

## The Rationale for an African Epistemology: A Critical Examination of the Igbo Views on Knowledge, Belief, and Justification

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### Abstract

The idea of African epistemology just like the larger discourse of African philosophy (especially in its early beginnings) still faces some challenges. One of the challenges centers on the proper meaning and adequacy of the idea. No doubt this difficulty has instigated some misgivings about the discourse prompting some philosophers to either reject it outright or accept it with reservations. I believe that part of the misgivings of African epistemology borders on the meaning ascribed to it by the advocates of the concept which is fluid and inappropriate with the present realities of Africans in their interaction with the rest of the world.

Part of our business in this paper is to dispel this unfortunate attitude and perception towards African epistemology through a careful reconstruction and delineation of the meaning and nature of African epistemology in a way that accords with the true situation of Africans and as such reflects their correct ontological and epistemological conceptualization. This is buttressed by some insights drawn from Igbo traditional thought system which in all intents and purposes chimes with other epistemological systems elsewhere.

**Key words:** African epistemology; Belief; Knowledge; Culture; Igbo

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### 1. AFRICAN EPISTEMOLOGY AND ONTOLOGY, EARLY DISCOURSES

Roughly speaking, the idea of an African epistemology as understood by those who propose it is taken as a way the African conceptualizes, interprets and apprehends reality within the context of African cultural or collective experience (Anyanwu, 1983, p.60). The idea of African epistemology is based on their (its advocates) acceptance that such concepts as knowledge, truth, rationality etc. can be interpreted using African categories and concepts as provided by the African cultural experience without a recourse to Western or alien conceptual framework. Thus this epistemology is abstracted from the collective worldview of Africans and leaning essentially on such materials as myths, folklores, proverbs, folk wisdom etc..

It is important to note that the discourse of African epistemology can be subdivided into two phases; namely its early beginnings and later attempts. In its early beginnings, the scholars whose works are associated or linked with this view, who were mostly religious clerics and theologians include, Placide Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy* (1959); E. Bolaji Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief* (1962); W. E. Abraham, *The Mind of Africa* (1966); J. B. Danquah, *The Akan Doctrine of God* (1968); John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (1969) among others. The intention of these scholars was to argue that African epistemology or way of knowing flows from African ontology and ultimately to establish that Africans had an idea of God even before Europeans came to Africa, apparently refuting the so-called civilizing mission of the Europeans with its dominant ideology which ascribed a pre-logical mental frame to the Africans and other non-Western peoples during the hay day of colonialism.

This early discourse of African epistemology attempted to link the African mode of knowledge with African ontology. In other words both are intimately related making it inconceivable to understand one

without a prior knowledge of the other. Onyewuenyi, an African philosopher from Nigeria and defender of African epistemology, argues that African theory of knowledge follows closely upon ontology (Onyewuenyi, 1976, p.525). He goes further by saying that True wisdom, according to Tempels, who pioneered the discourse of African epistemology, lies in ontological knowledge, it is the intelligence of forces, of their hierarchy, their cohesion and their interaction (Ibid). It is in this direction that Tempels' (1959, p.21) explication of Bantu philosophy and ontology, where he attempted to show that reality in Africa is invested with "life or vital-force" features prominently in the formulation of African epistemology. This view tends to suggest that an understanding of the African mode of knowledge should pay due attention to the background of African spiritualistic and dynamic metaphysics. Perhaps this is what John Mbiti (1969, p.1) had in mind when he made the now discredited statement that "Africans are notoriously religious" because of their extreme emotional and mystical disposition, and also by virtue of their insertion into an organic environment.

Even much earlier than Mbiti, Tempels, as discussed above, had stated that the idea of force was central to the life and world view of the Bantu. In fact, the Bantu cannot conceive of being without its attributes, force. Hence, he surmised that reality in Bantu in particular and Africa in general is enmeshed in the idea of force. As he stated

I believe that we should most faithfully render the Bantu thought in European language by saying that Bantu speak, act, live as if, for them, beings were forces, force is not for them an adventitious, accidental reality. *Force is even more than a necessary attribute of beings. Force is the nature of being, force is being, being is force* (Tempels, 1959, p.35).

Even though Tempels's analysis of Bantu Philosophy is criticized and even rejected by some African philosophers and scholars as not being a true reflection of an indigenous African thought system, and unwittingly justifying the alleged difference between European and African as arrogantly stated by earlier European anthropologists and given philosophical impetus by some philosophers, its import can hardly be missed which according to Abiola Irele (1998, p.110) "provided the model and conceptual framework for the construction of an original African philosophy and has remained a central reference of philosophical debate in Africa".

However, Tempels's propositions have been challenged by an indigenous African scholar, Alexis Kagame (1966, pp.10-20) who set out not only to critically verify and reformulate Tempels's claims concerning Bantu ontology, but also to bring it in line with the present realities of Bantu (Africa) Kagame, while appealing to Aristotle's categories in disclosing the epistemological basis of Bantu world-view using their linguistic codes or idioms, outlined "four fundamental categories of Bantu thought" namely; *Muntu* or Man (i.e being endowed with intelligence); *Kintu* or animals, plants (i.e being without intelligence);

*hantu* or space or time and *kuntu* or modality. Thus, Kagame argued that those terms were indicative of implicit thought processes and vehicles of an explicitly philosophical discourse based upon terms in the Rwandan oral tradition" (Cf. Irele, 1998, p.111).

Now the Tempelsian notion of vital-force is echoed in the epistemology implicit in Senghor's negritude -a term which both he and Aime Cesaire of Martinique regarded as representing in a functional sense, the effort of the Negro-African to recover for himself and for Africans in Diaspora, a self-pride and confidence shattered for centuries by the adventure of the colonizer and the resulting political and cultural devaluation. Senghor was not too consistent in his definition of negritude, in one sense, it is taken as "a metaphysics of a black identity, an African personality and a black soul," In another sense, it designates "a kind of epistemological anthropology and a political philosophy (Wiredu, 1998, p.98). Thus if all these are weaved together, it comes down to a single definition of negritude by Senghor (1964, p.72) as "the sum total of the values of the civilization of the African world. What is obvious from the views of the negritude theorists is a strong defense and affirmation of African values and civilization. This idea is reverberated in Alioune Diop's definition of negritude as 'the complete ensemble of values of African culture and the vindication of the dignity of persons of African descent. (Cf. W-Allen, 1962, p.30).

Again, what Senghor intends to achieve with his theory of negritude is now crystal clear when the theory is taken to be a kind of systematic exposition of the values of traditional Africa as they are embodied in thought systems and mentality as well as social institutions of the Negro-African. According to Senghor, at the epistemological level, there is a preponderance of African's exhibition of strong sensibility and emotional disposition. The African, apart from his affective participation in the object, does not draw a clear-cut distinction between himself and the object, or as Senghor (1964, p.72) unequivocally stated, " he (African) does not hold it at a distance, nor does he merely look at it and analyse it, as the European would do; rather he touches it, feels it, smells it." Senghor argues that the emotive response of the African is an act of cognition in which the subject and object enter into an organic and dynamic relationship and in which intense perception through the senses culminates in the conscious apprehension of reality. As he remarks:

...the Negro-African sympathizes, abandons his personality to become identified with the other, dies to be reborn in the other. He does not assimilate: he is assimilated. He lives a common life with the other; he lives in a symbiosis' (Ibid.).

Actually, Senghor argues that modes of knowledge or forms of thought as constituted by each race are different since they are rooted in the psycho-physiological make-up of each race.

Thus the Cartesian dictum: “I think therefore I am” is inapplicable to the African who will rather say “I smell, I dance the other, I am”, according to Senghor. Based on the African Sensual participation in the object, which Senghor acknowledged as ‘the best mode of knowledge’ he unavowedly proclaimed that “Emotion is African as Reason is Hellenic. (Cf. Irele, 1983, p.18). No one is left in doubt that Senghor was prepared to allow two forms of reason between European and African. Whereas European reason, according to him, is analytical, African reason is intuitive. Senghor (1965, pp.33-34) further avers that

The life-surge of the African, his self-abandonment to the other is thus actuated by reason. But here, reason is not the eye- reason of the European, it is the reason by embrace which partakes more of the nature of logos than ratio... *classical European reason is analytical and makes use of the object, African reason is intuitive and participates in the object.*

As it is expected, Senghor’s claim that “European reasoning is analytical, discursive by utilization, African reasoning is intuitive by participation”, though contradictory and ambivalent, no doubt generated a lot of controversy and odium from African intellectuals who felt thoroughly embarrassed by such reckless statement which has no basis in experience and theory. The untoward consequences of Senghor’s statement above are obvious. Apart from denying Africans any capacity for engagement in rational discourse and a reduction of the African mode of knowledge to sensuality and emotion, it also unwittingly justifies, in a poetic manner, Levy-Bruhl’s ascription of child - like and ‘pre-logical mental frame to the Africans.

Nonetheless, in the face of criticisms and challenges to Senghor’s position by African intellectuals, he retorted by saying, apparently modifying his earlier claim of Africans incapacity for discursive and critical analysis,

...in truth, every ethnic group possesses different aspects of reason and all virtues of man but each has stressed only one aspect of reason, only certain virtues. No civilization can be built without techniques. Negro African civilization is no exception to this rule (Ibid, p.75).

Senghor even argues that the Negro-African method of knowledge is traditionally dialectical and akin to the three main laws of thought in logic namely; the principles of identity; non-contradiction and excluded middle.

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## 2. AFRICAN EPISTEMOLOGY, LATER DISCUSSION

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Turning to the recent discussion or analysis of African epistemology, we see some African scholars and professional philosophers engaged in the conceptualization and theorization of African epistemology as opposed to the earlier attempt which was dominated mainly by theologians and poets. Now two approaches are proposed here for the study of African epistemology. One of these

uses Western concepts and categories to interpret African experience. The other, relativist in orientation and outlook, attempts to study African epistemic system adopting African culture, concepts and categories. What the African philosophers who use the first approach do is to seek for African equivalent of some Western concepts and graft same into African experience. For instance, the rationalist and empiricist theories of knowledge are accepted by the advocates of this view as applicable to Fanti, Yoruba and Igbo philosophy etc. In other words, both reason and sense experience, notable sources of knowledge in western philosophy, are taken to give knowledge about African reality. However this approach is criticized, particularly by P. K. Roy (1986, p.1) who argues that it is not enough to show how certain African belief, for example in innate principles or ideas supports rationalism, but to demonstrate through critical analysis and “argumentative approach how such belief is used or arrived at by the Fanti or Yoruba or Igbo.

One of the major contributions to the discourse of African epistemology is Robin Horton’s (1967, pp.155-187) classic paper “African Traditional Thought and Western Science,” where he argues that African religious ideas have some explanatory models as that of the scientific ones. In other words, pre-colonial African religious ideas could be “understood as constituting a body of theory whose fundamental aim, like that of Western science, were explanation, prediction and control of the phenomena of everyday life” (Cf. Appiah, 1998, p.117).

Horton’s real intention was to avoid the ethnocentrism characteristic of earlier anthropologists and to place African traditional thought on the same explanatory pedestals with Western scientific cultures against the intellectualists who have ascribed primitive and pre-logical mental frame to the non-Western peoples and to some extent the symbolists who accepted that traditional beliefs were “symbolically rational and true”. He, however, argues that what distinguishes, scientific theory from African traditional thought is that the former appeals to non-personal and inanimate objects exemplified in theoretical entities like atoms and molecules in its explanation of phenomena, while the latter bases its explanation of reality on personal and human agencies typified in human beings, gods and spirits. Another distinguishing feature of African and Western scientific cultures according to Horton, (1993, p.223) lies in the fact that African thought is closed while Western science is ‘open’ apparently articulating Karl Popper’s ‘open and closed societies’ predicament to show that a closed society is characterized by “a lack of awareness of alternatives, sacredness of beliefs and anxiety about threats to them” and whereas in open society or system, there is a highly developed awareness of alternatives, and less threatened or worried by the possibility of change.

A significant work of Wiredu, which is germane for our discussion here is his paper ‘The Concept of Truth



in the Akan Language'. Here, Wiredu tries to elucidate the epistemology of the Akan using the concept of truth. He discusses the Akan rendition of truth from its moral and cognitive aspects. But it seems the former is more noticeable amongst the Akans than the latter. Hence the Akan word *nokware* translates the English truthfulness, rather than truth and its opposite *nkontompo* which translates lies instead of falsity in English language. According to Wiredu (1985, pp.43-55) 'the Akan has correlated the word truth with a primarily moral rather than cognitive concept of truth in the Akan language. Wiredu adduces three reasons for this complication as firstly, the main pre-occupation with truth in the traditional Akan society was moral, secondly, the moral concept of truth presupposes the cognitive concept of truth and thirdly, the English word truth itself is ambiguous (Ibid). It is pointless going into controversy with Wiredu since the writer does not understand Akan language, but it is Wiredu's argument that both moral comment or connotation and communal unanimity or agreement embedded in truth by the Akans is an epistemological aberration (Ibid, pp.44-45). But it seems that the cognitive aspect of the concept of truth in Akan is fraught with some problems, since according to Wiredu,

...here we meet with a remarkable fact, which is that there is no one word in Akan for truth. To say that something is true the Akans simply say it is so, and truth is rendered as what is so... This concept they express by *nea ete saa*, a proposition which is so. (Ibid, p.46).

Now Wiredu's claims have been disputed by J. T. Bedu-Addo, a fellow speaker of the Akan Language. Bedu-Addo's critique of Wiredu, it seems, centers on two points namely; language evolution and linguistic conventions in natural language. Bedu-Addo discounts Wiredu's view that in Akan the opposite of *nokware* (truth) is *nkontompo* (lies), not falsity as we find in English by arguing that it may be correct to say that, at the moment the Akans may not have one word for what is not true (false), but the Akans have and indeed say "*enye nokware*" meaning it is not true which can also be used to convey '*eye nkon tompo*' (it is a lie). Again, it is his contention that

...in Akan, statements that are *nkontompo* (lies) constitute a sub-set within the set of statements that are said not to be *nokware*; just as in English, lies constitute a sub-set of the set of statements that are said not to be true (Bedu-Addo, 1985, p.72).

Also Bedu-Addo controverts Wiredu's rejection of the "oneness of voice" that is purported to be involved in the word *nokware* by reinterpreting it "as a purely linguistic phenomenon that does not involve any epistemological aberration on the part of the Akan (Ibid, p.73). In the same vein, he maintains that the Akan notion of 'being so' or what is supports not only the correspondence theory of truth but also the 'picture theory of meaning'. He argues, contrary to Wiredu, who had alluded that in Akan there

is not a single word standing for the English fact that what resembles the fact is the image produced by the use of the words in the minds of people who understand the language, that is, to say if the statement "it is raining heavily" is true if it corresponds to a fact, but false if it fails to correspond to a fact or state of affairs or situation (Ibid, p.80).

Another contribution to the literature on African epistemology and/or philosophy is Barry Hallen's and J. O. Sodipo's (1986) classic book "*Knowledge, Belief and Witchcraft*," where they attempt, in their words, to conceptually analyse three key words or concepts central to Yoruba thought. These are *aje*, *imo* and *igbagbo* which putatively translate in English witchcraft, knowledge and belief respectively. However *imo* (knowledge and *igbagbo* (belief) will interest us here since they bear on Yoruba propositional knowledge. Hallen and Sodipo, following W.V.O. Quine's distinction between observation and standing sentence, argue that the Yoruba make a distinction between knowledge and belief or opinion. According to them, whereas *imo* is derived through a first-hand information, observation and sense-experience and is capable of being verified, confirmed or falsified, *igbagbo* on the other hand, is gotten through second-hand information, though could later become *imo* after rigorous empirical testing, confirmation and verification etc..

In terms of ranking, knowledge in Yoruba is based on sensory perception, particularly visual perception (i.e *irinn*) of the external world. In other words what someone sees, when conjoined with cognitive activities or mind (i.e *eriokon*) like understanding, comprehension, judgment, consciousness, then propositions pertaining to such experience are regarded as true (i.e *ooto*) (Hallen, 1998, p.832). *Igbagbo*, on the contrary, is based on second-hand information. Thus the evidence or justification for *igbagbo* is based on what one is taught in the course of a formal education, what one learns from books, the media, other people and oral tradition" (Ibid, p.833).

Now if someone's *imo* (knowledge) or *igbagbo* (belief) is disputed, the first thing to do towards the resolution of the problem is to test the claims through empirical verification and justification. In other words some people may be invited to testify or give evidence on the matter. Of course the people invited to give evidence must be people of high moral integrity and good character (or *iwa*). The point being made here is that the evidence or explanation (i.e *alaye*) given by people of good character is more reliable than the one given by people of questionable character or even criminals. The approach adopted by Hallen and Sodipo in their research experiment, as they would regard their work rather than being called fieldwork, is to go into "collaborative analysis" with the *onisegun* (herbalist and native doctor) whom they regard as their traditional colleagues because of their intellect as well as extraordinary practical skills (Solomon & Higgens, 1995, p.276).

However, certain claims of Hallen and Sodipo in their work have been disputed. A.G.A Bello (1988, p.94) for instance, rejected the radical translation situation created by the duo and the choice of *onisegun*, who though understands Yoruba, but not English Language and thus incapable of providing a correct translation. Hence, according to him, “the choice of *onisegun* is not particularly auspicious since they are not more qualified than other groups of Yoruba intellectuals. He then submitted that Hallen and Sodipo should have tried to identify persons with philosophical ability, that is, individuals who might or might not have had exposure to Western education, but should be richly endowed with Yoruba literary and folk culture, perhaps some combination of the *akewi*; *babalawo*, and *onisegun* (Ibid, p.98) will suffice.

Another critique of Hallen-Sodipo came from Moses Oke (1995, p.210) who, apart from pointing out the incorrect translations of *imo* and *eri okon*, disputed predicating the supposed Yoruba epistemology on empiricism. This according to him, is fraught with some problems bordering on the phenomenological problems of perception like illusions, hallucinations, mirages, after images and relativity of perception etc. Again, the other problem is how to reconcile an apparently subjective (idealist) epistemology with a practically demonstrated realist ontology (Ibid), since the Yoruba seem to hold that the external world exists independently of being perceived, that sense experience is the sole source of our knowledge of the phenomena of the world. It seems that Yoruba thought system is vitiated by the same problem afflicting George Berkeley’s *esse est percipi* (to be is to be perceived).

However, in order to ensure the continuous existence of matter or phenomena of the external world, it is necessary to tie it to the activities of the mind (*okon*). So even when sense-experience disappears, the human mind is able to remember and recollect what has happened and thus correlates the present and future experience with past experiences, that is, induction (Moses Oke, 2004, pp.25-36). Equally problematic is the privacy of experience or solipsism implicit in Hallen - Sodipo. In order to overcome the problem of knowledge emanating from I and I alone without sharing my experiences with others, Oke (1995, p.214) suggested that rather than constructing “perception and empirical knowledge as “being private and subjective, it is better to regard them as socially and objectively grounded upon determinate conceptual schemes according to relevant epistemic contexts.

Apparently, Barry Hallen (1998, p.201) responded to Oke by saying that since Yoruba culture and African culture in general still depend on oral tradition, it is an “empirical observation that propositions come out of mouths.” According to him, given such a cultural environment the reliability of propositions may involve

assessing the moral character of the person who is its source, whose mouth it issues from (Ibid, p.202). Hence the correlation of the epistemological and moral concepts in ‘Yoruba discourse’. Equally instructive in Hallen-Sodipo is their desire to challenge the paradigm of Western epistemological concepts which hitherto have been taken as universal and which have stunted the growth and recognition of non-Western and indeed African modes of thought. This endeavour will assist philosophers in and around Africa to evolve alternative African concepts and categories which, albeit right in their own terms, are at par with Western concepts and categories on the cross-cultural scale of rationality (Ibid, p.203).

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### 3. UNIVERSALIST OR UNIQUE AFRICAN EPISTEMOLOGY?

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#### 3.1 Traditionalist Approach

Some African philosophers have proposed 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 (Udefi, 2005, p.74). What we shall do in this section is to analyse the respective views of the particularists who propose for a unique African epistemology and the analytic African philosophers who argue for a more Universalist African epistemological system. Of course their views here, in terms of their affirmation and denial, reflect their conceptions of philosophy.

The starting point or premise on which those African philosophers, particularly K. C. Anyanwu, I. C. Onyewuenyi and others based their argument for a distinctive or unique African epistemology is the proposition that each race is endowed with a distinctive nature and embodies in its civilization a particular spirit (Irele, 1981, p.70).

Since, according to them, there are different mindsets, namely; Western mindset and African mindset, it would be presumptuous to assess African thought on the criteria developed within the context of Western cultures. It is their contention that how each culture interprets experiences can be explained by uncovering those assumptions and concepts which underline its experience and world-view.

For the protagonists of African epistemology, the dichotomy or lacuna that is said to exist between the epistemic subject and the object in the Western philosophy is absent in African thought. In fact there is some kind of interdependence and interpenetration of the self (man) and the external world, such that what happens to the one, happens to the other. This point is stated by Ruch and Anyanwu. Thus,

The self vivifies or animates the world or mind so that the soul, spirits or mind of the self is also that of the world. The order of the world and that of the self are identical. What happens to the world happens to the self (1981, p.87).

According to Anyanwu the relation is not accidental, since in African culture, there is no sharp distinction between the subject and object. He argues, instead, that within the African cultural or historical situation, the self is the center of the world and hence every experience and reality are personal experience unlike the impersonal and scientific experience of the West. The kind of personal experience which Anyanwu alludes to here transcends reason, imagination, feeling and intuition in the sense in which Descartes used them as sources of knowledge. However, African epistemology, according to him, embraces all experiences derivable from different sources of knowledge namely; sense perception, imagination, intuition, reason, among others. The inability of Anyanwu to separate or categories experience with reference to the source of knowledge even when the subject and the object remain the same exposes him to attack (Roy, 1986, p.3). But the anticipated problem is ameliorated since Anyanwu (1983, p.60) holds a holistic view of knowledge which presupposes a unity of experience and in tune with African cultural assumption where “reality depends on personal experience and the world has meaning, order and unity by virtue of the living experience of the ego.”

The notion of epistemological monism implicit in the views of the protagonists of African epistemology might create the impression that the African cannot draw a line between himself and other objects in the external world. But on the contrary, the African knows that there is a distinction between him and other objects like trees, mountains, stones and wood. On this point, Ruch and Anyanwu say:

Because everything is a vital force or shares in this force, the African feels and thinks that all things are similar, share the same qualities and nature. (But) it does not mean that the African does not know the distinction between a tree and a goat, a bird and a man (1981, p.90).

Also, it is important to note that both the experiencing self, the object of experience and the cluster of forces intervening in the act of knowing in Africa is governed by the law of causation. Even though the African may not attempt to seek a rational explanation in all things like the Western man with a scientific cast of mind, he (African) is not impervious to such rational causal explanation. For instance, the African adduces a physicalistic explanation to explain the cause of a certain illness just like the Western man. However, in some cases he supplements this explanation with a reference to divinities, magic, witchcraft and other mystical powers.

The advocates of a unique African epistemology, it should be noted, anchored their argument on a prior conception of philosophy which they view “more contextually, that is, as expressions of the world-views and thought patterns of specific cultures (Hook, 199, p.12).

### 3.2 Universalist Perspective

Turning to the Universalist or analytic African Philosophers, we see a passive acceptance or denial of the idea of African epistemology as propounded by its advocates. This attitude is not accidental but is informed by their background conception of African philosophy in particular and philosophy in general. Since the universalist group see philosophy as a rational and critical study of which argumentation and clarification are its essential hall marks, then it is only natural that they would reject as inadequate the idea of African epistemology since, as we stated above that this epistemology depicts the way the African responds and interprets events in his cultural environment.

In fact, the Universalist African Philosophers’ rejection of African epistemology can be summarised thus,

- i. There are no distinctive cognitive principles belonging only to this or that society.
- ii. Knowledge cannot differ from one society to another.
- iii. If we call something knowledge, then it is true for all people, anywhere, at any time.
- iv. The criteria by which we decide the truth or falsity of a claim like, “it’s raining” (are) the same across cultural contexts.
- v. There may well be ways in which communities differ with regard to the institution of knowledge but these are not epistemologically important.
- vi. Epistemology, wherever it is practiced, is the same, and just as one does not find a distinctively Chinese or American or African mathematics, so, too there is no such thing as a distinctively African epistemology (Kaphagawani and Malherbe, 1998, p.206).

As stated above the universalist (analytic) African philosophers’ rejection of African epistemology is hinged on their conception of philosophy and its relevance which, according to them transcends the limits of the cultures and times of the philosophers who produced them, despite the fact that those philosophers were giving critical attention to the intellectual foundations of their own cultures (Gyekye, 2004, pp.23-24).

Having seen the respective positions of the particularist and Universalist African philosophers with respect to the discourse of African epistemology, which, we argued above, are underpinned by their conceptions of philosophy, we think that it is pointless for each group to dogmatically insist on its position. There is need for some flexibility since there are both elements of particularity and universality in epistemological conceptualization. Even though the advocates of a unique African epistemology may have a point in contextualizing knowledge and rationality since there is a sense in which we can say that philosophical ideas and insights arise out of the historical and cultural experiences of a people, but the problem



here is that it will scuttle or undermine the possibility of exploiting the intellectual resources, ideas and values as well as institutions of other peoples. Again, ontologically speaking, our common humanity which presupposes that certain values, experiences and characteristic features are common to all human beings makes the position of the champions of a unique African epistemology unattractive and unilluminating. The universalists who urge, on the contrary, for the universality of knowledge, rationality, justification, truth and belief because all human beings “share certain basic values and perceptions” among others irrespective of whether they inhabit Africa, Asia or Europe are right since according to Kwasi Wiredu, (1990, p.8) the frogs of Europe are the same as the frogs of Africa”. Similarly Steven Lukes (1967, pp.247-264) and Martin Hollis (1967, pp.231-247) had earlier argued that all men, irrespective of their historical and cultural circumstances, must accept the universal logical rules and methods of drawing inference since no rational man will affirm both P and not P (P→P) at the same time.

Also applicable is modus tollens

$$\frac{P \longrightarrow q}{\frac{p}{q}}$$

Let us restate the point of our argument in this paper by saying that although there is an African epistemology just as we have African ethics, aesthetics, metaphysics, political thought, African literature etc. to the extent that it reflects the cultural and lived experiences of the African peoples, but such epistemology cannot, by this factor, be said to be unique such that Africans are cocooned from any form of interaction with the rest of the world.

#### 4. SPECIMEN OF IGBO EPISTEMOLOGY

We now come to the examination of how the Igbo, an ethnic group in the South East Nigeria, conceptualize reality, that is, Igbo epistemology which, as we shall see, is not in contradiction or opposition with Western epistemology. In every epistemological system or study, one is bound to find such core notions as “knowledge, justification, truth, belief, ideas, intentions, explanation, understanding, experience and human action” etc. One term which encapsulates all these is rationality which again is found, one way or the other, in all societies and conceptual systems. Igbo thought is no exception to this since they attempt to validate their knowledge following certain epistemological canons as found elsewhere.

The Igbo terms ‘*amamife*’ and ‘*nchekwube*’ which putatively translate ‘knowledge’ and ‘belief’ in English are used to express their understanding or opinion of the facts in the world. 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 *ihe mfulu na anya ma uche kwado kwa ya* (What I see 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 reports from the testimony or reports from *ndichie* (elders) *Ozo* (titled holders) and *dibie afa* (native doctors) is different since they regard such reports as true and reliable, though, derived from second-hand information.

#### 5. 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 two-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 ofu*) 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 *Ndiigbo* (Igbo people). What the Igbo man engages here is the use of scientific reasoning to arrive at certain conclusions in his world.

One thing that our discussion of the Igbo distinction between *amamife* (knowledge) and *nchekwube* (belief) has revealed is the relationship between *amamife*

(knowledge) and *ezi-okwu* (truth). What the Igbo claims to know is what, in the final analysis, is the case or true. So when the Igbo man says, *amam na enwe bi na ofia ma buru kwa ezi-okwu* (I know that monkeys live in the forest and it is true), it is taken that knowledge involves some element of truth. Hence the Igbo would almost equate *onye amamife* (knowledgeable person) with *onye ezi-okwu* (truthful person).

However the Igbo would not refer to *onye asi* (a liar) as knowledgeable and the reason is that both knowledge and truth are regarded as possessing divine and moral status. This is in keeping with their saying, *ezi-okwu bu ndu* (truth is life). So in order to verify the truth of a claim or event, it is not enough to see how propositions correspond with facts or the weight of superior logic of the argument but it is important to consider the person's *omume* (character), that is, his moral standing within the community is paramount.

Even though, we argued above that *ncchekwube* (belief) relies essentially on testimony or second-hand report from other people and is usually held on trust, and faith, but nonetheless can qualify as knowledge after deliberate effort to empirically test and corroborate the information obtained from them. The process of empirical testing and corroboration begins with a comprehensive examination of the proposition with what others have said and in accord with *omenani ndi* Igbo (Igbo tradition and custom). Thus the Igbo attach different epistemic certainty to experience or proposition. In other words, what someone experiences or sees with his eyes at first-hand coupled with mind or cognitive apprehension of it is taken as a reliable way of knowing and is regarded as true (*ezi-okwu*). The next reliable is *ncchekwube* (belief) which, though derived from second-hand information, is capable of being empirically tested and verified. However *ncchekwube* (belief) that can never be verified is the least certain. There are occasions when the Igbo believe that the various ways of knowing may not be exhaustive, particularly when certain human problems are concerned like witchcraft, sickness, death, infertility and other forms of misfortunes. Here the Igbo attempt to provide explanation or justification by a recourse to (*arusi*) oracle and other spiritistic and paranormal ways of knowing, though the Igbo do not regard them as authoritative and unassailable system of truths. There is the temptation to accuse the Igbo of supernaturalism since they invoke explanation which is unreliable and inaccessible to scientific and empirical testing as well as transcending all epistemological canons. But this criticism is rash and presumptions since the Igbo perfectly attribute some death to natural causes like old age, prolonged illness etc. Also they know that certain sickness (*oya*) like malaria (*iba -ocha*) is caused by factors such as hard work (*olu-ike*) or stress (*oke-echiche*) and as such begin a process of prognosis by administering some herbs and concoctions (*mgbaraogwu*) to cure them.

The attempt by the Igbo to appeal to spiritistic and human or personal agencies should not be dismissed with a wave of the hands, for what they try to do is to offer explanation (*nkowa*) on what seems to defy scientific solution like spirit (ghost) and witchcraft (*amosu*) attack. But we must state that this attitude is not peculiar to the Igbo and indeed African, for other societies, including Western scientific ones, exhibit similar kinds of belief. For instance people who believe in God offer prayers to him to intervene in their daily affairs, keeping at bay evil spirits and accidents as well as other misfortunes. Even Rene Descartes, a notable French philosopher, and some ancient philosophers like Thales and Pythagoras amongst others, appealed to God and some occult substances respectively apparently to establish some knowledge of the existence of the external world. So the invocation and consultation of oracle (*arusi*) for the validation of certain epistemic claims is in tune with their *omenani* (custom and tradition) which seems to agree with what H. H. Price (1967, p.49) calls the "volitional and emotional factors or cultural elements in knowledge validation".

So the traditional Igbo thought (epistemology) cannot be dismissed as radically different from the Western ones because of its (former) appeal to non-physical forces, (English, 1999, p.86) oral tradition etc. which are unquestionably accepted. But this unquestioning attitude seems to characterize all human beings. As Godwin Sogolo (1993, p.87) an African philosopher from Nigeria, says,

Human beings are endowed with emotional attitude which allows for the unquestioning (attitude) based on the association of ideas. This acceptance is normally reinforced by the individuals psychological reaction to his personal experiences. This is not to be taken as a psychological deficiency. It is (rather) part of what makes us human.

The point here is that the Igbo and no less the Western scientific man could easily descend to this kind of psychological attitude of appealing to non-physical forces in terms of validating their knowledge of events or phenomena which seem to defy common sense experience. For instance, the Western man, like the African, who was told on phone shortly after cutting into two with a sharp razor blade the paintings or photograph of his mother that she died, would, according to H. O. Mounce (1973, pp.147-162) easily accept that there is a connection between his action and his mother's death. Whether or not this belief is justified is beside the point, the essential thing to note is that, that is the way human minds work".

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## CONCLUSION

Let us conclude by saying that the Igbo make a distinction between knowledge (*amamife*) and belief (*ncchekwube*) and there are procedures for validating the epistemic status of their claims which chime with Western epistemological canons. Even the appeal to non-physical forces by the



Igbo does not and should not constitute a deficiency since such attitude is noticeable in Western philosophy. Admittedly, there are cultural elements in knowledge and, again rationality has become an essentially contested concept” as there is now an increasing urge for alternative epistemologies and decolonizing methodologies (Smith, 1999, pp.183-192). But this does not suggest that African epistemology is unique, rather it is universal since there is no radical difference between knowledge apprehension and epistemological canons across-cultures.

Thus the respective positions of the particularist and universalist African philosophers should be seen as borne out of the need to redeem African that was devastated during colonialism. The efforts of the particularist and/or the ethnophilosophical school were according to Dipo Irele (2010, p.341) spurred by “the anxiety of the epistemic denigration of the African race, by the colonialists. But anxiety as used here by Irele may not be an appropriate way to describe the efforts of the precursors of African epistemology. Rather a more charitable thing to say is that they were motivated by the theoretical need to establish a basis for the discourse of African epistemology, notwithstanding their limitations (Sumner and Yohannes, 2002, pp.54-64).

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