IS THERE AN ‘AFRICAN’ EPISTEMOLOGY?

F. A. Airoboman

and

A. A. Asekhauno

Department of Philosophy and Religions, University of Benin, Benin City, Nigeria

E-mail: fe_bom2002@yahoo.com +234-807-316-9897

Abstract

This work is a rethinking of the idea of culture-dependent epistemology. It inquired into the meaning of African epistemology. It presented briefly some epistemological rumination of Africans which agreed with the universal nature of philosophizing. Thereafter, it presented the position of the proponents which held that there is African mode of knowing, peculiar to Africans, context-dependent and social bound, and superior to other epistemologies. This work critically examined these claims and opined that the idea of African peculiar epistemology is based on wrong epistemic premises. It argued that what is presented as the dicta of African epistemology by its proponents is colorized with western epistemological character. It argued further that the position of the proponents of African peculiar epistemology make the discipline of African epistemology a mutt, too simplistic, commonplace, and bereft of epistemological nitty-gritty. Although this work does not deny that epistemology can be culturally provoked, generated and reflected upon; but this does not remove the universal element of epistemology as a theory of knowledge. This article thus concluded that for Africa epistemology to be a serious business, it must first be freed from the cocoon of peculiarism.

Keywords: Epistemology, context-dependent, commonplace, universal epistemology

Introduction

As the theory of knowledge, epistemology is a universal phenomenon. It inquires into the possibility, nature, origin, scope, validity, and limits of human knowledge. From the classical accounts, for anyone to lay claim to knowledge, such claim must be true and believed with justifications. This definition and criteria have governed the epistemological discipline for centuries until the twentieth century when it faced serious objection—ignited by what is now known as the ‘Gettier Problem’, indicating that one’s claim could be true, believed and justified, but does not count as knowledge.

Before now it has been keenly debated, whether or not there is ‘African philosophy’. The two major camps to this debate were the traditionalists/protagonists, and the modernists/antagonists. To talk about African epistemology in connection with this debate is to either use it as a tool for justifying African philosophy or is to take as truism (if not out-rightly rejected) the existence of an African philosophy. This is because it is within African philosophy that an African epistemology is subsumed.

However, African philosophy is African system of world views. It is also a reflection on African world-views by both Africans and non-Africans. There had been a division—back in the sixties and seventies—as to whether the task of African philosophy should be that of discovering and documenting the ingenuous African beliefs and thought systems; and those who advocated that African philosophy should be a reflective and critical inquiry, whose focus should not only be on African experience in its various dimensions but also on human experiences...
in general. But the point is, however, that the immediate context of this debate was the post colonial experience in relation to freedom and economic domination because it was believed that changes in Africanc social political environment ought to imply changes in African mental outlook. The traditionalist school believes that African philosophy is a collective world view of Africans concerning man, nature and society. This world view is imbedded in the proverbs, myths, folktales and in the oral traditions of the people and are exemplified in their social-cultural policies. To develop an authentic African philosophy, therefore, these sources have to be investigated, recorded and where necessary analyzed. This is somewhat the religio-anthropological or ethnographic report of some classical scholars (such as Mbiti and Idowu) in this respect. African philosophy, according to Mbiti (1969, 2) “refers to the understanding, attitude of mind, logic and perception behind the manner in which Africans think, act or speak in different situations of life” and it is extracted from proverbs, and morals of oral tradition of each African community. Invariably, this is a traditional construal of philosophy by relying on myths and beliefs; in this respect, it is not evaluative.

Nevertheless, for the modernists (Appiah, Bodunrin, Oruka, Wiredu, et cetera), African philosophy must be reconstructive, critical and conceptual. They claim that critical, as different from folk philosophy, is “...a form of inquiry which is rationalistic, critical and individualistic” (Oladipo, 1996), and “using modern logical and conceptual techniques” (Wiredu, 1980). It is an intellectual and professional activity. Again, it must be observed that this cannot be achieved in isolation of the cultural perceptions of the issues—all of which raise epistemological concerns.

Then, what does one mean by the phrase ‘African epistemology? Does he mean the contributions of African philosophers to the general stream of epistemology? Or is he talking about African perception or preoccupation in their understanding of reality in contradistinction with Western and Oriental epistemologies? If answers to these questions are in the affirmative, then the natural question would be: ‘Do Africans have peculiar way of knowing different from, and inaccessible to non-Africans?’ And is the universal concept of epistemology not applicable for Africans? The preoccupation here is to examine these questions with a view to indicating whether the idea of an African epistemology is tenable.

The African Contribution

Here we shall briefly review the theories of knowledge by St. Augustine and Kwasi Wiredu.

St Augustine: St Augustine hailed from Targaste in present day Algeria. He was a Platonist. In his Contra Academicos, he attacked and refuted skepticism. Skepticism is a philosophical school which doubts or denies the possibility of certainty in knowledge. But according to St Augustine, anyone who says that nothing is certain involves in self-contradiction. If he is certain that nothing is certain then he is certain of one thing, i.e. that nothing is certain. Similarly, anyone who doubts the existence of everything is at least sure of his own existence. If one thinks he is deceived to believe he exists, then to be deceived is a proof of existence for that which does not exist cannot be deceived.

Like Plato, Augustine distrusts the senses as reliable sources of knowledge. According to him, the objects of true knowledge are not the material things of this world but the eternal ideas in the mind of God. The Platonic ‘world of forms’ becomes the Augustinian ‘mind of God’. According to St. Augustine knowledge is objective, universal and certain. The objects of knowledge are immaterial, immutable, stable, eternal and indestructible. The objects of knowledge which are eternal are superior to the human mind but the human mind is able to apprehend them through divine illumination. Remarkably, Augustine’s epistemology sustained Plato’s and formed the platform/course of subsequent conceptions of the subject. These include the views of Kwasi Wiredu.

Kwasi Wiredu: A Ghanaian philosopher, and at the heart of the debate as to whether or not there is an African philosophy, Wiredu contends that it is necessary to go beyond talking about African philosophy and to be actually involved in doing it (Wiredu, 1980). He, therefore, advances two epistemological theses from the Akan linguistic point of view that: (1) ‘truth is opinion’; and (2) ‘to be is to be known’.
In the first thesis i.e. ‘truth is opinion’, Wiredu denies any distinction between truth and opinion. According to him, common sense experience seems to indicate this distinction because truth is seen as an objective reality—timeless, eternal and unchanging—whereas opinion is not. He dismisses this objectivist notion because “if truth is categorically different from opinion, then truth is as a matter of logical principle, unknowable” (Wiredu, 1980, 11). He opines that:

Any given claim to truth is merely an opinion advanced from some specific point of view and categorically different from truth. Hence knowledge of truth as distinct from opinion is a self – contradictory notion…Truth then is necessarily joined to point of view or better, truth is a view from some points and there are as many truths as there are points of view…. To be true is to be opined.

The second thesis that ‘to be is to be known’, is rather a restatement of Berkeley’s to be is to be perceived. Wiredu argues that to say an object exists is to assert that the term in question refers to an object or has a reference. One cannot say that something exists and at the same time disclaims knowledge about the entity in question. To claim that an object exists means that one has some knowledge of it. Hence to be is to known. But this is a drift into idealism. Hence these Protagorean and Berkelean epistemological restatements by Wiredu are beset with serious criticisms the analyses of which are not within the scope of present article.

Going by St. Augustine, Wiredu, and their epistemological presentations summarized above, it could reasonably be claimed that, just as it is in order to point to the of Plato, Aristotle, Descartes or Hume (and a lot of others) concerning Western epistemological theory, it is also appropriate to mention Augustine, Wiredu, Appiah, Bodunrin (and a lot of others) concerning African epistemological theorizing. In this way, ‘African’ epistemology designates the epistemological theory by Africans.

African epistemology as peculiar

The advocates of an ‘African’ epistemology hold that Africans have their unique way of apprehending external object or reality. They contend that there is African epistemology separate from and superior to the epistemology of the West. Among these advocates are Leopold Senghor, Anyanwu, Innocent Oyenuwenyi, Andrew Uduigwomen, Roy and Anselm Jimoh. Leopold Sedar Senghor brings to fore African epistemological anthropology in his philosophy of Negritude. According to him, Negritude designates “the whole complex of civilized values—cultural, economic, social and political—which characterize black peoples or more precisely, the Negro-African world” (Wiredu, 1998). The character of these values becomes more apparent and more fundamentally at the epistemological level. In On African Socialism, Senghor developed the theory of African mode of knowing in an attempt to defend African authentic ideology. He contends that there is peculiar African mode of knowing which can serve as the metaphysical and epistemological foundation of African ideology. Accordingly, Senghor believes that “if European socialism thrives on the epistemological theory of dialectic, then African socialism can place its epistemological root on the African mode of knowing” (Senghor, 1964.). He thus places African mode of knowing at par with European’s epistemology and analogy. More so, in African epistemology, Senghor argues, there is no dualism between the object and subject of knowledge but it thrives on symbiotic and mutual interaction between the two. This culminates in the holistic understanding of reality which is put simply by Senghor as: *I feel, I dance the other, I am* in contradistinction to Cartesian cogito: *I think, therefore I am*. From this, it is evident that in African scheme of things, individuality is defined in terms of community. In consequence, the African approach to self-consciousness is Senghorian and not the Cartesian affirmation of the self with the cogito. Thus, what Descartes did in Western epistemology, Senghor is conceived to have done in African epistemology. This axiom of communalist self consciousness is also expressed in Mbiti’s formulations: *I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am*. According to Senghor, African method of knowing is more emotionally laden than being rational. He adds that European forms of thought or reasoning is analytic, discursive utilization but African reasoning is intuitive by participatory.

Anyanwu notion of African Epistemology is simply a restatement of Senghor’s *African mode of
Knowing. Anyawu’s presentation could be summarized as follows:

Knowledge therefore comes from cooperation of all human faculties and experience. He sees, feels, imagines, reasons or thinks and insults all at the same time. Only through this method does he claim to have the knowledge of the other. So the method through which the African arrive at trustworthy knowledge of reality is…intuitive and personal experience (Ruch and Anyawu, 1981).

Likewise and in defense of an African epistemology, Anselm Jimoh (1999) asserts that knowledge is ultimately dependent on some human and social factors rather than being an objective, impersonal relations between object known and the knowing subject. According to him, African epistemology is essentially a context-dependent theory of knowledge. It takes note of the important role of the human and societal factors in establishing our knowledge claims. It is a theory of knowledge that is indigenous to Africa as distinct from the one that is foreign to her. According to him, the question “what is African epistemology?” is an invitation to sift out a theory of knowledge that is at home with traditional African thought system. Jimoh argues that knowledge and belief are co-referential; which is to say, in traditional African claim, to know and to believe imply the same thing. For him, “[i]t is not rationally possible to assent to a claim without believing the claim. Neither is it rationally possible to assent to a belief whose content one does to know” (Jimoh, 2004). To sustain his contextual-dependent theory of knowledge claim, he quoted Peter Winch as saying that “whether a statement is true or false will depend upon what it means. What it means… will depend upon how it is being used, how it functions as part of form of life it belongs” (Jimoh, 1999). This argument of Winch portrays an epistemological theory that is applicable to the thought system of most, if not all African cultures. It conceives knowledge more as a product of societal convention rather than an objectivist phenomenon. According to Jimoh, truth is meant to describe human experience of reality. “A thing or proposition is true when it serves the purpose for which it applies” (Jimoh, 2004). Orangun consolidates this position as follows: “truth is the property of human experience and a link between the perceiver’s thought and the reality of the state of affairs or events of the external world” (Orangun, 2001, 71). The question now arises: how does the African mind establish an epistemic claim and the truth of his epistemic claim? According to Jimoh, African claims to knowledge are not established to be true or false through scientific reasoning and experimentations. This is because the claims are not scientific hypothesis: for example knowledge of witches and spirits. Also in this regard, Jack Aigbodioh opines that “epistemic claims are extensions of our social values, interests and preferences.” The validity of belief or knowledge is derived from customs and habits. This means that our knowledge claims are not validated in objectivist term as the rationalists and the empiricists contended. Neither a priori nor a posteriori reasons suffice in the justification of human knowledge.

Evaluation

The advocates of African epistemology need to be commended for the attempt to widen African scope of knowledge. However, some scholars hold that the theory of African epistemology is put forward by over zealous defenders of African culture who are of the view that there must be a peculiar African epistemology as there is European epistemology. Nevertheless, there is no prescribed or peculiar communalistic, racial and continental European epistemology; instead what we have is the epistemology of individual European philosophers which are divergent and opposing. By European epistemology, therefore, it is meant the summation of the various divergent and opposing epistemological views put forward by individual European philosophers. This suggests that the idea of African epistemology is based on wrong epistemic premiss, i.e. because there is Western epistemology then there must be African epistemology.

Moreover, what is presented as African epistemology by its proponents is beclouded with Western ideas and couched in western language. The Senghorian affirmation of self-consciousness: I feel, I dance the other, I am, is perfectly styled along and as well as a restatement of Cartesian cogito ergo sum (I think, therefore I am). Again, John Mbiti’s formulation that I am because we are and since we are therefore I am is couched in Sartre’s existential philosophy that man is a being in the world and a
being with others. Thus proponents of African epistemology seem to have appropriated Western ideas and then hold that African epistemology is unique to Africans. Not only this; they compared it with Western epistemology and hold that it is superior to it. This is a chickish’s approach. This seems to be a demonstration of intellectual dishonesty on the one hand and a contradiction in term on the other. Again, to have held that it is superior to Western epistemology but should not be subjected to Western critical analysis or evaluation because of its peculiarity or uniqueness raises a fundamental issue. How then do we know that it is superior to it? This seems to exemplify the proponents’ defeatist approach. This is because critical analysis or evaluation is fundamental to epistemology and epistemology is a serious discipline which critically and rigorously scrutinizes our beliefs. According to Owolabi (2000), “the fundamental objective of epistemology is to inculcate in humans, the desire to subject every idea however self-evidence to rigorous scrutiny.” The language and manner of advocates of African epistemology seems to demonstrate a lack of the rigor of epistemological discourse.

Again in an attempt for the advocates of African epistemology to distance from Western epistemology they hold that African epistemology is intuitive as against the British empiricism and Continental rationalism. This submission imply a bereft of facts. It thus runs fowl of success. This is because in the West, there are litanies of intuitionist apologists or philosophers. For example, the six dominant rationalists and empiricists philosophers, George Edward Moore, Jean-Paul Sartre and Henri Bergson, among others, hold to intuition as a way of knowing. To some of them intuition is the primary source of knowledge.

The proponents or protagonists of peculiar African epistemology need to erect it on a foundation independent of Western ideas of epistemology which they claim African epistemology is at variance with. Besides it must, if it is really peculiar, be couched in special or peculiar language. If this kind of epistemology is serious business for them, then they need to put forward the nature, scope, origin, validity and limits (if any, and which are the main concerns epistemic theory) of knowledge such epistemology. Bodunrin argues that any argument in favor of Africa epistemology must show that there is an African method of testing validity of knowledge.

Moreover, what is meant by the term Africa? If it is held that African knowledge is social bound then African epistemology must be unwarrantedly fragmented into absurdity even within African context. This is because Africa comprises of communities which do not have the same beliefs about their objects of knowledge. It is important to note that this contextual trend of thought about knowledge is not peculiarly African; it is also dominant in oriental and Western epistemological discourse.

Another question that needs to be asked in respect to the context dependency argument for African epistemology is this: if, for example, witchcraft does not exist and the Africans or at least some African communities contextually adjudge and affirm its existence, does this contextual affirmation imply it exists? Aristotle had settled this issue in his metaphysics thus: “to say of what is not that it is and of what is that it is not is false while to say of what is that it is and of what is not that is not is true” (Aristotle, Bk. 1). Jimoh offers that witches and spirits in African traditional set-up, (with specific reference to the people of Igarra of Nigeria), are said to exist and feature prominently in the people’s understanding of reality. However, the belief in the existence of witches and spirits is, therefore, an epistemic claim which is tied to a whole form of life. In response to this, it is a commonplace knowledge or reality that a whole community could be wrong. Besides, it should be noted that there is a difference between truth or knowledge on the one hand and meaningfulness or organized experience on the other. Moreover, the belief and practice of a people do not essentially consist in truth though they may be meaningful in organizing the people’s way of life.

Conclusion

The position of the proponents of African peculiar epistemology makes the discipline or business of the quest for epistemological theory too simplistic and commonplace. They appear to be too culture sympathetic in this matter. If what is posited above is what these proponents and protagonists of African peculiar epistemology have with respect to African epistemology, then, it seems it is not spectacular. This state ignites the fear that an African unique
epistemology must be bereft of epistemological nitty-gritty. It can lead to social and epistemic chaos. For example, how can we just take what one feels, thinks, imagine and so on, to be constitutive parts of knowledge? This demonstration seems to be a show of lack of a grip of what epistemological hallmarks should be, independent of specific cultures. If there is any distinct African epistemology other than the contributions of St. Augustine, Kwasi Wiredu, and the likes, to the general stream of epistemology, it has not been clearly stated. To make it a serious and meaningful engagement, it should be clearly stated and subjected to critical, rigorous analysis and evaluations because these are the hallmarks of epistemology.

A philosophy is not culturally situated because it is peculiar to that culture only, but because it is put forward by a philosopher who belongs to that culture. In this regards, Placide Tempels and Alexis Kegame, for example, cannot be properly called African philosophers but writers or experts or speculators of African philosophy just as an African who writes or specializes in western philosophy cannot be called a western philosopher but an expert in western philosophy.

Finally, if Africa epistemology is going to be a serious business it must be removed from the cocoon of peculiarism into which the advocates of an African epistemology telescopied and regimented it. This will allow a rational discourse, evaluation, criticism, and development of the discipline. African epistemology must not be peculiarly Africa; it must also be accessible and meaningful to non Africans and reflect their nature. This is because epistemology has to do with the human way of knowing or the nature of knowing. This work does not deny that philosophy can be culturally provoked, generated and reflected upon; but this does not remove the universal element of philosophy.

References

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