

African indigenous knowledge: Philosophy in history and history in philosophy

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Babatunde Olatunji Oni

Ladoke Akintola University of Technology, Ogbomoso
booni24@lautech.edu.ng
ORCID 0009-0009-5790-8830

Titilope Olusegun Olalere

Ladoke Akintola University of Technology, Ogbomoso
toolalere@lautech.edu.ng
ORCID 0009-0002-9633-2521

Abstract

Rationale of Study – This paper delves into the interconnectedness of African indigenous knowledge, situating its historical roots and the inherent philosophy embedded in its practice. African indigenous knowledge encompasses formulating a definition of knowledge in an African context and the justification of knowledge, which has its stand on cultural, linguistic, aphorism, and proverbial content. Scholars, however, argue that its historical foundation lies in the depths of time, tracing back to the ancient civilisations that thrived across the continent. On the other hand, its philosophical discourse serves as the guiding force behind the practices and beliefs of various communities. Within this purview, this paper sets out to close this gap.

Methodology – This paper adopts primary and secondary data sources, including oral information, books, articles, and journals. However, it uses argumentative and analytic philosophical and historical inquiry methods to highlight that African indigenous knowledge is pivotal in preserving historical and philosophical insights.

Findings – The study finds an interlink between history and philosophy in advancing African indigenous knowledge and its practice of knowing and justifying the indubitable truth that cannot be objectively attained in Western epistemology.

Implications – The study contributes to the existing debate that the wisdom embedded in proverbs, myths, and folklore is a repository of philosophical principles, offering guidance on ethics, social harmony, and the relationship between humanity and nature through historical insights.

Originality – The paper concludes that African indigenous knowledge has its own social and cultural dimension. It addresses the problem of knowledge by dividing its domain into rational, empirical, and mystical components, solving the problem of justification in the African context.

Keywords

Aphorism, beliefs, ways of knowing, oral traditions, empiricism, rationalism, African society

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1 Introduction

Epistemology is the theory of knowledge (Dancy, 1985, p. 1), and to describe epistemology as a theory of knowledge is to justify our knowledge claim by analysing and providing a source in which such knowledge is acquired (Mautner, 2000, p. 280). Thus, epistemology deals with analysing sets of facts as principles that guide understanding knowledge-related issues (Anselm, 2017, p. 5). Put differently, epistemology is primarily concerned with what is known, how it is known, and the justification of what it claims to know. In the Western world, it is important to note that 'how we come to know what we claim to know' becomes a puzzle needing clarification of knowledge (Laleye, 2008, p. 117). This problem does not exempt African conceptions of knowledge and justification.

This paper advocates the dichotomy between scientific (Western) knowledge and indigenous African knowledge to resolve the problem of knowledge and justification. It also demonstrates the close relationship between two interrelated disciplines: philosophy and history, on the one hand, and the use of philosophy and history in acquiring African indigenous knowledge, on the other hand.

It is paramount to note that the existing relationship between philosophy and history gives historians an edge in using philosophical paradigms in their search for knowledge (Kaphagawani & Malherebe, 2003, p. 259). The implication of this is well articulated in the words of Simon Ehiabhi (2007, p. 64) that "Every living thing performs an act or another that can qualify such action as either conscious or reflexion of knowledge" that is, while history inquires human confirmation and conservation, philosophy probes into the inner nature of the historical analysis. It is in the light of the above standpoint that this paper construes African indigenous knowledge as integral to the realisation of the survival of man with due cognisance to those beliefs that are institutionalised in a particular culture or community to enhance the growth, progress, and development of the individual in particular and humankind in general.

Given the above, Dretske (2000, p. 12) identified beliefs and other ways of knowing as a product of culture through language and the circumstances of people's lives that play important and complementary roles. This assertion forms the bedrock of recognising knowledge any community generates as epistemologically and historically relevant in their day-to-day activities. As earlier stated, the paper attempts to demonstrate that history and philosophy have more in common than differences in their methodological foundation by

defining the meaning of both disciplines, with the understanding of what constitutes African indigenous knowledge and how to search for it in both disciplines.

2 Rationale of the study

It is sometimes wondered why philosophy and history can be regarded as interrelated disciplines. Indeed, there are reasons for this, some of which may border on the concepts of definition, nature, and scope of the two disciplines. In complementing each other, while history stands out to trace “when” in historical analysis, philosophy answers “how” in justifying the “when” (Barzun & Graft, 1962, p. 2). This section discusses philosophy and history alongside their meeting points in acquiring and applying African indigenous knowledge.

There are two approaches to defining philosophy - philosophy as the first order and philosophy as the second order. However, the discussion in this paper conceptualises the first order, which tends to approach life issues through evaluation, analysis, and clarification of thought. It should be noted that philosophy provides an opportunity to examine the use and meaning of concepts, ideas, issues, and problems in our experience as human beings. On this note, Staniland (2000) defines philosophy as a “criticism of the ideas we live by.” This assertion raises another question: How? Specific answers may not be provided for this question yet; professional dignity forbids any to reply, “I do not know.”

An expression such as “my philosophy is to live a simple life” expresses a principle of life one claims to be living. From the above, philosophy is defined as a guiding principle that one adheres to and lives by (Akinawonu, 2006, p. 5). Philosophy can also be explained as a belief we live by in life. That is, philosophy explains some beliefs that explain how we view our world and its interpretation. Beliefs of this sort are usually left unexamined, though they express some life principles. This approach pictures Socrates' dictum: “An unexamined life is not worth living.” A belief is held that when a person collects raindrops with his palm, he will be struck by thunder. This belief has been held for years in traditional African society, particularly by the Yoruba people of southwestern Nigeria. But suppose an individual who holds such a belief is called upon to provide a critical justification for holding such a belief, that is, a connection between two disparate events, namely, “collecting raindrops with palms” and “thunder strikes”. Thus, those individuals who hold this belief will like to justify their positions based on historical and philosophical standpoints.

It is interesting, so it may be amusing that practitioners of both disciplines do not have common grounds of agreement as it concerns the definition of philosophy and history. The absence of a generally accepted working definition of the subject matter opened the floodgate for multi-dimensional definitions of concepts. A glance at the concept of philosophy and history will probably give us a clearer picture of why every philosopher and historian has a relative conception of their disciplines. The term philosophy is derived from two Greek words, *philos*, meaning "love", and *Sophia*, meaning "wisdom" (Akinnawonu, 2006, p. 8), and when the two words are combined, it means "love of wisdom", first employed by Pythagoras in about 600 BC to qualify those who keenly observed and made meaning out of their observations (Miller, 1993, p. 2).

This same Greek concept of seeking wisdom is also applied to the study of history, as one of the ancient Greek historians, Herodotus, used the term "philosophein" (Odimegwu, 2006, p. 8) as *historia* - to mean investigation or inquiry. According to Herodotus, "History is science in the form of inquiry" (Erim, 2004, p. 14). By combining the two disciplines, we can infer that every seeker of wisdom would investigate at every point in time because knowledge is believed to be an infinite dynamic and, in some cases, perishable. It is from this perspective that this study examines a plethora of definitions. It is also paramount to note that a perusal of some definitions of philosophy confirms the position of this study. For example, Fadahunsi and Oladipo (2004) see philosophy as a process of higher thinking that makes one conscious of himself, his environment, and the value of knowledge acquired. Heidegger's (1953, p. 45) opinion is that philosophy is about rationalising every claim to arrive at more improved knowledge. During the Socratic period, philosophy came to be identified with contemplative enterprise; that is, the role of reasoning faculty in human learning is rational. Epicurus (341-270 BCE) sees philosophy as a medium of attaining happiness through a rational inquiry, while Wittgenstein (1951) sees it as sentence construction. For Russel (1970), philosophy is a way of answering life questions. Sodipo (2004, p. 8) defines philosophy as reflective and critical thinking about the concepts and principles we use to organise our experience in morals, religion, social and political life, law, history, and the natural sciences. From the above definitions of scholars, it can be inferred that philosophy means a guiding principle of conduct, a quest for understanding, and a reason for pursuing fundamental truth. Thus, philosophy seeks to establish a standard of evidence, provide natural methods of resolving conflicts, and create techniques for evaluating ideas and arguments.

On the other hand, a glimpse into the definition of history presents the same scenario. Collingwood (1946, p. 3) says history is “res gestae”, the study of man's actions in the past. Carr (1981) defines it as “a continuous interaction process between the historian and the fact, an unending dialogue between the present and the past.” According to the above definitions, history is the study of the past, the present, and the understanding of the future, not only to simplify the compilation of facts but, at best, to discover the general principles in which man lives in his environment.

3 Methodological approach

Every aspect of knowledge in history and philosophy highlights the concept of African indigenous knowledge. For the historian, knowledge is acquired when 'facts' are ascertained after data have gone through the crucible of identification, collection, organisation, synthesis, and interpretation of evidence before the historian can accept it as factual (Olorunfemi, 2006, p. 14). Historical knowledge is mostly considered a “series of accepted judgments based on logically interpreted facts” (Collingwood, 1978, p. 14). The case is not different with philosophy, as Dancy (1985) aptly argued Plato, who defined knowledge as justified true belief. Epistemology is the area of philosophy that focuses primarily on evaluating the reliability of knowledge that is deemed to exist.

The problem of objectivity is peculiar to these disciplines. Thus, objectivity for a historian means obtaining “perfect or certain knowledge”, which, in historical accounts, is free of all personal biases or devoid of impartiality in which the historian is neutral or detached (Olorunfemi, 2006, p. 14). Brodbeck (2022, p. 36) succinctly puts this forward when he asserts that “it is impossible to have perfect knowledge in any discipline of study, whether in the humanities or science, because knowledge is infinite”. In the same way, the Sophists during the ancient Greek period built up their refutation of certainty and objective knowledge, which Simon Ehiabia referred to as “perfect knowledge.” Thus, the central thesis of the traditional epistemologist is that the chances of certainty in epistemic claims are sceptical. So, the desire for perfect or certain knowledge no longer demands epistemological relevance. It is paramount to note that the gulf between the rationalist and the empiricist is exposed because of the attainment of indubitable knowledge. The question that needs to be asked is: How do we know?

In seeking knowledge, philosophers and historians have given different methods and processes by which knowledge can be sought. However, the discussion here will be limited to philosophical and historical methods that answer the problem of objectivity in

knowledge. Philosophers believe there are two major ways to acquire knowledge: (i) rationalism - the power of reasoning - and (ii) empiricism - using the senses to acquire knowledge. The rationalist contends that reason can transcend the limitations that limit the possibility of establishing a secured foundation of knowledge. On the other hand, empiricists believe that our knowledge of the external world, which contains trees, chairs, dogs, and men, can only be known through our senses. Certainly, both are needed, the senses and reason, to understand the knowledge of the world we live in.

In seeking knowledge for the historian, they combine both ways of acquiring knowledge to investigate events and appraising their material sources for historical research. According to (Stephen & Bamikole, 2021, p. 67), these materials for historical investigation are grouped into two categories: the archaeological sources and the verbal. The objectives of the research influence source materials for historical research. Historians, when researching pre-literate societies, usually solicit verbal sources for facts, while archaeological sources come in handy when researching literate societies. It should be noted that facts and documents from these sources are essential but do not yet constitute historical knowledge; rather, they are mere “raw material” until they have been processed through the rigours of historical methodology. On this note, knowing these two interrelated disciplines gives an edge to indigenous knowledge viewed from an African perspective. However, this paper aims to discuss African indigenous knowledge from two different disciplines, as well as related methods of construction, which can be preserved for further investigation.

4 In search of African indigenous knowledge: a discourse in history and philosophy

Historians have established that there is no substitute for the history of African people (Mudimbe, 1988, p. 17). This means the African continent exists by structure, history, culture, politics, and morals. Notably, there have been different debates on Africa's social, political, technological, and philosophical development. Paramount to this discourse is African indigenous knowledge and the concept of traditional knowledge in a general sense.

African indigenous knowledge was coined from the general term “traditional knowledge.” According to (Ogungbemi, 2008, p. 91) who argues that just as smoke is the by-product of cigarettes, so is African indigenous knowledge an offshoot of traditional knowledge. Stephen and Justin (2003, p. 3) define traditional knowledge as “the information that people in a given community gives, based on experience and adaptation to a local culture and environment, have developed over time and continue to develop.” This knowledge is

used to sustain the community and its culture and to maintain the genetic resources necessary for the continued survival of the community. It is apparent quickly that the term "tradition", as it is used in this context, connotes the traditional-based knowledge of a specific culture. Thus, knowledge is traditional in this regard because it is created in a manner that reflects the traditions of the communities, therefore not relating to the nature of the knowledge itself but how that knowledge is created, preserved, and disseminated.

On this premise, African indigenous knowledge is an African form of collective knowledge. It is often considered the property of the entire community, not belonging to any single individual within the community. In this paper, African indigenous knowledge is construed in terms of its contextualism thesis. The above view implies that African indigenous knowledge is transmitted through specific cultural and traditional information exchange mechanisms, such as maintained and transmitted orally through elders or specialists, and often to only a few people within a community.

African indigenous knowledge, as proposed by Emeagwali (2023, p.3), refers to local knowledge unique to a given culture and acquired by local people through the accumulation of experiences, informal experiments, and an intimate understanding of the environment in that culture. From the above view, African Indigenous knowledge is a cultural-based concept that needs historical and philosophical perspectives to acquire and practice.

There are two ways in which African indigenous knowledge can be sourced; these are: the mute- any physical object without words (Lalonde, 1989, pp. 156-157) and the verbal- which means any written or spoken medium that constitutes knowledge (Lalonde, 1989, pp. 1156-157). In the formal, African indigenous knowledge can be derived from the past and present without necessarily reading them from the text. This natural physical indigenous knowledge includes forests, groves, streams, rivers, lakes, hills, valleys and mountains. For instance, it is general knowledge in the African context that flowing rivers cannot flow backwards. As this belief has its historical undertone, it also has a philosophical explanation. Thus, if it had not been for the indelible archaeological sources, most of Africa's cultural and historical knowledge probably would not have been critically examined.

In Africa, some of the afore-claimed belief knowledge can be historically and philosophically raised questions of "why and how" (Ugwuanyi, 2006, p. 45); for instance, the propitiation sacrifices in the forest, rivers, lakes and mountains require further

investigation. Closely related is the application of archaeological discoveries, which have helped greatly to bring to light knowledge from the artefacts of the distant past. It is on this note that this paper argues that one of the best ways to verify the validity/invalidity of some African indigenous knowledge from verbal sources is to cross-check and reconcile with archaeological sources because these primary sources cannot be doctored since they are “concrete representations or relics of the historical fact, observable by the senses” (Eluwa, 1988, p. 24).

With archaeological excavations, African Indigenous knowledge can be sourced and practised from written and oral sources. One of the arguments levelled against the existence of African philosophy, which does not exempt African indigenous knowledge, is a lack of documentation. These problems, among others, were identified by Oladipupo (2021, p. 6) when he affirms that the existence of African philosophy, which is paramount to African indigenous knowledge, is confronted with several problems ranging from the problem of definition, problem of documentation, problem of rationality, problem of methodology, problem of language, and problem of logical questions among others. In throwing all these problems associated with African philosophy ditto, African indigenous knowledge into the wind as Oladipupo (2021) noted, Bodunrin (1981) and Hountondji (1983) maintained what Makinde (1989) aptly urges that the debates on whether African philosophy or African indigenous knowledge exist or not had been laid to rest and thus, fruitful discussions of substantive issues in Africa have taken its place.

In affirming the above submission by Makinde, to argue that oral and written tradition are sources of African indigenous knowledge can be justified by historians that oral sources or information about African indigenous knowledge come in two varieties, either as eyewitness accounts or second-hand information. The former deals with oral sources or information from direct or indirect participants in acquiring knowledge, while the latter concerns age-old information narrated from generation to generation. Vansina (1965) succinctly categorised this oral tradition of acquiring African indigenous knowledge into some of the following: forms, formulae, poetry, lists, tales, commentaries, myth, legend, song and popular history. Written sources are more revered because they tend to be more specific and permanent in their information about why and how events occurred, and these are regarded as oral accounts.

Hountondji (1983, p.30) also well captured the assertion in his definition of African philosophy as a “set of texts, specifically the set of texts written by Africans and described

as philosophical by their authors.” Based on the above, one can note that African indigenous knowledge must transcend oral tradition. However, his argument suggests documentation through literature without which no one engagement could qualify as African philosophy or history. One crucial way of learning about traditional African Indigenous knowledge, especially among the Yoruba of the Southwestern Nigerian system, is through Ifa Corpus. To the Yorubas, Ifa is observed as the god of wisdom (Abimbola, 1977, p. 30). The knowledge of Ifa is all-encompassing, which can be known through the Odu (verses) and is both historical and philosophical. According to Oluwole (2017, p. 13), Odu Ifa is the work of over 256 ancient Yoruba philosophers and intellectuals. So, African indigenous knowledge is knowledge by divination by which a priest inquires about the past, present and future of what is claimed as knowledge (Oluwole, 2017, p. 13). This inquiry of knowledge from Ifa can be known through historical and philosophical methodological sources. Hence, African indigenous knowledge through the Ifa corpus is substantive and has its domain of truth and knowledge generated through Ifa divination, which serves as a solution to the problems of justification among the Yoruba.

5 Conclusion

African Indigenous Knowledge offers a rich tapestry of philosophy intertwined with history, demonstrating a reciprocal relationship between the two. Through African indigenous knowledge, a profound insight is gained into how African communities have understood and interacted with the world around them over millennia. This knowledge underscores the importance of recognising diverse epistemologies and valuing the contributions of non-Western traditions to global thought. Furthermore, African indigenous knowledge challenges dominant narratives and invites a more inclusive approach to philosophical inquiry that acknowledges the interconnectedness of past and present, local and global. It becomes evident that philosophy and history are not isolated disciplines but complementary lenses to understand the complexities of human existence and the dynamics of knowledge production. Embracing African indigenous knowledge enriches our understanding of the human experience and fosters a more holistic approach to scholarship and dialogue. It is apparent that no discipline or branch of knowledge is superior to the other, and all disciplines seek knowledge through their methodological perspective. However, what appears to differentiate between the two disciplines is how practitioners perceive their disciplines, which consider African values, knowledge, interest aspirations, and physical environment. However, Africans place a special interest in their

methods of knowing. To a large extent, this has been working for them through their historical background and philosophical approach.

The implication of the above discussions is to contribute to African epistemology, which includes the African conceptions of the nature of knowledge, how knowledge could be gained, how one can justify an epistemic claim or validate a knowledge claim, and the role that knowledge plays in human existence through the disciplines of history and philosophy with a spirit of philosophical and historical orientation that emphasis coexistence with nature rather than conquering, collectivism above individualism. This paper advocates that it is ideal to delve into traditional life forms to solve contemporary problems, such as governance, political and social organisation, and ethics, through studying history and philosophy.

6 Recommendations

In view of the above finding, which establishes the strong inter-link between philosophy and history, the study recommends that the African Indigenous knowledge system admit metaphysical, social, and historical conditions of knowledge. It also provides a more comprehensive account of human knowledge than the other theories of knowledge, with a deeper understanding of truth justification.

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