

7.

## TOWARDS AN INDIGENOUS (AFRICAN) ORDER OF KNOWLEDGE

**Professor Amaechi Udefi**

Department of Philosophy

University of Ibadan, Nigeria

E-mail: amy4ibe@yahoo.com

+2348035036401

### **Abstract**

The problem a philosopher/scholar might face writing on an area of study like the African theory of knowledge has to do with a conceptual clarification of the terms in use as well as correcting some perceived misconceptions, which due to the accident of history, have tended to be accepted as the norm or a given. So, when the Africa's indigenous theory of knowledge is mentioned, some scholars are wont to ask; what theory? And what knowledge? Do Africans have a systematised body of knowledge? Part of our concerns in this essay is to expose the pitfalls in the disguised rejection of African theory of knowledge (epistemology) and its ideological underpinnings in order to reconstruct the ideas with a view to showing the parity of epistemological concepts between African and Euro-western.

### **Introduction**

Epistemology or theory of knowledge is a core branch of philosophy and is taken by philosophers as basic to the understanding of philosophy and allied subjects. Whatever is known at all whether sensible or transcendental entities and their justification come under the rubric of theory of knowledge.<sup>1</sup>

During the heydays of the struggle for nationhood by African statesmen and intellectual elite, there was a preponderance of interest in reconstruction of the African cultural heritage devalued by the colonialists with a view to evolving authentic African values and knowledge system,

*episteme*. Such area studies that emerged as one sure way of reclaiming the humanity and the past of Africa included African philosophy with its strands of African epistemology, African metaphysics, African ethics, also included were history, literature, socialism just to mention a few. The intent of these educated Africans was to prove to the Western world that Africa had what it takes to assert her sovereignty and governance structures. This might seem a digression, but it is not.

During this period, the Europeans denied Africans the capacity for philosophical and epistemological conceptualisation which were obvious in the writings of Kant, Hegel, and Levy-Bruhl amongst others. Here, the idea is that reason (*logos*) is an essential mark of humanity, and since Africans were unfortunately excluded from the corps of humanity, it was only logical not to ascribe reason to them.

It was not by providence that some African scholars and others have shown through theoretical and empirical research that the above view can no longer be sustained. It is incontestable that Africans possess and engage in remarkable and intricate philosophical and epistemological reflections deriving essentially but not exclusively from their cultural systems.

Like other epistemological systems in other lands, the central questions of African epistemology bother on justification and criteria of validation.

The theme and problems centre on how Africans conceptualise knowledge and problems of juxtaposing culture with knowledge.

Though, African mode of knowing is an ongoing project, its future prospects are brighter than anyone could imagine. Scholars who are interested in African epistemology can deploy their training in philosophy to do further research into the epistemic canons of African societies. They can do this by evolving a method of analysis using African concepts, categories and language. Such topics as *eziokwu* (truth), *nkowa* (explanation), *amamife* (knowledge), *nchekwube* (belief), *uchem* (opinion) *asii* (falsehood), *ntuhariuche* (examination) can be investigated using alternative methods different from the mainstream Western epistemology, without necessarily making a case for incommensurability of Western and African epistemology.

### **The West and the Rest of Us (Africa)**

By way of citation, Chinweizu, the Africanist came up with this title many years ago to underscore the damaging effects of colonialism on the

colonised (Africans). Now writing African history cannot be complete without a mention of African colonial experience no matter how briefly.

The discourses on the African encounter with the Euro-west are now too familiar and over flogged and so would not detain us here. The violent historical incursion of Europe into Africa brought about a new image of Africa, apart from a considerable process of social and cultural change on the continent. During this period, African personality and her cultures and tradition became devalued and disoriented leading to identity crises and cultural anomie. This scenario is well expressed by John Dollard as quoted by Abiola Irele thus:

The cultural and political ascendancy of the Whiteman, combined with the active denigration of the Blackman, has thus had the effect of vitiating the latter's self-esteem, with profound psychological consequences, including shame and self-hatred.<sup>2</sup>

The Europeans invaded Africa with the disguised motive of bringing civilisation to a horribly backward race. According to Abiola Irele, “The colonial enterprise was aimed at transforming Africa by the progressive approximation to the ideals of western civilisation, specifically through education”<sup>3</sup>

The ideological justification for Euro-western colonisation was provided by both the Renaissance and Enlightenment scholars drawn from different fields like philosophy, history, anthropology. During these periods, western civilisation prided itself as the pinnacle of human civilisation. The values inherent in science and reason were celebrated as the exclusive preserve of the Euro-western society. In fact, there was the belief that European civilisation was synonymous with the universal or world civilisation. Based on this, Africans and other non-European peoples were typed as the absolute “other”, primitive, backward, pre-logical, backward, savages and possessing no history of note and therefore needed the redeeming intervention of Western civilisation. A notable European philosopher, Hegel once claimed that;

...Africa... is no historical part of the world; it has no movement or development to exhibit. Historical movements in it that is in its Northern part belonged to the Asiatic or European world... Egypt does not belong to the African spirit.<sup>4</sup>

A similar sentiment was expressed by Lucien Levy-Bruhl, a notable anthropologist, when he said that human societies were classified into two, namely those with a civilised mentality and those with a primitive mentality. For him, Africans and other non-Western peoples fitted into the latter group because they possessed a pre-logical mindset which is taken to mean a complete lack of scientific, critical and analytic reason and suffused with contradictions. In apparent valorisation of reason, Hegel as quoted by D.A. Masolo (1994:4-5) unequivocally stated that:

...Culture was the concretisation of reason in its historical moments. To identify the intensity of dialectical reason at work in the world... where there is no culture there is no reason.<sup>5</sup>

The point of this brief discussion of the relationship between Africa and the West is to show that the Western denigration of African culture necessarily prompted the denial or rejection of African concepts and categories like being, mind, knowledge, belief, ethics, soul, body.

### **Is there One Science, Knowledge?**

To answer this question, whether in the negative or affirmative, one needs to reflect on the contemporary developments in epistemology, science, language, sociology, economics. In these fields, there has been considerable paradigm shift in terms of the mainstream discourse to alternative discursive strategy. But before going into this, let us state that the Euro-Western people with their un-linear and analytic bent of mind will acquiesce that there is one knowledge, science, theory, method. The point being made here would be clearer when we notice how D.W. Hamlyn in his book, *The Theory of Knowledge*, attempts to grapple with a question he raised himself thus, “why then a theory of knowledge, what are the philosophical problems about knowledge”. Hamlyn argues that the problems devolve into two, namely, “what knowledge is and what we understand by the term knowledge”.<sup>6</sup> Then of course, he goes on to intimate the main problems of the theory of knowledge as;

- i. Those concerning the nature of knowledge
- ii. The general conditions that must be satisfied by any genuine claim to knowledge.

The interesting thing for our purpose about Hamlyn's argument is that the only people qualified to legislate or proffer answers to the above problems are:

Those with the relevant specialist knowledge or by those who have the techniques or knowledge of the methodology appropriate for the discovery of the truth in question. Hence, the theory of knowledge is, among other things, a set of defence works against scepticism of the very possibility of knowledge.<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, possession of techniques or knowledge of methodology seems to betray Hamlyn's interest and admiration of the Enlightenment project of reason and the criteria of knowledge as belonging to the Euro-Western. But Theophilus Okere, an African philosopher, has pointed out the revised image of epistemology and science after the searing critique by notable scholars like Thomas Kuhn, Paul Feyerand, Richard Rorty and others. According to Okere with the new image it has become necessary to say that:

Scientific knowledge is socially constructed, constructed by cultures, worldviews, locations, ... Science should be aware that it is necessarily partial in the representation of its objects and a full account of reality would include every perspective. It should be wary of flaunting credentials of objectivity, neutrality, transparency and universality. Nor should (it) see itself as superior to alternative epistemologies or scoff at indigenous knowledge systems as... superstitious, irrational or mythical.<sup>8</sup>

### **Deconstructing Western Narratives**

Our interest here is to explain some African and non-African scholars to deconstruct and re-right the Western narratives on Africa with a view to telling the African story as they are. According to Abiola Irele the colonial situation as whole was a collective political and cultural oppression (and) the literature of negritude became, as a result, a testimony to the injustices of colonial rule and an expression of the Blackman's resentment".<sup>9</sup>

Another critical point of the critique of Western imperialism, science and knowledge came from Linda. T. Smith who tries to contextualise some key concepts, which are employed by Western imperialists to discuss alien cultures and indigenous peoples. These include imperialism, history,

writing and theory.<sup>10</sup>

According to Smith, these concepts from the “indigenous perspectives are problematic, apart from provoking a whole array of feelings, attitudes and values”.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, Smith, remarks that;

Decolonisation is a process which engages with imperialism and colonialism at multiple levels. Having been immersed in the western academy which claims theory as thoroughly western, which has constructed all the rules by which the indigenous world has been silenced. The act, let alone the art and science, of theorizing our own existence and realities is not something which many indigenous people assume is possible.<sup>12</sup>

Similarly, M.B. Ramose, an African Philosopher, in what he calls, “the struggle for reason in Africa”, castigated the attempt by the Euro-Western peoples to exclude non-European peoples like Africa from the compass of reason, in spite of Aristotle's declaration that “man is a rational animal”. Based on this it is clear that Ramose is prepared to uphold the view that;

The liberation of reason from the irrationality of scientific racism imposes the duty to recognise that the Aristotelian definition of human being must apply to and be equally valid for all human beings where they are without this recognition there is little chance for building and sustaining world peace.<sup>13</sup>

The question is: what is to be done? We argue that African scholars and others interested in African themes to articulate African philosophy and other African themes in African terms. This is true of what Kwasi Wiredu, in his later works, is doing in what he calls “conceptual decolonisation”. This is taken to mean on the negative side “reversal through a critical conceptual self-awareness, of uncritical assimilation in African philosophy of those categories of thought embedded in the foreign languages, and on the positive side it means the exploitation of the resources of our indigenous conceptual schemes in our thinking on the problems of philosophy.”<sup>14</sup>

### **Sample of Igbo (African) Epistemology**

Some African philosophers have proposed that there is an African epistemology or theory of knowledge. By this, it means that there is a way of knowing that is uniquely African. This view is criticised and rejected by

some analytic African philosophers who argue that ascribing a unique epistemological mindset to the Africans does not pulsate with the lived experiences of Africans. The Igbo terms “*amamife*” which putatively translate “knowledge” and “belief” in English are used to express their understanding or opinion of the facts in the world.<sup>15</sup> Thus, *amamife* (knowledge) is used by the Igbo to explain those things or events for which they have good reasons and which can be verified through common sense perception or observation. This is first-hand information since the person witnessed the events and is prepared to provide evidence and justification for his claims. Here justification is based on perception which is obtained through the five senses. So, when the Igbo say the *mfuru na anya ma uche kwado kwa ya* (What is seen with my eyes and which my mind or consciousness supports it), then they can claim to know it. *Nchekwube* (belief) on the other hand, is used by the Igbo to express those things which they accept on trust, faith and confidence for which there is no reliability or certainty. Such second-hand information like reports from other people are regarded as not reliable. However, the Igbo attitude to report from the testimony or reports from *ndichie* (elders) *Ozo* (titled holders) and *dibble afa* (native doctors) is different since they regard such reports as true and reliable, though derived from second-hand information.

### **Inductive Reasoning in Igbo**

It is important to state here that direct sense perception and testimony as discussed above do not exhaust the sources of knowledge in traditional Igbo thought. For we have inductive reasoning which is often ignored in the treatment of African thought. By inductive inference in Western philosophy, it is meant a procedure in logical and scientific research in which we make judgment concerning a phenomenon or event from a mere observation of a particular fact to a conclusion covering a large number of instances or cases. Put differently the inference which is drawn here usually starts from a particular instance to a general law. The Igbo believe that past experiences provide sufficient ground to infer what will happen now and in the future. Also, they believe that the external world exists independently of them (realism) and will continue to exist. This is the significance of their saying; *Uwa ebi ebi* (world without end). A three-legged goat that is presented to an Igbo man will obviously contradict his past experiences that all goats have four legs and hence he has every reason to doubt his present

sensory experience and all epistemic beliefs based on it.

Another instance of inductive reasoning among the Igbo is exhibited when, as agrarian farmers, they observe that each year there is a long period of rainy season, which usually starts from (*onwa anoo na afo afu*) month of April in the new year to (*onwa irii*) month of October. Having successively observed the cycle of the year including wet and dry seasons, they (Igbo) are able to plan their activities which include agricultural operations and ceremonies like the *Ahajioku* festival (New Yam Festival), which apart from celebrating yam as the king of crops, shows the rich cultures of *Ndigbo* (Igbo people). What the Igbo man engages here is the use of scientific reasoning to arrive at certain conclusions in his world.

### **Conclusion**

Let us conclude by saying that the Igbo make a distinction between knowledge (*amamife*) and belief (*nchekwube*) and there are procedures for validating the epistemic status of their claims which is parallel to Western epistemological canons.



### Endnotes

1. Hamlyn, D.W. *The Theory of Knowledge* London: The Macmillan Press Ltd. 1970, pp. 3-10.
2. Irele, A. *The Negritude Movement Explorations in Francophone African and Caribbean Literature and Thought* London: Africa World Process, 2011, p. 42.
3. Ibid.
4. Hegel, G.F.W. *Philosophy of History* New York: Dover Publications, 1956, p.99.
5. Masolo, D.A. *African Philosophy in Search of Identity*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994, pp.4-5.
6. Hamlyn, D.W. *The Theory of Knowledge*, p.4.
7. Ibid, pp. 4-9.
8. Okere, T. *Philosophy, Culture and Society in Africa* Nsukka, Nigeria: Afro-Obis Publications Ltd, 2005, pp. 159-160.
9. Irele, A. *The Negritude Movement Explorations in Francophone African and Caribbean Literature and Thought*, pp. 44-45.
10. Smith, L.T. *Decolonising Methodologies Research and Indigenous Peoples*. New York: Zed Books Ltd., 1999, pp. 19-20.
11. Ibid., p.20.
12. Ibid; pp. 20-29.
13. Ramose, M.B. *African Philosophy Through Ubuntu* Harare; Zimbabwe: Mond Books, 2002, p.10.
14. Wiredu, K. *Conceptual Decolonisation in Africa 4 Essays* Selected and Introduced by Olusegun Oladipo Ibadan: Hope Publications, 1995, p.7.
15. Udefi, A. An Analysis of Some Contemporary Alternatives to Traditional Epistemology in *Kaygi Journal of Philosophy* Vol. 12 (2009, p.22.

### Bibliography

- Hamlyn, D.W. *The Theory of Knowledge* London: The Macmillan Press Ltd. 1970, pp. 3-10.
- Hegel, G.F.W. *Philosophy of History* New York: Dover Publications, 1956, p.99.
- Irele, A. *The Negritude Movement Explorations in Francophone African and Caribbean Literature and Thought*, London: Africa World Process, 2011, p. 42.

- Masolo, D.A. *African Philosophy in Search of Identity*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994, pp.4-5.
- Okere, T. *Philosophy, Culture and Society in Africa* Nsukka, Nigeria: Afro-Obis Publications Ltd, 2005, pp. 159-160.
- Ramose, M.B. *African Philosophy Through Ubuntu* Harare; Zimbabwe: Mond Books, 2002, p.10.
- Smith, L.T. *Decolonising Methodologies Research and Indigenous Peoples*. New York: Zed Books Ltd., 1999, pp. 19-20.
- Udefi, A. An Analysis of Some Contemporary Alternatives to Traditional Epistemology in *Kaygi Journal of Philosophy* Vol. 12, 2009, p.22.
- Wiredu, K. *Conceptual Decolonisation in Africa 4 Essays* Selected and Introduced by Olusegun Oladipo Ibadan: Hope Publications, 1995, p.7.