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Negotiating Knowledge: Epistemological Pluralism in Ghanaian Postcolonial Detective Fiction

Négocier les savoirs : le pluralisme épistémologique dans le roman policier postcolonial ghanéen

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The African whodunit is a haven for revealing the continent's critical social issues and exploring the tensions between competing ways of knowing. Yet there is a limited focus on how detective figures renegotiate scientific rationality and indigenous epistemology in their quest to unravel a crime. This paper explores this dialectic by examining how Nii Ayikwei Parkes's *Tail of the Blue Bird* (2009) and Kwei Quartey's *Wife of the Gods* (2009) reimagine crime-solving as an epistemological negotiation and a complementary interplay between plural ways of knowing rather than a purely scientific process. The paper introduces the concept of cognitive border-crossing to describe how these texts resist rigid binaries between tradition and modernity, rural and urban, and science and spirituality. The paper contributes to debates on epistemic decolonisation by advancing the need for context-responsive frameworks for supporting an understanding of knowledges in the postcolonial African state.

Keywords: detective fiction; epistemology; indigenous knowledge systems; *Tail of the Blue Bird*; *Wife of the Gods*

Le roman policier africain est un terrain propice à la mise en lumière des enjeux sociaux critiques du continent et à l'exploration des tensions entre les modes de connaissance concurrents. Pourtant on s'intéresse peu à la manière dont les personnages de détectives renégocient la rationalité scientifique et l'épistémologie autochtone dans leur quête pour élucider un crime. Cet article explore cette dialectique en examinant comment *Tail of the Blue Bird* (2009) de Nii Ayikwei Parkes et *Wife of the Gods* (2009) de Kwei Quartey réinterprètent la résolution d'énigmes criminelles comme une négociation épistémologique et une interaction complémentaire entre des modes de connaissance pluriels, plutôt que comme un processus purement scientifique. L'article présente le concept de « franchissement des frontières cognitives » pour décrire comment ces textes résistent aux oppositions binaires entre tradition et modernité, milieu rural et milieu urbain, science et spiritualité. Il contribue aux débats sur la décolonisation épistémique en soulignant la nécessité de disposer de cadres adaptés au contexte pour favoriser la compréhension des savoirs dans l'État postcolonial africain.

Mots-clés: roman policier ; épistémologie ; systèmes de savoirs autochtones ; *Tail of the Blue Bird* ; *Wife of the Gods*

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Introduction

A literary genre invented and popularised by the West, detective fiction revolves around a crime, a criminal, a victim, and a detective (Saren 2016). Primarily, detective fiction thematises narrativity itself as a problem, a procedure, and an achievement (Hühn 1987). Thus, the narration is in itself the problem to be solved and the means through which the problem is solved. It typically begins with a murder – where the murderer is unknown until the last pages of the fiction (James 2009) – which triggers a need for an investigation by a detective. Saren (2016) has observed that in Western detective fiction, which emerged in the 19th-century, there was a tendency to use such narrative to support and expand the colonisation of the native populations. Such a view is in tandem with what Said (1978) portrays as an ideological expansion of empire and an imperial narrative. In such detective fictions, colonial subjects were criminalised, and it was the duty of the detective figure who was prototypically a white male to bring the criminal to justice.

However, there has been a recent revolution in the literary genre of detective fiction, leading to the creation of postcolonial detective fiction (Saren 2016). A new wave of African writers has espoused postcolonial detective fiction, using the tropes invented by the West to question colonial epistemologies (Saren 2016), as well as to brutally self-examine the continent's various failings of both its urban and traditional or rural centres (Nyela 2022). Instead of revealing the hidden villainy of a single individual, the African detective fiction intentionally transgresses stylistic norms of the Western use of the genre and uses tragedy as a way of illuminating the problems of the continent (Nyela 2022). In a recent trend, the rural world is presented as being at crossroads, as it deals with Western influences on its indigenous epistemologies, and the detective figure who finds themselves in such rural settings must grapple with the unavoidable dichotomy between tradition and modernity (Nyela 2022; Saren 2016).

Such is the case of two popular Ghanaian detective novels, Kwei Quartey's *Wife of the Gods* (2009) and Nii Ayikwei Parkes's *Tail of the Blue Bird* (2009). The former follows Inspector Dawson's quest to solve a case involving the murder of a young medical student who went to Ketanu, a small village, to sensitise the people against HIV/AIDS. The latter follows Kayo, a young forensic pathologist, who is tasked with solving a case involving mysterious remains at a hut in Tafo. The two whodunits tackle epistemological diversities between scientific and indigenous ways of knowing. Significantly, the detective figures in the two novels, both prioritising scientific rationalities, are from the city, and are sent against their will to uncover peculiar mysteries where they both meet distinct epistemologies that are arcane in comparison with their own belief systems.

I have chosen these texts as a conduit for questioning the prevalent hierarchical way of thinking about knowledge, wherein indigenous epistemologies are considered primitive and irrelevant in solving contemporary problems. Rather than adopting an absolutist purview, especially when no form of knowledge is considered absolute (Santos 2015), I offer a syncretic approach that weaves together the benefits and insights that complementary modes of sensing the world offer, while also recognising the limitations of these different epistemologies. I analyse the changing perspectives of the two detective figures who come to accept the importance of indigenous epistemologies by undergoing 'a perspectival modulation' (Scott 2024, 21) as they search for elusive truths that their ways of seeing the world cannot reconcile.

An understanding of indigenous and scientific epistemologies is central to this paper's argument. Accordingly, I briefly clarify their operational meanings before proceeding with my analysis. I define indigenous epistemologies as the sum total of all the unique ideologies, worldviews, values, and practices of indigenous people, developed from their longstanding relationship with the environment, which governs their everyday living and gives meaning to their continued existence as these knowledge systems are transmitted from generation to generation. One way of

enacting these epistemologies is through the strategic performance of identity of indigenous people (Nicholls 2021). Amofa, Abass, and Asempasah's study on Parkes's *Tail of the Blue Bird*, outlines how one such strategic performances, notably the enactment of communal memory, deconstructs the linear, empirical logic that other detective novels typically use, while 'repositioning indigenous knowledge systems as equally valid modes of detection and interpretation' (2025, 94).

Scientific epistemological order, on the other hand, presents reality 'as anything whose existence has, or can be, established in a rational, objective manner, with universal laws operating only in perceived space and time' (Nyamnjoh 2017, 37). What is constitutive as reliable knowledge, then, is knowledge that is empirically observable, and can be experimented with or tested under controlled conditions. Reliable knowledge is also considered to be based on logical inference from evidence. Whereas indigenous epistemologies provide adequate room for realms or knowledges beyond what is observable, while recognising the rhizomatic relationships between the natural and supernatural, as well as the physical and the metaphysical, scientific epistemologies are sceptical of acknowledging knowledge beyond the observable as valid. In Caroline Rooney's introduction to her book, *African Literature, Animism and Politics* (2000, 1), she draws a productive distinction between these two epistemologies by juxtaposing Einstein's kinetic energy formula $E = mc^2$ with Chinua Achebe's portrayal of the Igbo world. Einstein's formula follows a linear, predictable, measurable and causal understanding of the universe, interpretable through relativistic mass and the speed of light, wherein energy and matter interact according to predictable and measurable laws. Achebe's portrayal of the Igbo world, on the other hand, indexes worldviews of an indigenous epistemology which is reflective of an interconnection between the physical and metaphysical. Causality in an indigenous framework is relational and cyclical and emphasises moral, social, and spiritual responsibilities alongside observable phenomena.

In what follows, I undertake a comparative textual analysis of *Wife of the Gods* and *Tail of the Blue Bird* to demonstrate how each novel stages encounters between scientific and indigenous epistemologies and, in doing so, unsettles their presumed hierarchy. I first examine moments of epistemological tension, whereby scientific rationality, embodied by the detective figures, collides with indigenous modes of knowing. I then trace how these moments of friction give way to epistemic recalibration, as the detectives confront the limits of their methodological certainties and gradually accommodate alternative explanatory frameworks. I also subject both knowledge systems to critical scrutiny and reveal the ethical and practical consequences of epistemological absolutism. Finally, I use the concept of cognitive border-crossing to illustrate how both whodunits resist the oversimplification of epistemologies to particular geographies and spheres.

Epistemological tensions in tail of the blue bird and wife of the gods

The forces of mainstream society tend to undermine indigenous people because of the alleged inferiority of their knowledge systems (Ioris 2023). As a result, indigenous societies continue to face attempts at cultural erasure (Simpson 2014) by subjects that Nyamnjoh calls 'disciples of [a] colonial epistemological prescription with an attitude of arrogance, superiority and intolerance towards creative difference and the value of appropriation' (2017, 38). This is evident in *Wife of the Gods* where Togbe Adzinma, the priest of Bedome is irate that Inspector Dawson is interfering with their ways. He tells him: 'We have no problems. We don't need anyone to come and tell us how to live' (Quartey 2009, 147). In *Tail of the Blue Bird*, something similar happens: Opanyin Poku is surprised that the sergeant from Accra is scornful of his pouring of libation – a libation which is triggered by his belief that mortal eyes without the right powers should not see something as ghastly as the remains at Kofi Atta's house. What Opanyin Poku says later

furnishes further grounds for why both he and Togbe Adzinma decry the unwanted interference of detective figures from mainstream societies who have no respect and value for the ‘creative difference’ of indigenous knowledge systems. He says: ‘We have always had our own ways; remember that the monkey was eating long before the farmer was born’ (Parkes 2009, 9). Opanyin Poku’s monkey-farmer anteriority encodes a kind of experiential logic that symbolically frames the long-standing, custodial nature of indigenous epistemologies. Importantly, these indigenous epistemologies predate the modes of inquiry used by detective figures like Dawson and the sergeant who fail to critically appropriate peculiar ways of knowing.

The first point of call for the two primary detective figures in *Tail of the Blue Bird* and *Wife of the Gods* is scientific rationality and they both encounter epistemologies that privilege ancestral authority, spiritual causation, and communal validation over empirical verification. In *Wife of the Gods*, Inspector Dawson openly challenges culturally specific manifestations that derive their meaning and authority from indigenous epistemologies. For Dawson, scientific knowledge always supersedes non-scientific knowledge and anything that does not fit the epistemological canon of scientific thinking is dismissible. That is why he orders that Elizabeth, after she is attacked, be taken to the VRA hospital instead of being taken to Isaac Kutu, the herbalist. But what Dawson misses, as Santos (2016) shows, is that biomedicine and traditional medicine are complementary epistemologies, and not alternatives to one another. To imply that they are alternatives carries ‘a latent connotation of subalternity’ (2016, 190). Further, for the people in Ketanu and Bedome, the metaphysical or esoteric is the only explanation to anything beyond the ordinary. We see this in how Kutu, the herbalist, argues that even HIV can be explained through the realm of the mystical. Hence, contrary to Dawson’s beliefs that Efiā has contracted AIDS from Togbe Adzima, Kutu maintains the possibility of metaphysical causation and attributes potential causes of Efiā’s illness as resulting from either a curse or witchcraft. What is striking is that this belief does not stem from the herbalist alone; Dawson has to contend with such beliefs even from his fellow detectives in Ketanu. For instance, Inspector Fiti invokes the power of the gods to force the truth out of suspects, and also believes that a widow who has no children but makes money is a witch. Their different belief systems cause a rift between their operations, and Dawson is later taken off the case (he solves the case while he was off duty) for attacking another herbalist and for calling Inspector Fiti ‘a bush policeman’ (Quartey 2009, 224).

A comparable epistemic conflict structures Kayo’s investigative trajectory in *Tail of the Blue Bird*. Like Dawson, Kayo initially privileges procedural logic and forensic observation as the legitimate means for producing truth. While Kayo follows this logic, he is, unlike Dawson, respectful of the beliefs and knowledge practices of the people of Sonokrom. For instance, he asks Oduro, the medicine man, how to properly dispose of the unsightly remains that he found at Kofi Atta’s hut. His own internal conflict starts when he ‘couldn’t tell the inspector about the sweet smell of the flesh they burned, or about the birds that had left their nests in the bamboo to fill an empty hut’ (Parkes 2009, 70). This is because his scientific knowledge cannot provide rationalisation for what Garuba refers to as ‘a continual re-enchantment of the world’ through a manifestation of the ‘animist unconscious’ (2003, 265), where rational knowledge only finds meaning through the mystical and magical, such as through the sweet smell of the flesh the inspector and Garuba burn and the birds that have left their nests in the bamboo to fill an empty hut. The liminal position between instinct and knowledge that Kayo finds himself confronting is in sharp contrast with the people in Sonokrom, especially Opanyin Poku and Oduro, who understand that there is ‘the invisible in the visible’ (Nyamnjoh 2017, 40). Both Opanyin Poku and Oduro know that the sweet smell of the burning flesh is propagated by an olfactory animist re-enchantment of the sweet taste of justice meted out to Kofi Atta. Both Opanyin Poku and Oduro also know that the birds known as the bee eaters, as stated by

Nkansah, are coterminous with ‘nature deploying her healing gifts to counter [Kofi Atta’s] evil sting that threaten[ed] the community’s harmony’ (2025, 130). Additionally, Oduro, unlike Kayo, demonstrates his indigenous knowledge of this animist unconscious by showing his ‘symbiosis with the forest and its magic of infinite ambivalences’ (Nyamnjoh 2017, 144). Oduro tells Kayo: ‘You have to be careful. Some of the paths are sacred; ask before you go wandering’ (Parkes 2009, 91).

The necessity of epistemological pluralism

No greater knowledge can endow any man, even the most studious, than to discover himself supremely learned in his ignorance, which is proper to him, and he will be the more learned, the more ignorant he knows himself to be. (Nicholas of Cusa 1985, 6)

I draw on Nicholas of Cusa’s quote to argue that situating one’s self humbly within the plurality of knowledges enables one to recognise the limits of their own knowledge, and this humility strategically positions anyone to acquire more knowledge. In the whodunits discussed in this paper, it becomes evident that where scientific knowledge is tested against its own limits, other epistemologies like indigenous knowledge systems can prove pivotal. Kayo realises this early on when he tries to formulate a coherent hypothesis about the evidence reviewed at the crime scene:

There was no way, to his mind, he would have a full outline of what happened in Kofi Atta’s hut by the end of the week. Indeed, he was beginning to think that the real truth, like love, was beyond the reach of scientific explication. (Parkes 2009, 124)

Kayo, who is at his wit’s end because he cannot find CSI-style answers to the crime like Inspector Donkor wants, only gains answers through the storytelling of Opanyin Poku. He is able to make sense of the mystery of the remains in Kofi Atta’s hut and connect the pieces of scientific evidence into a meaningful whole only when the novel takes on an intradiegetic lens when Opanyin Poku recounts the story of Kofi Atta (Scott 2024). His own reverie and deduction later in the novel support this, as Kayo reflects: ‘But maybe that was the way to be; maybe he’d be better equipped to understand life if he didn’t believe in absolute truths’ (Quartey 2009, 125).

In *Wife of the Gods*, despite Dawson’s open resistance to and disbelief in most traditional epistemologies, overcoming this ignorance becomes the key to solving the murder of Gladys Mensah, and even the killer of his own mother. Efi’s explanation of the indigenous implications of white smoke to Dawson offers him ‘a higher plane of evidential meaning’ (Scott 2024, 27), which gives him incremental value that relieves him of what Garuba (2003, 270) calls an ‘agonistic struggle’ between epistemologies. It is no wonder he tells Efi: ‘You did a lot – in just one sentence’ (Quartey 2009, 289). After Efi’s explanation, and the dawning of this new knowledge on Dawson, he makes smoke signals to trick his aunt Osewa and Kutu, who often used smoke signals as an index for their clandestine meetings. When Kutu asks Dawson how he was able to decode such a symbol, he resorts to a cryptic reply: ‘Just when you think no one is watching, someone sees’ (Quartey 2009, 310). Despite not acknowledging the priceless source behind his discovery, he, nonetheless, is able to extract details from Osewa, who appears unsettled due to Dawson’s newfound knowledge. Osewa confesses:

I attacked her. I wanted to hurt her. We fell on the ground and she started to scream. I squeezed her neck to make her quiet, and she was looking up at me while I was doing it. She was struggling and I wanted her to stop, so I kept squeezing. Her neck was very soft. And when she stopped breathing, I felt sorry for her, and I didn’t know what to do, so I just tried to make her more comfortable by

moving her underneath a palm tree. And I rearranged her skirt and blouse so they were nice and neat again. (Quartey 2009, 315)

Santos's (2015, 188) assertion that 'knowledge is the overcoming of a particular ignorance' is applicable to the two whodunits because a kind of complementary epistemology is presented. The two detective novels deconstruct the hierarchical precedence of scientific knowledge over other epistemologies by projecting that to fully make sense of one's society, scientific and indigenous knowledge need to be in communion with each other. The two are like Achebe's popular kite and eagle adage: 'Let the kite perch and let the eagle perch too – If one says no to the other, let his wing break' (1958, 11). Both detective novels acknowledge Santos's (2016) pluralist epistemologies and the interdependence among scientific knowledges (the kite) and indigenous epistemologies (the eagle), where each compensates for the other's epistemic limits. If any claims epistemological superiority or exclusivity, we see the ramifications in the blind spots and ambivalences the detective figures face.

There are several notable instantiations in the two detective novels that recognise this interdependence. In *Wife of the Gods*, Gladys Mensah is reported to have taken interest in Mr Kutu's herbal medicines for HIV and had planned to work with him to better the cure before she met her untimely fate. Similarly, in *Tail of the Blue Bird*, Oduro, the herbalist, on two occasions sought Kayo's opinion and, at the end of the novel, Kayo, the forensic pathologist, agrees to learn herbal medicine from Oduro. Opanyin Poku is also seen telling himself that if the red-eyed policeman who had been watching over Kofi Atta's hut had wanted to keep himself awake, he should have chewed cola, instead of smoking. These exemplifications do not imply that scientific knowledge should be eradicated altogether. Rather, Santos (2016) proposes that we interrogate it in order to generate richer understandings of it.

Epistemologies of harm: social and material implications of privileged and marginalised epistemologies

There are also cases where some epistemologies are detrimental to the participants involved in the operationalisation of that knowledge. Santos's precaution principle stresses the need to reassess the interventions that the different knowledges can offer to society, particularly 'in light of the concrete outcomes intended or achieved by different knowledge practices' or the gains and losses brought about by a particular knowledge system (2016, 204). For instance, *Wife of the Gods* critiques the practice of Trokosi, a practice which subjects young girls to servitude as atonement for familial sins. Such is the case of Efiya who, at thirteen years of age, is married off to Togbe Adzinma to atone for crimes committed by her uncle Kudzo, who beat 'a man to death with a branch from a baobab tree' (Quartey 2009, 6). These Trokosi girls are seen as 'privileged young women who will learn the ways of morality' (Quartey 2009, 71). However, the ripple effects on the Trokosi girls are innumerable: from being cleaved away from their families, to being physically abused and infected with HIV, as Efiya is by Togbe Adzinma. In one instance, a Trokosi girl is considered cursed even though it is clear that AIDS was the prime cause of her death.

The novel also exposes the structural inequalities that mark the postcolonial state's relationship with biomedical knowledge. The case of Hosiah's (Dawson's son) ventricular septal defect maps out a murky tension of the exclusionary regime of biomedical knowledge which is inseparable from access to capital. Although Dawson believes that biomedical science is the only rational cure for his son's defect, he becomes paralysed by the financially exclusive and structurally inaccessible demands for the scientific treatment for the kind of defect Hosiah suffers. Gifty, his mother-in-law tells him:

We are trapped. National Health will not pay for this. None of us is rich. We just don't have the money, plain and simple. And this dreamy idea that someday you're going to save up to that level – why, Darko, by the time that day comes around, if ever, Hosiah may be in terrible shape. Don't you see what I'm saying? (Quartey 2009, 49)

Although Dawson hated the way Gifty spelled it out to him, it nonetheless harnesses the painful reality that access to the benefits of the innovations from scientific epistemologies is conditioned by economic and political structures under which its benefits are distributed and withheld.

Resistance to strict epistemological boundaries

Both *Wife of the Gods* and *Tail of the Blue Bird* also run their course through a distinct type of interpenetration that prevents the oversimplification of typical attempts to dichotomise the city scape as favouring scientific rationality and the rural scape as favouring indigenous epistemology (Scott 2024). Efia, Elizabeth, and Christine, Dawson's mother-in-law, are illustrative in this disregard for strict epistemological borders or spheres as they refuse to conform to the supposed normative indices of where they are geographically situated. Although Christine is geographically removed from Ketanu, she privileges traditional medicine over biomedical intervention and, as a staunch adherent of Augustus Ayitey's practices, resists the proposal that Dawson and his wife should save for their son's congenital heart surgery. Elizabeth, while resident in Ketanu, similarly exhibits epistemic selectivity: she is critical of the excesses of certain traditional practices yet affirms the symbolic value of others, such as the inclusion of material objects in burial rites. Most strikingly, Efia's response to the rape of her daughter by Togbe Adzinma decisively disrupts expectations of ritualised spiritual retribution. Rather than invoking divine vengeance as the people of Ketanu and Bedome believe, she enacts immediate, corporeal justice by severing Adzinma's manhood.

A similar situation, albeit with a different twist, surfaces in *Tail of the Blue Bird* where Yaa Somu resists the rigid epistemological boundaries and counters the internally homogenous beliefs of the people of Sonokrom who first resort to advice to curb Kofi Atta's brutish behaviour. Yaa Somu recalibrates this epistemological sphere by drawing on a two-pronged approach. First, she champions the cause to mete out justice to Kofi Atta by personally threatening to kill him should he physically abuse Mensisi again. Second, she curses Kofi Atta. She lashes out: 'If you beat her like that again, I will kill you, and if I'm not here, the moment she conceives, that will be the beginning of your punishment. I curse you in the name of all my ancestors' (Parkes 2009, 87). Interestingly, it is this same curse that pivots the novel within the indices and the matrices of the supernatural and the esoteric. It is the curse that sets the centre stage for Kayo's encounter with the realms of an animist unconscious and of the esoteric. Her actions, as Bonsu, Asempasah, and Sam (2024) have identified, 'reveal a commitment to ethics of courageous uprising against oppression and the collective advance of human rights' (375).

From the exemplifications provided above, I advocate that we take cues from Efia, Elizabeth, and Yaa Somu, through what I call a 'cognitive border-crossing' as a mode of engagement which finds roots in critical discernment across epistemological systems. For instance, Ciaffa (2008) has warned that celebrating traditional beliefs without any critical appraisal is an impediment to solving the challenges of the present. In the same vein, scientific knowledge should not be the gold standard behind every decision; its limits should be supplemented by other forms of epistemologies.

Conclusion

The paper traced the discursive orientation of detective figures to two different epistemologies: scientific and indigenous knowledge systems. Through readings of *Wife of the Gods* and *Tail of the Blue*

Bird, this paper has argued that Ghanaian postcolonial detective fiction reconfigures crime detection as an epistemological negotiation rather than a strictly procedural exercise grounded in scientific rationality alone. In doing so, the paper re-examines both knowledge systems, by exploring their limitations and strengths, and showing how indigenous knowledge systems, which are often considered primitive and irrelevant, are important to the postcolonial detective. Inspector Dawson's rigid reliance on scientific reasoning initially blinds him to alternative ways of understanding reality, while Kayo's openness allows him to appreciate the value of indigenous perspectives. In the end, indigenous epistemologies aid them in solving the crimes they are tasked with investigating. In foregrounding the necessity of epistemological pluralism, the paper also draws on instances of collaboration between traditional and scientific medicine. This is similar to Du Toit's (2005) argument that the interaction between indigenous knowledge systems and scientific rationality can assist people to develop a better understanding of their environment. The novels model cognitive border-crossing as a socio-political ethic that destabilises reductive binaries and reimagines epistemology as mobile and context-responsive. Again, the novels challenge postcolonial African societies to rethink how knowledge is valued, legitimised, and deployed.

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Statement of ethics

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