

# Epistemic Deference and African Indigenous Knowledge Production

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## Abstract

*Rationale of Study* – It is frequent to find in African indigenous knowledge production, instances of giving credence to the belief of another other than oneself, and accepting such belief as justification of one's own epistemic claim. The argument pursued in this paper is that each epoch of the African has a reservoir of indigenous knowledge that is capable of meeting the demand of the continent at every point in time. The significance of doing this is to complement existing literature on African epistemology generally, making it logically coherent to conclude that epistemic deference is more relevant than has been acknowledged.

*Methodology* – The paper has employed critical analysis and hermeneutic interpretation of theoretical data and data from history and culture of Yoruba (African) people.

*Findings* – The paper argued in strong terms against the adoption of all pieces of acclaimed knowledge on the ground that since such were not conceived with Africa in mind, they will not yield what is desirably African. The position maintained in the paper is similar to the coherence theory of knowledge. It is a position that knowing does not take place until an idea had been conquered, internalised and coheres with one's system and previously acquired knowledge on the level of the individual.

*Implications* – This paper helps towards making the complementarity between truth, knowledge and epistemic difference a holistic organic system deeply and uniquely situated in African ontology.

*Originality* – The paper has employed critical analysis and hermeneutic interpretation of theoretical data and data from history and culture.

## Keywords

Indigenous knowledge, epistemic deference, knowledge production, Yoruba

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## 1 Introduction

It is not infrequent to find instances of giving credence to the belief of another other than oneself, and accepting such belief as justification of one's own epistemic claim. In such instances, it is regardless of how different or similar the knowledge claim is to ours. Such instances are treated as mutual contradictions, and the mutually opposite agents are regarded as sceptics in the dominant Western cannon. In African indigenous systems, it is regarded as an indication, at least, that epistemic deference could be relevant than being merely dismissed as scepticism and therefore could be a veritable tool for knowing. In spite of its recognition in the African cultural systems, it has for so long escaped the attention of scholars of African Indigenous Knowledge Production Systems to pay scholarly attention to it.

This paper further argues that epistemic deference does not necessarily imply that the person to whose belief one defers necessarily knows more than the deferrer at every instance. Unlike in the dominant lineal conception of knowledge of Western cannon in which the deferrer, often referred to as the sceptic, either knows or opposes knowledge (Oluwole, 2014). By so doing, one forecloses the chances of getting additional information from the supposed sceptic and runs the risk of losing some bits of information which at the moment is not relevant but could be useful in the next moment. It simply means that as it pertains to a particular epistemic issue at a given time, the one to whom one defers knows or has had the benefit or chances of epistemic access to what the deferrer claims to know, plus some additional fact(s) that the deferrer does not know. To achieve the promise objective, the paper has employed critical analysis and hermeneutic interpretation of theoretical data and data from history and culture of Yoruba (African) people.

This paper works with two basic assumptions, namely, that epistemic activities are human actions and as such, that they are activities within the human community. In a traditional system, the primary concern is on providing solutions to the challenges of daily experience. With the passage of time, such solutions amount to the cultural heritage of such people. This cultural heritage is what is handed down from one generation to another and, with further passage of time it could become modified or jettisoned when it becomes incapable of supporting the daily challenges of individuals or of the community.

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Some of the earliest discussions around the issue of indigenous knowledge system in Africa relate to whether there is any such thing as indigenous knowledge, authentically critical reasoning or rational thinking with mental rigour (Tempels, 1969). Some scholars even refer to it as aborigine knowledge, others call it traditional knowledge rather than philosophy (Bodunrin, 1985). It can now be better understood when Wiredu referred to African philosophy as a philosophy in the making (Wiredu, 1980, 16-36 *as used in* Oyeshile, 2008, p. 57-64). Debate soon evolved into discussions around the question of whether only systems of the ages past are the only ones that qualify to be called indigenous knowledge. While some scholars put forward some theoretical agitation that a piece of knowledge is indigenously African if the creator is indigenously African (Onyewenyi, 1996; Oluwole, 1989, p. 207-231) and some are simply saying that issues around the indigenous knowledge in Africa is tantamount to a call for renaissance. In some ways, debate has outgrown those stages now. This explains why Olatunji (2010) questions whether primitivism is indigenous to Africans.

While the debate at the latter level has remained relevant and unresolved, there are even more fundamental issues that are urgent and compelling. Some of these are: can an acquired knowledge be regarded as indigenous knowledge? How can an ignorant person ever come to know if such a person never knew? With the rise of the catchphrase “African solution to African problems”, how is non-indigenous knowledge production possible and relevant to Africa? What exactly are indigenously produced knowledge expected to address differently? This paper rather than taking on all the aforementioned issues prefers to address itself to a specific aspect that makes African Indigenous knowledge production AIKP unique to Africa.

In this paper, we also have considered how this is practised in the African traditional setting where elders, by the virtue of the age and experience, pass knowledge to younger generations in the form of oral traditions based on the people’s interaction with all elements in their worldview. The validity of such epistemic products lies on the fact that what the elder knows is drawn from the communal knowledge of the people. This makes epistemic deference a common phenomenon among African. This paper further shows that knowledge production, that is, the outcome of African traditional experience, is of an immense value, but is lacking in imported or indigenised knowledge production. This is why the paper is not an advocate of the latter. As a piece in theoretical philosophy, it is assumed that the result of an enquiry is significantly predetermined by the method and

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approach. Nevertheless, hermeneutic method remains one of the least value-laden starting points, and as a result, this paper attempts to employ the hermeneutical analysis method in order to make the result as objective and disinterested as required of a work in philosophy. Aside this introduction, the article is divided into three. The first part scrutinises the African ontology, the second part examines the African Indigenous Knowledge Production and the third part makes a critically examination of the Value of Epistemic Deference in AIKP before inferring the conclusion.

## **2 African Ontology**

A consideration of African ontological commitment is important for an appreciation of an African investigation on knowledge and knowledge acquisition. African ontology pertains to how Africans perceive reality. Africans do not consider reality as one entity with diversity of manifestations, but a composition of both empirical and non-empirical things. According to Jimoh and Thomas (2015), this implies that for the African, there is more to reality than what is within the realm of empirical inquiry (p. 114-133). This belief of Africans also determines their mode of inquiry and emphasis on a harmonious relationship between the multiple of entities. This commitment to the belief in the varieties of existents is the concern of ontology as the science of being. Does this make ontology different from metaphysics? A simple distinction between ontology and metaphysics is that while the former is the conception of being, the latter is the study of being, a method of inquiry or investigation into what is.

In all African societies there is a strong belief in the spirit world (Nkemnkia, 1999). For the African, reality extends beyond the empirical existents. Africans believe in the existence of a realm of reality which though transcends the empirical, has an influence in the physical world. This realm of existence consists of supra-sensibility world of conscious gods, spirits, divinities and ancestors whose activities are considered to have effects on the physical world inhabited by man, animals and nature.

Hence, Asante (2000) avers that “there are several elements in the mind of Africa that govern how humans behave with regard to reality: the practicality of holism, the prevalence of poly-consciousness, the idea of inclusiveness, the unity of worlds, and the value of personal relationships”. Similarly, Njoku (2006, p. 221-241) remarked that there is an emphasis on a harmony of all with all – humans and non-humans. For him, what he refers to as harmony of peace is an environment where things co-penetrate and co-mingle with one another. According to Jimoh and Thomas (2015), the philosophy of

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integration and principles of understanding, as well as aesthetic continuum of the African cultural world constitutes trustworthy knowledge and reality. In classical African philosophy, there is a concrete existence of man and nature. African tradition only talks about two entities in terms of conceptual numerical and not in terms of separate ontological existence. It is impossible for the African to separate man from nature. They are sacredly united. In this unity, they both participate in the same locus without being opposites. So, the African world is a unitary world against the analytical and pluralistic world of Western thought.

Man occupies the central position in this coherent link, and he is, therefore, responsible to ensuring harmony between the two varied but complimentary modes of existence. Hence, Owusu-Ansah and Mji (2013) speak of the spirit of African worldview as including wholeness, community and harmony which are deeply embedded in cultural values. Elders in the African traditional system are specially charged to ensure that everyone maintains unity among these beings. As custodians of the cultural heritage, they have the responsibility to teach and ensure that everyone conforms to the dictates of harmonious relationship. This collective responsibility has an implication in their epistemic activities. In other words, since the emphasis is more on a group than an individual's claim to knowledge, African communities build their epistemic tradition around collective memory. That is why it is usually easy for them to defer to collective knowledge received from elders who are considered as occupying a place of significance in the midst of other elements that make up the African world.

### **3 African Indigenous Knowledge Production**

Indigenous knowledge production refers to the epistemic enterprise aimed at understanding and providing answers to the puzzles of life among a particular group of people within their environment. Indigenous knowledge is the cumulative body of strategies, practices, techniques, tools, intellectual resources, explanations, beliefs, and values accumulated over time in a particular locality, without the interference and impositions of external hegemonic forces" (Emeagwali, 2014, p. 1-17). It refers to cognitive claims by the natives of a particular place who are culturally distinct and have occupied the territory before the arrival of a new population that has its own distinctive and dominant culture. Kaya (2014, p.1) aptly sums this up in these words:

*...the way learning is perceived and how people actually learn is culturally specific. Different cultures have different ways and experiences of social reality and, hence, learning. This is*

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*influenced by their worldview and belief systems of the natural environment, including the socio-economic and ecological context of their livelihood. These culturally and locally specific ways of knowing and knowledge production are often referred to as traditional, ecological, community, local knowledge systems, and so on.*

According to Semali and Kincheloe (1999), indigenous knowledge reflects the dynamic way in which the residents of an area have come to understand themselves in relationship to their natural environment and how they organise that folk knowledge of flora and fauna, cultural beliefs, and history to enhance their lives. It basically concerns how people respond to their experience. That justifies the claim of many scholars that knowledge is usually situated within a group and how they experience the world around them. For instance, Ogungbure (2013, p. 12-20) opines that human knowledge is a cultural phenomenon because enlightenment and sophistication, which are aspects of the cultural experience, are acquired through social means of education and the beliefs, customs, norms and traditions of a people are preserved, and transmitted through this medium from one generation to another.

Indigenous knowledge, according to Hooper (2005), is manifest in every sphere of life, as such it is “a synergy of knowledge and practices, whether explicit or implicit, used in the management of socioeconomic, ecological and spiritual facets of life, stored in the collective memory and communicated orally among members of the community and to the future generations [through, stories, myth, and songs, among others]. It is, therefore, the sum-total of the accumulated knowledge, or wisdom within a given communal, social or traditional setting. In this vein, Ogungbure (2013) holds that human knowledge is a cultural phenomenon because enlightenment and sophistication, which are aspects of the cultural experience, are acquired through social means of education and the beliefs, customs, norms and traditions of a people are preserved, and transmitted through this medium from one generation to another.

Since indigenous knowledge is a product of a people’s history within a geographical location, it is the product of the understanding of the dynamics and inner workings of their immediate environment over long period of time (Adesiji, 2011). According to Mapara (2010, p.139-155):

*Indigenous knowledge systems are a body of knowledge, or bodies of knowledge of the indigenous people of particular geographical areas that they have survived on for a very long time. They are knowledge forms that have failed to die despite the racial and colonial onslaught that they have*

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*suffered in the hands of Western imperialism and arrogance. They are knowledge that was swept aside, denigrated by the colonialists and their sciences as empirical and superstitious as they sought to give themselves some form of justification on why they had to colonise other people's lands.*

African indigenous knowledge, sometimes referred to as African indigenous epistemology, is the system of knowledge processes and practices done in African categories and concepts. This system covers epistemic investigation, understanding, assimilation, and attribution on African conception of reality that is distinctively African and philosophical (Jimoh, 2018). It is about the meaning and understanding of the African concerning knowledge claim. Such knowledge claims are closely connected to, and more often than not, situated within the African conception of reality. African indigenous knowledge production pertains, therefore, to the web of how they make meaning out of the reality while employing the tool of rationality of inhabitants of a geographical area that is unique to them in every regard.

It is, therefore, a social and collective form of knowledge production, and an individual participates in it through the society. Owusu-Ansah (2013) explained this as follows: a person becomes human only in the midst of others and seeks both individual and collective harmony as the primary task in the process of becoming a true person (Owusu-Ansah & Mji, 2013). Being communitarian, it emphasises, is the interrelatedness and interdependence of all phenomena. Jimoh (2018) describes this as 'epistemological communitarianism' or communitarian epistemology – a situation in which the community, rather than the individual, is the primary bearer of knowledge.

In addition to its social outlook, indigenous knowledge is passed on from one generation to another in the form of tradition and heritage, and people in each era adapt and add to it (Jimoh, 2018) in the context of community living and activities. In the process of adaptation, each epoch contributes not through an adjustment in the truth of the epistemic claim, but an adaptation or application of the epistemic claim for pragmatic purposes. The implication of this is that the African system of knowledge is knowledge through participation. This explains why the indigenous knowledge system is not a set of static, accumulated, cognitive claims, but is an accumulated set of cognitive claims that are adjusted continuously and passed on to subsequent generations to provide survival strategies (Hooper, 2005) suitable for each era. So, all men and women in the community speak with one voice and share the same opinion about fundamental issues (Hountondji,

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1996). On the other hand, Gbadegesin (1988, p. 293-305) and Gyekye (1987) argue that individual persons within the community do not fade into communal or cultural apparatuses. They have the capacity to express their own individual judgements, or to re-evaluate communal goals, values and practices. However, he does this in the consciousness of leaving room to accommodate inherited philosophical truth.

African philosophers recognise oral tradition as vital in its activities of passing its epistemic values from one generation to another. According to Kwasi Wiredu (2009, p. 8-18):

*... an oral tradition is a transmission of ideas from generation to generation using the spoken word and any associated devices short of writing. On this showing, proverbs, of which there is superabundance in African culture, are an obvious item in the oral heritage. They frequently have a philosophical significance, apart from the commanding beauty of their epigrammatic terseness. Also, they often contain wise, practical advice.*

Ikuenobi (2018, p. 23-40) adds that relevant knowledge, beliefs, ideas, values, and practices in African cultures were taught and learned from everyday lived-experiences, parables, myths, proverbs, stories, folklore, folk tales, musical lyrics, funeral dirges, and other forms of narratives. These encompass sophisticated arrays of information, understanding, and interpretation that guide interactions with the natural milieu: in agriculture and animal husbandry, hunting, fishing, natural resource management, conflict transformation, health, the naming and explanation of natural phenomena, and strategies to cope with fluctuating environments (Semali & Kincheloe, 1999, p.1-56). Other aspects that express rich complexities of oral tradition in African knowledge parlance include community ceremonies and rituals, namely, story-telling, proverbs, folktales, recitation, demonstration, sport, epic, poetry, reasoning, riddles, praise, songs, word games, puzzles, tongue-twisters, dance, music, and other education-centred activities (Ngara, 2007, p. 7-20).

Despite this, oral tradition is often, although erroneously, looked down upon relative to the written tradition. This is partly because indigenous knowledge is mainly oral and not written, and partly because it is people-centred and sometimes not so easily 'measurable' (Emeagwali, 2003). It has been mistaken by many as simplistic and not amenable to systematic scientific investigation. Masolo (2003, p. 21-38) rightly captures this by saying that "in the wake of the written word, which was foreign, the oral, which was indigenous, had slipped into irrelevance".



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#### 4 The Value of Epistemic Deference in AIKP

An offshoot of the relatively recent advocacy and recognition of testimony as a reliable source of knowledge on the same pedigree with sense perception and the like is epistemic deference. Scholars have argued that it is sometimes irrational to think for oneself - that rationality sometimes consists in deferring to epistemic authority and, consequently, in passively and uncritically accepting what we are given to believe (Hardwig, 1985). Hence, it is possible to base one's belief on another person's belief. James (2015) defines epistemic deference as the phenomenon in which one person uses the deliverances of some information source, perhaps the opinions of another person, as a model for what to believe (p. 187-206).

In line with this principle, the one being deferred to is usually considered as knowing something more the one who defers. Ikuenobe (2018, p. 23-40) rightly puts it thus:

*This principle indicates that, if one has good reasons to believe that others, as reliable experts, authorities, or epistemic superiors, have good reasons for a belief, then one has good reasons and it is rational to believe what the experts believe justifiably.*

Epistemic deference in African system is a lifelong experience that is acquired informally. In African traditional practice, elders occupy the position of and are rightly considered as reliable experts, who assumed the position of credible authority based on their age and experience. Their age warrants them to be considered as possessing a wealth of wisdom, knowledge, experience evident in good judgment and moral character. For this reason, they are considered as the custodian, source and repositories of the knowledge, history, beliefs, and values in African cultures and, they pass these to younger generations. Children defer to elders as guides towards growing into responsible adulthood. However, it requires a conscious effort of all that a child grows by participating in the common wealth of the people as embedded in the cultural practices.

According to Ikuenobe (2018), elders (not just one elder, but some agreement among many elders) in African communities have the trust as authorities, reliable sources of knowledge, and reliable vessels of transmitting knowledge. They have the communal responsibilities of providing the justifications for, upholding, and ensuring the maintenance and adherence to cultural beliefs and traditions for communal well-being and harmony, as well as helping to impart relevant values and knowledge on children, to help them attain moral personhood. As mentors and role models, elders can impart wisdom by advising and guiding children, and implicitly or explicitly providing the

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explanatory, historical, and justificatory bases in tradition for principles, which specify and prescribe requisite behaviours, values, practices and moral duties.

## **5 Conclusion**

The argument pursued in this paper is that each epoch of the African has a reservoir of indigenous knowledge that is capable of meeting at least the minimum demand of the continent at every point in time. The paper argued in strong terms against the adoption of all pieces of acclaimed knowledge on the ground that since such were not conceived with Africa in mind, they will be incapable of reliably yielding what is desirably African. The position maintained in the paper is similar to the coherence theory of knowledge. It is a position that knowing does not take place until an idea had been conquered, internalised and coheres with one's system and previously acquired knowledge on the level of the individual. In the same vein, an idea does not become knowledge for a society until the idea has been conquered, internalised, indigenised and it coheres with existing systems of knowledge. Suffice it to say that only indigenous knowledge is truly knowledge. Put differently, externalised or person-independent knowledge is impossible. Even if it is possible, it is not relevant to one's life situation. In the same way, a culture independent knowledge is impossible, and even if it is possible, it remains equally irrelevant to a people such as Africa.

That explains why the paper argues, in strong terms, against the adoption of all pieces of acclaimed knowledge on the ground that since such were not conceived with Africa in mind, they will not yield what is desirably African. At best, such moves will be a subtle form of neo-colonialism and tantamount to regression and against self-development. Therefore, the paper distances itself from such voices that proposed Feyerabend's Philosophy of Anarchism as a paradigm for African development (Akpan, 2005, p. 45-64). Such views do not recognise that Africans have a heritage of what is needed for her sustenance and development. The recommendation of this paper is that Africans should look inward to recognise, appreciate and utilise the material contents imbedded in heritage of the elders are worthy custodians. This will give credence to recognising and deferring to the elders in their capacity as 'experts' on epistemic activities and who consequently pass this on to the younger generations. This explains why as children begin to mature into adolescence, there is a concerted effort to educate them about the communal ways of life and the basis for deference to, and dependence on, elders as

moral and epistemic authorities who are the sources of all forms of traditional knowledge and values (Ikuenobe, 2018, p. 23-40).

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