

# DIMENSIONS OF EPISTEMOLOGY AND THE CASE FOR AFRICA'S INDIGENOUS WAYS OF KNOWING

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## Abstract

The debates within African philosophical practice have concerned its status, relevance and methodology appropriate or usable for doing it. Many African philosophers still express reservations concerning the importance of Africa's indigenous ways of knowing. Paulin Hountondji, a leading African philosopher, famously denies that African traditional thought is true philosophy, classifying it as mere ethnophilosophy, since it deals with orality and other ethnographical materials like proverbs, parables, folklores, fables, songs etc. Hountondji's position is, to say the least, exclusionist, since it denies traditional heritage a position in the on-going philosophical conversation or discourse. The paper suggests that Hountondji's position rests on one-sided conception of epistemology. And wishes to show that philosophical practice is as old as the history of mankind in Africa,

## TWO SENSES OF THE WORD EPISTEMOLOGY

The introduction of African Philosophy as part of the curriculum in Nigeria's higher education system was marked or preceded by a long debate centering on its methodology and status as an academic discipline. As this debate continued, African philosophers and scholars were polarized. On the one side were those who took a position arguing that African philosophy was still in the making. On the other side were those who believed that African philosophy was continuous with African culture.

Paulin Hountondji, one of leading African philosophers, characterized the position of the latter group as ethnophilosophical, which he takes to be an attempt to "define a specific African philosophy, a worldview common to all Africans, past, present and future, a collective, im-

mutable system of thought in eternal apposition to that of Europe”<sup>1</sup>. This way of understanding African philosophy, according to Hountondji, prompts some African philosophers to see it as a matter of duty to “re-construct the thought of his forefathers, the collective *Weltanschauung* of his people”<sup>2</sup>. He avers that ethnophilosophy has as its main objective;

...to reconstruct a particular *Weltanschauung*, a specific world-view commonly attributed to all Africans, abstracted from history and change and moreover, philosophical through an interpretation of the customs and traditions, proverbs and institutions in short, various data-concerning the cultural life of African people<sup>3</sup>.

Hountondji would not have been worried by the anthropologisation of African philosophy if it had identified itself as a form of “cultural anthropology”, and not, as its proponents would want us to believe, as representing the proper methodological rendering of African philosophies<sup>4</sup>. The assumption here is that philosophy cannot exist as an implicit, collective, and communal thought, which characterizes all Africans. Neither can philosophy be masked in the form of poems, myth, legends, etc, since these, according to Hountondji, are “artistic literature as distinct from scientific literature”<sup>5</sup>. Hountondji, like the members of the Analytic African philosophy, understands philosophy in the active sense – a rational and critical study with argumentation and clarification as its essential hallmarks, which persistently “questioning the untiring dialectic that accidentally produces systems and then projects them towards a horizon of fresh truths”<sup>6</sup>. The key targets of Hountondji’s denunciation of ethnophilosophy include;

- (i) Orality
- (ii) Myth of unanimity
- (iii) Collective or communal thought as opposed to individual thought
- (iv) Unconscious, spontaneous and implicit world-view
- (v) Cultural uniqueness.

Based on his uncompromising adherence to philosophy as it is defined or understood in a Western context, it is natural that he would reject terms like Igbo philosophy, Yoruba philosophy, Dogon philosophy, Akan philosophy etc. In the same manner, he would dismiss the idea

of African theory of knowledge for the same reasons, despite the effort of African philosophers to demonstrate the existence of such philosophy and epistemology as found amongst indigenous African people. Therefore in an effort to defend the idea of an African philosophy we need to clarify the various senses of the word 'epistemology'. This can in turn allow an appreciation of a collective epistemology.

## **ORDINARY OR BROAD SENSE OF EPISTEMOLOGY**

Epistemology studies the nature of knowledge, especially the question of how we know what we claim to know and the extent to which we know it<sup>7</sup>. But epistemology can possess another sense, where it is taken to mean the communal beliefs of a people, because any group of human beings will certainly have to have some world outlook, that is, some general conceptions about the world in which they live and themselves both as individuals and as members of society<sup>8</sup>.

Concerning traditional African philosophy, we do not need to assume that there is any kind of metaphysical or mythic unity among Africans with respect to their conceptions of nature, man, existence, society, etc. It is also not necessary to suggest that these conceptions are unique to them. We do not have to make any of these suggestions because of the diversity of the cultures and traditions in Africa and the possibility that these cultures and traditions might share some of their essential attributes with those of other societies. The point however, is that in spite of the diversity, we can still identify some deep underlying affinities running through the various African cultures and traditions by which we can consider their unity. The point we are making here is well stated by Anyanwu when he says:

...a skeptic may doubt whether what I have described as the basic assumptions of African culture refer to all black African cultures or to specific or particular cultures of certain groups of people in Africa. I would say that it makes no difference whether one speaks about the philosophy of a particular ethnic group in Africa or the philosophy of African culture in general,...The underlying principles inherent in all African cultures are applicable in any form in which one may formulate African (traditional) philoso-

phy<sup>9</sup>.

Thus on the basis of this illuminating insight by an African philosopher, we can say that there is a certain underlying identity even in the face of plurality of African traditions and heritage.<sup>10</sup> If we assume that there is a traditional African philosophy, then this philosophy is certainly not a stock of metaphysical notions common to all Africans. Rather, it is 'an abstraction standing for those interrelated conceptions of nature, man, society, morality' etc.

It is important here to distinguish between objective and subjective, or the material conditions that enable one or other philosophy and the vehicles for its expression to come into being. This point is taken by Joseph Dietzgen, when he writes:

Just as the reformulation was conditioned by the material base of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, so the theory of human intellectual operations just like the discovery of the electric telegraph is conditioned by the material base of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Accordingly the contents of this tract are not the product of an individual mind, rather there are a plant born on historical soil...<sup>11</sup>

What emerges from this would be that there is no necessary link between the existence of philosophy and the effort of the individual since every philosophy that finds expression does so after a period of gestation. A mode of thought cannot therefore be the emergence of individual philosopher. Rather it must be what Dietzgen has rightly called 'the material base'. The point here is that philosophy like history in general, cannot be conceived as merely the product of individual works of genius. For there is abundant evidence in African traditional thought to show that indigenous thinkers are capable of reflective philosophical thinking and that philosophical world-views are characteristic of a people's communal outlook upon the universe. It would be said then that any attempt to reject this in preference to 'the theoretical effort of the individual' is to be guilty of stealing the fruits of the work, both manual and intellectual of the mass of the people.<sup>12</sup>

Scholars such as Hountondji, who reject African traditional thought because it is a collective philosophy, ignore the relevance and impact of culture on the reflections of the individual thinker. They mis-

takenly believe that philosophizing is a wholly individualistic affair, and fail to realize that the so-called individual thinker must draw as his raw data the communal ideas and belief systems preponderant in his community. They are rooted in the beliefs and assumptions of the culture. Here, the term culture is taken from its Latin roots, *cultura* meaning cultivating or tilling the land. It was taken by Cicero and others as the cultivation of the soul or mind since the human spirit will not achieve its proper result if it is not trained or educated<sup>13</sup>. However, we shall define culture following E.B. Tylor, to be “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs and any other capabilities and -habits acquired by man as a member of society”<sup>14</sup>. We are therefore justified in saying that Socrates and Plato are Greek philosophers and Locke and Berkeley are British philosophers because the ideas of these individuals are rooted in the traditions and mentalities of the Greek or British culture.

Philosophy (epistemology) is the product of a culture because it is inconceivable to say that a culture can exist without those elements of thought that are shared in common. Hence, we can say that all individualized philosophies stem from the general experience and problem confronting a particular people in a given cultural environment. On this Anyanwu says:

The philosophies of individuals are still subordinate to public philosophy, and in the ultimate analysis public (collective) philosophy.<sup>15</sup>

In order to corroborate the point we are developing here, it may be instructive to examine some of the philosophical doctrines of some individual thinkers in the Western philosophical tradition to see how they appropriated the dominant ideas of their culture to formulate their doctrines. In ancient philosophy both Thales, Anaxamander and Anaximenes were credited for explaining natural phenomena in purely systematic and scientific terms, shifting away from the explanation natural phenomena in terms of supernatural agencies. It is important to note that the main pre-occupation of these philosophers was to discover the ultimate principles that underlie the various things in the physical world. Thales contended that all things in the world derive from ‘water’. Aristotle later pointed out that the idea that water subsists in all things in the universe was common in the mythological traditions of the Greeks and the peoples

with whom they come into contact.<sup>16</sup> The issue here is that the notion of water and the beliefs and practices associated with it were already embodied in the Greeks' conception of natural phenomena. The philosopher merely draws for his analysis the ideas or raw data embedded in the communal world outlook of his people.

As a matter of fact, the minds of the philosophers are not a *tabula rasa* where ideas are imprinted, but are already furnished with the ideas, beliefs, thoughts of their society. Based on this, we can argue that philosophical discussion in any given epoch is determined by a set of assumptions which are the groundwork of current conceptions shared by all men of a given culture.<sup>17</sup> Thus, it can be argued that Greek philosophy or any other arises out of the minds of the people and is in fact a component part of that culture. This fact is obvious when we consider what Bertrand Russell says:

My purpose is to exhibit philosophy as an integral part of social and political life, not as the isolated speculations of remarkable individuals.<sup>18</sup>

## **TECHNICAL OR STRICT SENSE OF EPISTEMOLOGY**

What we are attempting here is to examine epistemology in its strict or technical sense with a view to showing that both the broad or general and narrow or technical sense shade into each other in many forms as well as unraveling some of the pitfalls associated with the technical sense of the term. The word 'epistemology' is a compound Greek word formed from two simple parts, 'episteme' which means 'knowledge' and 'logos' which connotes 'theory'. Hence, epistemology is referred to as 'theory of knowledge'.

Even though epistemology embraces a variety of concepts and issues, its central questions have remained the same. These include, what are the criteria of knowledge? How does one know or come to know anything at all? These questions, we believe, serve as an invitation to analyze the status of our knowledge claims, the validation of our cognitive experience, and the relationship between our cognitive experience and the various objects in the world. This is what Michael Williams intends when he says that epistemology is concerned with the nature or structure of the justification of our most important beliefs, our belief in

the existence of the physical world.<sup>19</sup>

Now apart from the above questions, there is even a larger question which is: why is it necessary to have a theory of knowledge? This is connected to the problem of what we understand by the term knowledge, and what deserves the title of knowledge<sup>20</sup>. It suggests that only those that are equipped with the proper methodology can achieve the solution to these problems. The knowledge of the philosopher, because of his understanding of what constitutes knowledge, is different than the knowledge of the man on the street, or knowledge in the real sense of the word. The philosopher can criticize certain knowledge claims based upon the idea that certain logical conditions are not being met. The point then is that any claim to knowledge, if it is to be a valid claim, presupposes a prior satisfaction of the conditions concerning grounds, truth, meaning etc. Thus, the task of the philosopher, concerned with the theory of knowledge, is to investigate and elucidate, in a practical manner, the conditions for true knowledge.

The word 'know' is very complex. Whereas some philosophers describe the word as psychological or propositional attitudes towards statements or a state of affairs, others reject and instead claim that it has distinctive meaning as a private mental state that intuitively distinguishes it from other psychological attitudes.<sup>21</sup> For these people, such statements as 'I know x: will then refer to only that distinctive state of mind at that particular time. But its ordinary English usage tends to suggest that the word is commonly used in a dispositional or behavioral sense. Concerning this, H.H. Price writes;

Now in ordinary everyday English the verb 'to know' generally used in a dispositional sense: not quite invariably perhaps, but certainly the dispositional use of it is by far the most common.<sup>22</sup>

Whenever we talk of knowledge or the ordinary English verb 'to know' in epistemology,<sup>23</sup> what we are aiming at is the sense in which a person knows that something is the case (knowing that or propositional knowledge), or the sense in which a person could be said to be acquainted with a state of affairs (knowledge by acquaintance). For instance, when a person claims to know that the atomic weight of gold is 197.2; or that A.J. Ayer is the author of *The Problem of Knowledge*, we believe that this sense of knowing entitles someone to talk of knowledge as being a

sub-set of belief. Additionally, the way we justify different claims to knowledge differs; hence the justification of the claim that a person knows that the atomic weight of gold is 197.2 is quite different from the justification required to prove the truth of the claim that A.J. Ayer is the author of *The Problem of Knowledge*. Now if this is accepted, then what justification do we have to say that these examples fall under the same concept? To answer this will imply also our knowledge or understanding of certain similarities they share especially in the ordinary usage. So this seems to be one of the sources of the philosophical importance of trying to find an adequate definition of knowledge, that is, a definition that could provide satisfactory criteria for assessing certain claims to knowledge.<sup>24</sup>

## **INTERCONNECTIONS BETWEEN THE BROAD AND STRICT SENSES OF EPISTEMOLOGY**

As stated above, the distinction between the broad and strict or narrow senses of philosophy is akin to those between ‘critical’ and ‘collective’ epistemology. Hence, the explication of one can be used to understand the other since epistemology is a core branch of philosophy. Some philosophers and scholars have made postulations alluding to the distinction between the broad and strict senses of the terms, philosophy and epistemology. Witness, for instance, F.C. Copleston’s distinction between broadfield and second-order philosophy<sup>25</sup>; Claude Sumner’s broad and narrow philosophy<sup>26</sup>; D.A. Masolo’s ordinary sense and second sense philosophy<sup>27</sup>. What is clear in all these two senses of philosophy (epistemology) is that these philosophers do not take them as autonomous and as existing independently of each other. For them, however, both overlap and shade into each other in a complementary manner. The symbiotic relationship, as it were between the two senses or philosophy and/or epistemology is well expressed by Sumner when he argues that:

Philosophy in a broad sense is still philosophy. ‘In this way, he justifies using the words Ethiopian Philosophy in the titles of his books’... He sees his own distinction between broad and narrow philosophy to be a bridge or compromise between Western version of philosophy and what



is needed to include African wisdom traditions within the field of philosophy, thus making the definition more universal rather than narrowly European<sup>28</sup>.

As was discussed earlier, Hountondji, and some members of the analytic African philosophy have argued that traditional African thought cannot and should not constitute African philosophy. Hountondji, in his seminal work, *African Philosophy Myth and Reality*, made a distinction between what he calls ‘popular’ and ‘strict’ senses of philosophy. The former, according to him, refers to “wisdom, individual or collective, which is made of coherent principles and meant to guide daily action”. However in the strict sense, Hountondji argues that it cannot be spontaneous or collective philosophy, but is based on the scientific model of free discussion during which hypotheses are tested<sup>29</sup>.

Kwasi Wiredu, a member of the analytic school of African philosophy, while not as dismissive of traditional African thought as Hountondji, still holds (what Sumner calls) “a colonized version of philosophy which accepts Western definitions instead of creating African definitions of philosophy”.<sup>30</sup> Concerning traditional African Philosophy, Wiredu has this to say;

If African philosophy means Traditional African philosophy as surprisingly many people seem to think, then we can forget any pretence of modern philosophizing. In most parts of Africa, we would have, in that case, to abstain from such disciplines as symbolic logic and its philosophical interpretations, the philosophy of mathematics and of the natural and social sciences, the theory of knowledge associated with the foregoing disciplines and the moral, political and social philosophy which has arisen as a response to the needs of modern times...<sup>31</sup>

According to Olusegun Oladipo, Wiredu’s rejection of the equation of African Philosophy with African folk thought is informed by two considerations namely; ‘practical and theoretical’. On the practical side, such equation, according to Wiredu, would amount to being “content with the mere narration of the ideas Africans lived by as an adequate fulfillment of the philosopher’s task in contemporary Africa”<sup>32</sup>. From the theoretical angle, “it would deny Africans the opportunity of engaging

fruitfully in the activity of modern philosophizing”.<sup>33</sup>

But the hostilities against ethnophilosophy in particular and traditional African philosophy in general by the analytic group is unwarranted because their views will definitely hurt Africa by robbing it, according to Barry Hallen, of engagement in “a positive and fruitful relationship between Africa’s indigenous intellectual heritage and technical systematic academic (Western) philosophy”.<sup>34</sup> One aspect of their position against traditional African philosophy is simply that it is largely oral and unwritten. In other words, “its various aspects have usually been transmitted from generation to generation by word of mouth”<sup>35</sup>. However some scholars have shown that proverbs, myths, folklores etc, are important vehicles for the transmission of traditional thought and as ‘sources of traditional conceptions and ideas, whether metaphysical, epistemological, ethical etc’<sup>36</sup>.

By advocating the method of science and technology as the basis of social development by the analytic African philosophers, they were uncompromising in calling for a break or total destruction of “traditional idols” and other heritage resources. But it is fruitless to pursue this project because Africa’s past cannot simply be eliminated. In the views of some scholars, particularly J.F. Ade Ajayi,

...development is not simply an activity in which the old is replaced by the new in a mechanical manner. Rather, it is a process of social reconstruction in which the past survives in the present, though in a modified form...<sup>37</sup>

Based on the insight offered by the doyen of African historiography, Ade-Ajayi, we can make the bold claim that these views of the analytical African philosophers are unilluminating and do not serve as an adequate critique of ethnophilosophy.

This essay wishes to show that the attack on ethnophilosophy and the rejection of traditional African thought is misguided. This is because ethnophilosophy is still an important fruitful discourse in contemporary Africa. Apart from promoting positive aspects of culture, it also promotes indigenous knowledge, which is “a paradigm shift from the mechanistic top-down models primarily concerned with economic development towards dynamic participatory approaches concerned with all facets of human development”. In other words, the utilization of ‘indigenous institutions and culture in effecting more positive governance and

development emphasizing participatory processes' at the socio-political and economic layers of the society is the interest of ethnophilosophers in postcolonial Africa.

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