruptures and seeming discontinuities. An archive is part of this system, and there are myriad ways through which the archive can be conceived within this particular order. There are also several forms in which the archive can manifest that highlight this essence.

The archive’s manner of composition also informs its value. As part of an organized system, the archive acts as signage, that is, as a systematic collection of signs with referents and significations. The significations can manifest in terms of any of the afore-listed realizations of the archive. Its

referents can be specific moments or actions in human cultural history that are readable or can be historicized. Because the archive holds its constituents in a systemic relation, wherein the elements that comprise it interact systematically, reading, engaging, or exploring the archive yields knowledge that transposes it from “a mere assemblage of things” to “a complex system with an equally complex import.” The transposition of an archive from a collection into a system is possible because of the complex levels of interaction within the archive itself or between the archive and the world external to it – the world within which it finds or achieves (greater) meaning. The nature of this interaction is based on the kind of knowledge the archive yields and also the kind of consciousness that interacts with it. The insight it provides and the interaction it allows – for instance, how accessible is the archive to intrusive reasoning? – determines what knowledge is to be gained from it. Equally important is the knowledge gained from exploring the significance of its composition as a system and that of its constitutive elements as independent (mini)systems.

Not all collections are systems, even if systems are collections of several parts, items, materials, etc. An archive provides knowledge that is conditioned by the relationship between its parts and between the parts and the referents residing within the world external to it, since all readable items including art and textiles are texts in their own right, and since archives wield referentiality. The archive can narrate the process of its being, stressing its significance as a “meta-schematics” to itself; narrate that of the materials that comprise it; and also narrate the generative force behind its creation, which in this case is the self. Two things must be noted here: conception and continuity. An archive is a conception; here that means a knowledge-scape conceived at some point in time and in some space, even if its quality, texture, and nature as a system are continually redefined. This means an archive is not static, regardless of being defined in and by space and time. Another way to see the archive in this sense is as an engineered knowledge cosmos – although in material form – generated (by the self) in the process of experiencing knowledge and thus fated to continuity, insofar as the generative center (the self) that transforms experiential knowledge into material forms or binds both persists.

I should, however, point out here that these positions are not definitely defined or fixed in their manner of relation: archive as knowledge source/cosmos and the self as a generative center. These roles can be reversed, and indeed this mutability is what shapes the relation, since both the self and the archive are constantly in a symbiotic relation in foregrounding their relevance, essence, usefulness, and continuity. As said earlier, the archive provides insight to the constantly evolving self, while, as will be shown, the self, by virtue of aiding the engineering of the archive, contributes to its essence and continuity, serving as a source to the archive’s persistence and continuity in and across time.

However, this state of perpetuity does not detract from the archive's organicity as a system or its ability to yield knowledge of itself to others, or of others to third parties. What I mean here is that as an organized system it does not shut out possibilities of historicization. It means the archive opens up to external queries, queries that would aid its definition and contribute to its essence. In fact, yielding itself to historicization and (re)contextualization marks the dynamics and fluidity of the archive. The archive is thus fluid and organic.

The archive's process of conception, its state of perpetuity, and its positionality with the world it textualizes all define it and the knowledge it provides. Archives textualize the material space because they co-shape the human perception of things. More so, archives as part of cultural forces condition human reception, relatedness, or perception of things or phenomena, especially if they (archives) are located or discovered outside of the temporality within which they have been composed, or if their constituent parts date differently. If an archive's immanent parts date differently, this system of difference defines and contributes to its organicity as well as its relevance to the material world. Therefore, the archive is a sum of its constituent parts; hence, it cannot be treated independently of them or, at least, the diversity that defines it. An archive can be underscored by several forms of diversity, and temporality is only one of such. But in the case where a systemic difference occurs, the knowledge it provides is a mixture of the implication of this constitutive difference and its effects on the contextual world. Therefore, the knowledge an archive provides is multileveled with multiple implications. It becomes a blueprint, readable and applicable to several issues, so far as they relate to the ideology behind the archive's conception, the ideology conceived of by the self that has created it.

What then is the archive? The answer is simple without being reductive and complex without being mysterious. The archive is a narrative. To appreciate the archive as a source of information, it is vital to see the archive as a system-in-narration. The various manifestations of the archive all yield patterns that tell a story. The knowledge extracted from an archive after due exploration by a probing mind is a consequence of seeing patterns within these patterns. These patterns have corresponding referents in the outside world, which allows a logical interaction between the probing mind (third party) and the archive. This is possible because as a system and as a narrative the archive has an organizing principle, a nucleus to its circumference, a generative center that holds it together and transforms knowledge into experience and vice versa, an intelligence constituted in much the same way that the human as a living narrative has a nucleus, an intelligence that holds its parts in harmony. The interaction of the two nuclei (that of the archive and that of the probing mind as a living narrative) allows for exchanges that advance the transfer of knowledge. This knowledge can come from the probing mind relating parts of the

archive to existing referents in the human world or worlds beyond it, or engaging the intelligence that has organized the archive, which can be within or without the archive.

The intelligence of the archive can exist outside it, but still be felt within it as its generative source, where it performs the function of a marshal, commanding its various parts for cohesion and unity. The intelligence within the archive would, in this case, be a trace of the overarching intelligence, a sort of microcosmic force, which can be anything from the self, a cosmic intelligence, a super-computer, or any consciousness external to the archive, to cite a few possibilities. What I am essentially saying here is that the self that serves as the source of the archive, engineering it into a possibility, leaves a trace of itself within it, one organic to its composition. Therefore, the archive and everything about it can represent the self: its organicity, constituents, the patterns that define it, the implications of its internal relations, and its extratextual connotations. All these can inform on the inner landscape of the intelligence (self) that has created the archive, especially since archives wield referential power.

The archive therefore is a metaphor of the self. Its ability to represent the self and the processes of its definition underscores it as a narrative. An interpretive engagement with the archive leads to exploring the cognitive landscape of the self, as if the self were responding to an investigative force. In the case where the archive represents and narrates the self, it would be acting in the capacity of a trace of the self. Although the archive is a narrative, it is not the self, but a trace of the self. Being a trace, the archive leaves room for the narration of the self without being the self. The archive thus is a useful tool for connecting culture and self, private experiences and common knowledge, or introspection, cultural epistemologies, and personal perspectives – everything that defines the self as a sociocultural being. It tells a story of the self as it relates, works with, affects, or is affected by the larger culture. These qualities of the archive have defined its importance, particularly to me and my consideration of African knowledge forms and their place in the global world. As I entered the last phase of my academic career and began to ponder how best to use my remaining limited number of years, the possibilities the archive offers encouraged me to settle more for introspective work. The possibilities are vital to the introspective angle from which I approach the idea of bridging personal experience and cultural knowledge for revisiting African epistemologies.

Over the decades I have acquired tremendous experience as a scholar and researcher, teacher, and mentor, and I have equally served as a policy formulator and public intellectual. As I began to think of how best to cumulate the diversity of knowledge and experience into a set of writings, my mind became restless. I had already written two memoirs and was planning the third. I agonized on how to structure an interrogation of myself as archive in order to arrive at originality and value. I settled for two interrelated bodies of ideas and objects – the accumulation of my creative/literary and academic work as

one part; and the cumulation of my extensive collections of sculptures, textiles, and paintings as the second. Both parts are archives that are both external and internal to me, an entry into an expansive library. Both have taken a lifetime to collect. The two archives speak to the African societies from which they emerge and to which they are addressed. Both reveal the path of history and all of its contradictions.

I am part of the contradictions, of growing up in colonial and postcolonial Nigeria. The visual objects speak to the contradictions of modernity. The literary works capture the anger and displeasure of modernity. In light of the foregoing, I consider my archive a narrative, a system-in-narration, a composition of patterns that tells a story, expressing all the afore-discussed possibilities. Comprising materials that hold value for me, it advances a theory that centers my lived approach toward decolonizing African cultural practices and knowledge form. The archive thus offers a narrative that not only textualizes this philosophy but also stresses my aesthetic choices in relation with my knowledge of the world and my cognitive itinerary in connection to my position within an epistemic space whose cultural vehicles continue to intimate me and to which I respond appropriately. The accounts this archive provides emphasize my position as a knowledge-scape; they present me as a matrix of possibility generating several layers of knowledge that find traction within a world outside of me.

This archive is thus an extension of me as a consciousness. In exhibiting cultural and personal significance, they advance a narrative of me and the experiences I have gathered over the years as the “intelligence” capable of organizing different elements into a system and an “organizing principle” generating patterns that cast private materials as cultural vehicles. This is buttressed by the fact that readers and viewers can respond to this archive, (re)negotiating the meaning of its composition as I have organized them and their knowledge of it as they have received it. This way, they create personal responses that interact with me as the “trace” within the archive, validating the evocative responses of an archive. This evocation is both of self and of culture.

*Decolonizing African Knowledge: Autoethnography and African Epistemologies* is, therefore, a product of ongoing interaction between me and the world, and between intelligence (self) and an archive as a collected system. I use my collection organized into an archive to explore personal and public perspectives in relation to the Yorùbá and the African world. This is the function of an archive, and mine is not different. The archive’s revelatory power or connotative possibilities are revealed when the intelligence that organizes it engages it. Probing it for knowledge reveals several layers of connection between the self and the archive: there is, for instance, the layer of industry, where the archival or ethnographic effort is made manifest; the layer of epistemic significance, which relates how the archive serves as a cultural vehicle revealing cultural histories; and the layer of self-representation, which is the layer of the “cognitive itinerary” where the archive

traces and embodies the self, symbolizing strategic intellectual effort toward the (re)definition of consciousness. The connotative possibilities of an archive can be the subject of debate since they can take several forms. But what is implicated when the archive is engaged by the intelligence that organized it, while it is also expected to speak to the larger cultural firmament within which both self and archive are positioned? One simple answer is that the archive operates on a dual level. The archive is a complex system with an equally complex import. While this rationale is straightforward, it does not answer the question of what happens when the archive is engaged by the intelligence that has created it and is responsible for its organicity. What is the result of my metacognition of my own archive?

A useful answer, which sets the tone for the chapters in this work and reveals the overriding premise, is that the archive as a trace of self not only narrates the self, but also reveals how the archive (as a network) intimates to the intelligence that has created it. What this means is that the archive, as a network with cultural and historical significance, demonstrates the intelligence that has created it as a matrix of possibility. The intelligence not only lives on in the archive, as a trace, but is projected as drawing cultural networks into close proximity through diverse cultural vehicles (that make the archive) in order to establish a convergent zone. This zone is the intersection between the self and culture; the self as an organizing principle and the created archive as an expression of this principle as well as a cultural vehicle and a source of knowledge in its own right; the archive as a narrative of the self and of culture; the archive as a trace of the self and a network of interacting cultural elements. Also, within this convergent zone (made possible by the archive as a trace of self and a network of cultural vehicles) is the intersection between conclusions of general scholarship and those of personal observation; general aesthetics or aesthetic appeal and personal knowledge of the archive's (and its parts') symbolism; and the intersection between what is intimate to the self and how it draws the culture into this private world of intimacy.

An instructive summary of this zone is that it creates room for the collusion of what is known to all and what is known to the self. This condition is brought about by two important things: the archive comprising personal materials that also are cultural vehicles; and the intelligence (self) also being the organizing principle, that is, the generating center of the archive, as well as the critical voice interrogating the archive. In other words, if the intelligence that serves as the powerhouse of the archive interrogates the archive, a trace of the self, the intelligence interrogates itself. Doing so, it emphasizes itself as a matrix of possibility or a knowledge source. Engaging the archive to establish the convergent zone depicts the self as an archive, while the endeavor becomes autoethnographic. The self is essentially an archive demonstrating its ability to generate another archive with personal and public significance. These are bounded by the merging of personal and public realms, which allow for personal and communal import.

The philosophy behind the book, to put it simply, adapts a familiar English expression: show me your books, show me your clothes, show me the art in your home, and I will show you who you are. This is possible because the self is a miniature of culture. Questions of “why” and “to what purpose” that address the self (and also implicate the culture) can be quickly answered by engaging the materials collected into an archive. A double channel of knowing is created: the self and the culture. The intelligence enters both simultaneously to establish a connection between the self as a generative center and the culture as the knowledge source, and vice versa, since the self can also serve as a source of knowledge and culture, a generative zone. In establishing this connection, experience is transformed into knowledge, personal items into cultural vehicles, and personal knowledge into public and vice versa.

Each chapter in this book operates on this principle. I demonstrate how personal objects as cultural vehicles tell my cultural history even as they intersect other histories. The chapters are autoethnographic because their premises are rooted in the convergent zone whence they observe the world and emphasize my position within it. Using my archive with its traces of the self to engage the world and its knowledge and to foreground African epistemologies allows me to demonstrate how autoethnographic approaches can transform experience into knowledge and derive from the convergent zone. To reveal this, the book is divided into two sections. Each focuses on a particular archive: the first section (Part II) contains six chapters that interrogate African culture through memoirs, existing scholarly works, and creative literature. The chapters approach the convergent zone by using personal narratives to explore African culture for a broader sociocultural significance. The second segment (Part III) differs slightly in its approach even though the premise remains the same. With five chapters focused on various archival materials – textiles, paintings, hair, sculpture, and photographs – the place of the archive as a trace of self is accentuated.

The larger context in the two archival categories that form the second part of this book confronts the Western encounters with Africa as well as two imposed competing models of development: capitalism and socialism. The encounters and models changed Africa, sometimes for good, sometimes for bad. As I am part of the changes, I had to document them, in minor and major tales, thereby constituting the primary archives of specific moments, as in the peasant rebellion of the 1960s captured in *Counting the Tiger's Teeth*. While each chapter focuses on a separate archive, this strategy gives the book an opportunity to closely examine the place of Africa and its cultures within a changing social climate initiated by Western capitalist forces from several perspectives toward generating useful and holistic conclusions.

Not only have we as a people had to accept many imposed cultures, we also had to rebel against them and their life-altering influences. I was part of both responses. But the tools of studying our experiences – the libraries, protocols, and ideas – were also foreign and largely imposed. I experienced this as well as



part of my education system in Nigeria, from the elementary to the University of Ife where I acquired two degrees. Since the 1960s the humanities and social sciences have changed with the times, from a “dark continent” paradigm, to modernization theories, to Marxism, and to the current market-controlled liberal scholarship and so-called democracy. Thus, I have to accept and challenge epistemologies, and, as this book argues, make a case for alternative ways of thinking. If there is a core theme that this book demonstrates, it is to reinforce alternative ways of thinking based on African indigenous ways of knowing. This book provides a convergent zone, where alternative ways of thinking can materialize or be shaped to purpose.

From the introduction is revealed how autoethnography reinforces and is a product of this convergent zone. The subsequent chapters focus on several archival materials – autobiographies and essays, textiles, sculptures, paintings, photographs, and hair – to explore several aspects of the Yorùbá and African reality; and in their treatment of these subjects is reflected the strength of autoethnography in returning agency to African cultures, even if it investigates or researches it. The intricacy of this convergent zone is laid bare as each chapter implicates its decolonial leanings from several perspectives. The strength of autoethnography – in reestablishing/buttreassing African epistemologies, foregrounding the transformation of experience in knowledge, and reinforcing the connection between the self, the archive, and the culture – is established from the book’s introduction to its conclusion.

This book cannot be confined to one discipline. It is a work of History as of Philosophy; it is grounded in ideas associated with gods and goddesses as well as in sheer literary imagination. The book enhances the value of proverbs to the same pedestal as those of books. As the chapters range from folklore to academic work, they expand understandings around the limitations of disciplinary boundaries. While the book captures events in some chapters, it is not about these events but about the ideologies and epistemologies surrounding them. While the book references stories and tales, it is less about them than about meta-narratives and meta-theories, revealing the mega-ideas that shape societies. And those theories are largely non-Western, widely used in African communities as they draw from language and lifestyles. There is a major focus in this book on cultures, even when they speak to social hierarchies, modernity, ethnicity, and nationality.

There is cultural nationalism in basing the archives on the Yorùbá experience. Without a deep understanding of culturalism, the core of African indigenous knowledge systems would be lost. As deployed in this book, there is one advantage to culturalism: it reduces generalizations around Africa, thus offering challenges to some of my formulations as African culture becomes located in different people and places. There is yet one other advantage: one cannot be led astray, as an insider, by the failure to understand what one addresses.

*Decolonizing African Knowledge: Autoethnography and African Epistemologies* provides decolonial direction through the Yorùbá example. And this is very

significant as there is not one single way to put decoloniality to work as a tool of decentralizing and distribution of agency. Its focus is on the Yorùbá space, past and present, and has implications on how Yorùbá epistemologies are presented and received, now and in the future. It also has implications for how the culture is studied as autonomous and historical, and as reflective of obtainable realities in Africa as a continent, without attempting to account for all of it. The connection between autoethnography and how Africa is studied is the thread that holds together the several levels of analyses and layers of meaning in the book. Autoethnography is an alternative and counter-hegemonic instrument and is useful to the African who has been branded the alternative to a Western standard; hence, it enhances the visibility of those branded as subaltern persons, centralizing their culture, institutions, and epistemic possessions away from Western hegemony. It draws attention to the importance of the rapport between individuality and communality, and how one affects the other. By doing this, it gains the cultural value it needs to be an evocative tool of decoloniality. As demonstrated in the chapters that make *Decolonizing African Knowledge: Autoethnography and African Epistemologies*, autoethnography rebrands the archive as a cultural vehicle to achieve cultural relevance since the archive returns the spotlight and value to African epistemologies.

## OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

### Part I: Introduction

#### *Chapter 2: Autoethnography and Epistemic Liberation*

This introductory chapter addresses the idea of autoethnography, examining its reliance on the objectivity of research and the subjectivity of autobiographical works in ethnographic efforts. It argues for the use and importance of autoethnography when researching indigenous epistemologies, drawing attention to autoethnography's relevance for decolonial studies. The discussion focuses on what autoethnography is, the arguments against it, the benefits, and ethnography's relation to existing research methodologies and patterns, particularly within countries located at the margins of global power. In its conceptual exploration of autoethnography as a research mode, the introduction argues for the book's approach toward centralizing African epistemologies. It also draws links between the theses of the chapters and the idea of autoethnography.

### Part II: History, Fictions, and Factions

This book is an archival meta-narrative that reflects on my corpus as an ideological afterthought, considering the scope and concerns of my