A Philosophical Reflection on Some Key Issues in Yoruba Indigenous Knowledge System.

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Abstract

The discourse of indigenous knowledge system is no absolute preserve of any intellectual outlook; humanities, social-sciences or basic sciences. The enterprise of philosophy is not an exemption in this regard. From a philosophical angle, this discourse addresses certain key issues identified in Yoruba indigenous knowledge system (IKS). Adopting conceptual and critical methodology, it argues that the Yoruba indigenous knowledge system could be explicated from an internalist perspective, drawing upon the intricacies of key issues like *Ifá*, the environment, arts (beliefs and practice), as well as human-animal relations in Yoruba worldview. Basically, it emphasizes that Yoruba IKS is underscored by an internalist framework of understanding (knowing) inherent in beliefs, reflected in attitudes and practices, which are suffused with ontological cum existential assumptions of reality.

Keywords: Yoruba, Indigenous knowledge system, internalism, beliefs and practice.
Introduction

Tanui et al (2013, 60) asserts that indigenous knowledge is the unique, traditional, local knowledge that exists within and has developed around the specific conditions of indigenous people in a particular geographical area, acquired through accumulation of practical experiences and intimate interaction and understanding of the environment within a given culture. This definition informs that indigenous knowledge is a ‘bound phenomenon’, within a specific tempo-spatial realm (that is a matter of boundary) and it is a consequential effect of human understanding about existence and reality. This conception captures the fundamental basis of indigenous knowledge as a dialectical reflection on the existential conditions of reality within a particular space of existence, that subsequently becomes a ‘given’ in the evaluation of events, phenomena, incident and many more in reality; within and without of that space.

This above point of view portrays indigenous knowledge as a relative prism of understanding and explaining the conditions of existence and reality. While this cannot be undermined in the conceptualization of indigenous knowledge, the concern of the justification of indigenous worldviews and practice remains pertinent. In other words, questions such as the following demands critical response; on what basis do we justify the veracity and acquisition of indigenous knowledge claims about event, phenomena, incidents and so on; how is the philosophical authenticity of certain knowledge schemes/systems derived? Subsequently, the claim that knowledge as a phenomenon bear the mark of indigeneity, meaning that they are indicators of the ways that people think different about the world; searching for the interaction of diversity in knowledge (Masolo 2010, 51) needs to be critically engaged.

However, within the context of this discourse, indigenous knowledge is conceptually granted as a body or system of knowledge derived from reflections of beliefs, norms, experiences and practices of a given tempo-spatial enclave in the course of events, phenomena (natural and extra-natural) in existence and reality. Importantly, it is expedient to justify this conception. Thus, an exposition of the Yoruba indigenous knowledge
system that exhibits epistemic understanding about existence and reality through the pervasiveness of some key issues like Ifá, the environment, arts as well as human-animal relations would be presented and subsequently subjected to an internalist critique to justify the credence of the indigenous knowledge system.

**Key Issues in Yoruba Indigenous Knowledge System**

Indigenous Yoruba people comprise mainly the ethnic group found in South Western Nigeria, Southern Benin (West Africa), some parts in Togo, Sierra Leone, Ghana and the diasporic regions of Cuba, Brazil, Trinidad and Tobago, that share in common the Yoruba language, history, social institutions, ancestral linkages as well as other ways of live.² The focus in this section is on the major strands of belief and practice associated with Ifá, environment, arts and human-animal relations in Yoruba enclave, though from an epistemological angle. Expatiating briefly on the descriptive nature of these key issues as found in the Yoruba culture thus is necessary. This would be done accordingly as presented below.

**Ifá**

Among the Yoruba, Ifá is generally conceived as a divinity corpus or system (Parrinder 1977, 137 – 139; Taiwo 2004) central to the socio-religious worldviews held about human and non-human existence, happenstances, events and other phenomena. It is attributed to the essence of the deity, Òrúnmìlà (Heaven knows salvation) among the pantheon of gods, below Òlódùmaré (Supreme Being) in the Yoruba belief. Adegbindin (2014) corroborates that Ifá as a divination system is also a process of the pursuit of knowledge about truth, destiny, morality, social order and other virtues. Wande Abimbola (1976), Lijadu (1923), Bascom (1969) to mention a few, among others have made concerted efforts in delivering an exposition of Ifá corpus. However, these efforts deserve considerable attention beyond this discourse. Importantly their exposition resonate some basic features of Ifá which is recognized in three folds below:

- Ifá corpus is an orature that is oral tradition based on the web of permutated relationship/combination of the 16 major Òdù and 246 minor Òdù. The major Òdù are Ogbè, Òyèkú, Iwori, Odi, Iroshu, Owara,
Bara, Okara, Ogunda, Osa, Ika, Oturupon, Oture, Irete, Ose, and Ofu(n) (Parrinder 1977; Adegbindin 2014).

- *Ifá* divination about phenomena/events is expounded through a unique systematic forecast of certain paraphernalia (accessible to the *Ifá* Priest or diviners popularly called *Babalawo* among the Yoruba) like ikín, Òpèlè, and ìbò, whose usages are specific and procedural in certain stages of *Ifá* divination.

- The corpus is expressive of the link between courses of action; thus is employed to merge precedence with the present reality and in anticipation of the future, in the process of interaction between humans and humans, humans and non-humans, gods, deities, predecessors, descendants inclusive, as well as nature.

The above simply presents in brief an analogy of the nature of *Ifá* as core to the indigenous worldview of the Yoruba; the epistemic intricacy of this would soon be addressed after granting concise insight in similar manner on other key issues, which are derivatives of beliefs, assumption, practice, customs/norms in Yoruba life world.

**Arts (Beliefs and Practice)**

The nature of arts among the Yoruba validates its mention as a key issue in this discourse. By arts, we mean the implicit and explicit display of belief-oriented practice through symbolic representations in different occasions of life as well as the attachment or dispositions to these representations that is reflective of the metaphysical, aesthetical and psychological understanding of the Yoruba. This simply means that one way in which this society elaborates its system of belief is precisely through the arts. Abiola Irele in his effort to conceptualize arts as a medium or source of expressing identity, generally in Africa has identified three major forms of arts; the literary (oral), plastic (solid) and musical arts that exhibit phallic (relational), ludic (pleasure/aesthetics) and ideological functions (Irele 1991, 53-57). Arts within the Yoruba context fit well into Irele’ classification as the patterns of art forms pervasive in rituals, musical festival, masquerade exhibitions,
folktales, sculpted images, dance accompaniment etc. are laden with these hinted functions. They are also laden with metaphysical and ontological understanding of the Yoruba. This seems not far-fetched with the instance of ancestral veneration.

Ancestral veneration is a sort of religio-cultural piety that serves as a mnemonic demonstration of the nature and manner of charismatic heroes/heroines, deities, gods or ancestors, who often times are deemed revered for honour and at the same time mediators for human or nature’s request. The ancestors among the Yoruba are regarded as ‘living dead’ and remain members of the community since death does not connote the end of a man’s life (Idowu 1996, 186 – 187). Ancestral veneration is simply a practice of the Yoruba based on the belief in the immortality of the soul. This belief is perpetuated through the expressive art forms of masquerades accompanied with peculiar dance steps and tonal musical notes. In this sense, bàtá dance\(^3\) that elevates the majesty of Sango, the god of thunder among Yoruba is an accurate example. However, it is important to stay in line with the concern of this discourse and this is addressing the basis of justification for indigenous belief-oriented practices of this kind. This would be addressed shortly as we proceed.

**The Environment**

The environment connotes the expanse of occupied space in nature by human and non-human entities, that is, the ecosystem. The Yoruba take on this is readily accessible through the extent of its appreciation of the environmental landscape; an urge for the regulation of acts and attitudes that are inimical to the growth, conservation and development of life forms; humans and non-humans. Being a society immersed in both physical and metaphysical interpretations of phenomena, the Yoruba approach to the environment is tilted towards a conservative understanding of the environment through specific prohibitions that are taboo-rated, exacted by beliefs often times considered superstitious. Some scholar have asserted that this approach is mainly eco-bio-communitarian since it reinforces the ideal of interdependence and peaceful co-existence between humans and other life-forms (Tangwa 2004, 387 – 388).
Within that worldview the distinction between plants and animals and the animate things, between the sacred and the profane, matter and spirit, the communal and the individual is slim and flexible one, thus, the belief that humans in certain circumstances can transform into animals and plants or into forces, such as the mind is very prevalent within this system and has very significant implications for the way nature is approached (Ibid, 389).

This implies that in indigenous Yoruba understanding, life-forms, inclusive of humans, are cooccupants within the expanse of space and as such human beings do not possess ultimate claim over space, hence nature/ the environment is not meant for human flourishing alone (Olen & Barry 1992, 340). In cases where a spiritual life-form occupies a domain, it should be accorded some regards in terms of un-tampered relation with its environment. This latter understanding is granted by the reason that Yoruba attributes belief to the natural environment as an abode. Non-natural/spiritual beings that inhabit trees, rivers, rocks etc. Òrísàoko (god of the farm), Oya, Osun, Àbíkú (kindred spirit of still-births) are instances of such spiritual beings in Yoruba worldview. In other words, Yoruba worldview of the environment is underscored by animistic dispositions. Ogunade (2006, 16 - 37; 2004) has further informed that there is bound to be environmental tension, crisis or disasters when actions and attitudes deviate from the observation of this belief.

Human-Animal Relations

A common saying among the Yoruba that; ise eniyan nise eranko – the way of humans/man is also the way of animals captures the understanding of human-animal relations in a general sense within the enclave. However intensive readings have been provided in concrete terms about the place of animals in Yoruba cosmos (Adewoye 2007; Ajibade 2006, 155 – 172; Ogunade 2004, 180 – 191) which informs the understanding about the issue of human-animal relations. Ajibade (2006) attempted to discern the Yoruba cultural understanding of animals, which he called Yoruba ‘ontological perceptions’ of animals, by earmarking the classification of animals, placement of animals in the Yoruba cosmology, religion, traditions, economics (food and hunting), and interactions between humans and animals. His efforts yielded certain insights on the existential status of animals.
among Yoruba which include that; animals are categorized by groups, habitat and physiological traits; perception about them are complemented with taboo and mythical explanations; also that animals like humans are considered agents of propitiation to the gods and are given meaningful names similar to the practice of naming human beings, and they may be the subject of panegyrics or songs of praise (Owoseni & Olatoye 2014). In simple terms, practices, attitudinal dispositions, sayings, aphorisms and proverbs of the Yoruba are the indices to consider for understanding adequately the issue of human-animal relations and this could constitute the focus of further studies. At this juncture, it is crucial to delve critically into the epistemological justification of these issues to establish the viability of the framework of the Yoruba indigenous knowledge system

**Internalistic Critique of the Key Issues**

The phenomenon of knowledge and its justification within the philosophical enterprise has received attention from diverse schools of thought, each in one way or the other expounding certain conditions as the basis of the phenomenon. This implies that if a belief or claim is for example justified, it is justified in virtue of some further conditions (Madison 2010, 1); which are conceived diversely as foundational, correspondence, infallible, contextual, external or internal for the viable justification of such held beliefs or claims. The interest in this section is that of internalist strand of justification, also called internalism. Internalism emphasize that the relevant factors that determine justification of held beliefs or claims must be internal (that is specified). Internalism as a justificatory model posits that one’s belief or claim demands some kind of accessibility or awareness of one’s ground for laying claim to the belief as true/veritable (Madison 2010, 3). Simply put, only factors that are accessible to the agent’s conscious awareness can contribute to or detract from a belief’s justification (Ibid, 4). Expanding the details of internalism is beyond the focus of this discourse. Importantly, showing how this justificatory model provides a viable ground for the epistemic basis of Yoruba indigenous knowledge as regards key issues like Ifá, the environment, arts and human-animal relation is the core concern.

Prior to embarking on this, it is essential to clarify the nature of the epistemic agent that is the knower/subject of knowledge in Yoruba indigenous thought system. To speak of the epistemic agent in an individualistic sense
seems unsuitable, for this system of thought is communitarian; one in which the epistemic subject is taken as the ‘collective individual’ since existence is conceived as communal existence. Thus the epistemological standpoint of an individual is within the matrix of such communal outlook, cultural belief system, historical linkages, norms, traditions and practice. Mbiti’s (1970, 141) assertion that “I am because we are” clarifies the status of the epistemic agent/knower in Yoruba parlance of indigenous knowledge. It is in this sense, issues like *Ifá*, the environment, arts and human-animal relation are common epistemological fonts for the knower within this context. In clear terms, the epistemic agent in this indigenous knowledge scheme is the all-embracing ‘we’, the communal self, whose essence and existence is determined by indigenous beliefs, norms as well as practice that is the epistemic agent/person’s belief is simply a function of the beliefs that people accept in the social and cultural context of existence (Ikenuobe 2000, 127).

Makinde (2007, 68 – 74) conceptualized the *Ifá* corpus as a repository of knowledge, and this is not likely to be irrational. The forecasting essence of *Ifá* that is the potency of its divinatory ends can be likened to a deductive method of knowing, which is though dependent on the relay of antecedents of happenstances or events of progenitors, gods or deities to assert knowledge of present predicament in human and non-human reality. It suggests remedies in ensuring cosmos cum metaphysical balance. This is readily proved through the techniques involved in the casting of *Ìkín*, *Òpęlè* as well as the analytic function of *Ìbò* during consultation of the *Ifá* priest (known as the babalawo). *Ìkín* are palm-nuts considered sacred, derived from *Opẹ-Ifá* (*Ifá* palm tree) and are used to access *Ifá*’s epistemic assertion on issues upon consultation. Wande Abimbola has presented the systematic operation of this paraphernalia on the basic constituent of the corpus’ signatures, which is the *Òdù*. The *Òdù* is as a result of this divine medium. Wande Abimbola (1975) expatiates that *Ìkín* are held within the Priest’s palms and the casting process is determined by the lines drawn, following the number of *Ìkín* held at a particular moment of consultation within the palms. He states that:

If two nuts remain, he makes one mark immediately below the two marks he first made. He makes either one or two mark in this way four times in two rows starting from the right to the left. If he has more than two nuts left inside his palm or if he has nothing left, he will make no mark at all. The outcome of this
process is believed to be the signatures of an Òdù. Hence, if the Ifá priest continues to have two nuts left inside his palm each of the four times, it means that he would make one mark four times on the right, and one mark four times on the left. The result will be signature of Èjì-Ogbè…the most important of the two hundred and fifty-six Òdù in the Ifá divination system…if on the other hand, the Ifá priest has one nut left each time, he will make two marks each time for each of the eight times (four times on the right and four times on the left). The name of the signature which he prints as follows is that of Qyèkù Mèjì…All the Òdù carrying such names are known as the principal sixteen Òdù (Ibid, 13 – 14).

In similar vein, Òpèlè is adopted in place of Ìkín in contemporary times among the Yoruba because of its advantage of portability (Ibid, 16). It is a metal or cotton string made of eight half-nuts of the fruit of Òpèlè tree, with four half nuts attached to each half of the chain (Ibid, 15). This string is held at the top and casted by the priest in order to read the signature of the Òdù that surfaced. Each of the half nuts have an inside (rough) and an outside (smooth) surfaces. When all the nuts (upon casting) present their inside (rough) surfaces upward, the signature is that of Ogbè and when they present all their outside (smooth) surfaces upward, the signature is that of Qyèkù (p.16). It follows that when all the four half nuts present their rough surfaces upward both to the right and left, the signature is that of Èjì Ogbè (that is two Ogbè), when all the four half-nuts on the right and the four half-nuts to the left present their outside/smooth surfaces upwards, the signature is that of Qyèkù-Mèjì (two Qyèkù) (Ibid, 16).

The importance of these paraphernalia for indigenous know-how lies mainly in the casting process, which is a combination of Òdù signatures, both major and minor. The accessibility of this is reflected in the exposition of Èkùn and Èpelè above, the medium for the composition of signatures that are accorded as oracular vestige of accounts, tales, poems, and philosophies of Yoruba cultural and ontological understanding of Ifá’s wealth of wisdom, and the efficacy of its prediction in all matters. This understanding is proved by the extent of accessibility, not only of Ifá priest but that of the client; the latter is ensured by the medium of Êbò that verifies the analyticity of Ifá’s prediction. Basically, the Êbò consist of a pair of cowries sewn together with bones and like the Èkùn or Èpelè is casted upon request by the consulting client, to check the coherency of
Ifá’s declaration on matters consulted. The justificatory ground for this perhaps may appear to be beyond a reasonable proof for a non-Yoruba person, since it could be claimed that this paraphernalia depicts attachment to the metaphysical potency of Ifá, which is taken for granted to determine the course of forecast. However, for the Yoruba, this forecast are systematic route for the formulation of hypothesis, for the reason that when the cowries surface upon the cast, it signifies a ‘yes’ (acknowledgement) and when it is a bone, it signifies ‘no’ (Ibid, 21). The logical possibility of the epistemological input of Ifá divination system cannot be delivered at once within the scope of this discourse and thus it deserves a detailed focus, well beyond this.

The issues of arts and the environment seem less difficult to grasp from an internalist epistemological angle. As Abiola Irele (1991, 56) hinted, arts fashion the values in a society, the way people see the world and see themselves and the way they relate to themselves and to each other. It goes well beyond the exhibition of the material culture to display the inner aspect, which is the mental and extra-mental essence of a people. Arts within the Yoruba context thus is driven by an internalized consciousness of the beliefs attributed to the crafts of artistic images, regalia, dance steps accompanied with tonal rendition of music, as seen for instance in masquerade festivals. This informs that for the Yoruba, arts for aesthetic sake connotes a mental and extramental essence, which may be psychologically and metaphysically known, accessible through the stylistic pattern of performances, inherent with cultural beliefs. For instance, carvings, masks and the likes are expressive in this way; they represent the repertoire of adorable values, artefacts, feelings and skills which image the social being or life of the people; when we have a mask for instance (as it is among the Yoruba), the ancestors will come back (Ibid, 56).

This relates that ‘arts’ in this sense is a consequent of the society’s system of beliefs; which renders it indubitably internally based. It is a way of impressing as Huemer (2006, 148) had observed about internalism that all of the conditions that confer justification depends on how things seem to the subject (that is epistemic agent, in this context, the Yoruba). In similar vein, the Yoruba way of knowing about the environment, in relation to the eco-system as well as non-human entities/animals, depicts personified participatory/undetached understanding of the subject in the object of knowledge; such that there is no epistemic gulf that may seem to
distinct the object from the subject in Yoruba indigenous worldview. In other words, the subject and object are internalized within the web of cultural beliefs about these issues, which account for certain attitudes and relation to the environment and entities within it. Thus, the rationale for the belief in reincarnation, transmigration of the soul, animistic beliefs that spirit, gods/goddesses inhabit the material plane of existence, that is in animals, trees, water and so forth would not be contemplated as illogical from such an internalist stance. Ruch and Anyanwu’s (1981, 87) assertion captures succinctly the basis of our argument here. The duo notes that, “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”.

Given the above, there is a sceptical impression that unravelling the basis of Yoruba indigenous understanding on issues of the environment and human-animal relation that is laden with superstitious belief from an externalist (that emphasize factors outside the epistemic agent) rather than internalist position would be comprehensible. This is simply because the Yoruba participates in the object of knowledge; either at the realm of ideology or experience; thus its indigenous mode of knowing is personified, indubitably an internalized one or for the sake of brevity could be termed ‘cultural internalism’. Be that as it may, there is the need to hint that the problems inherent in internalism as an epistemological justification stance surface in the case of an internalist justification of indigenous knowledge and this also deserves some comments.

One problem that may emerge from the reading, perhaps misreading of the analysis so far is thinking that the Yoruba indigenous knowledge scheme on the basis of an internalist justification does not take external factors into consideration. This thought line is not resonated here but the point that Yoruba indigenous knowledge on the basis of this justification model emphasizes that the knowing/epistemic subject cannot be completely externalized in the interpretation or understanding of reality within the Yoruba world, is made. And the rationale behind this has been clarified. This is that the knowing agent in Yoruba indigenous knowledge participates in the object of knowledge. Another problem identified with this internalist approach is that it is criticized for being a cognitive approach of justification disconnected from truth-conduciveness of belief claims. However, this seems not to be so, especially within the Yoruba indigenous scheme of thoughts. The
Epistemological significance of Ifá for instance has been shown by recent works to go well beyond being a repository of knowledge to having the potential for truth-conduciveness. Adegbindin (2014, 121 – 133), for instance made worthwhile effort to clarify that Ifá system is significant for the construe of the notion of truth among the Yoruba through coherent, correspondence and pragmatic theories. Within the context of indigenous knowledge system, it could thus be stated that internalist approach is rather laced with cultural cognitive conduciveness of truth. This further reiterates the appropriateness of what we accorded as ‘cultural internalism’ previously. In all, this argument does not suggest that the Yoruba indigenous thought system is immune from flaws but only to assert that the extent of interrogating such flaws could be done adequately from the standpoint of the appropriation of the normative structures of the thought system itself.

Conclusion

In lieu of the above, it can be stated that within the context of the discourse so far, the internalist basis for Yoruba indigenous knowledge system (via the issues of Ifá, the environment, arts and human-animal relations) gives credence to the common place view that there are social, contextual and pragmatic components of its epistemic rationality and justification. In other words, the issues that have been identified so far constitute aspects of Yoruba indigenous knowledge system and reiterate that its basis of justification is internal, contextual and relative to the beliefs and practice that pervade the Yoruba world. The discourse simply state that the notion of beliefs and claim is relationally absolute (Dretske 1981); in the context of Yoruba indigenous way of knowing, it implies conceptual, metaphysical and ontological understanding of existence and reality.
For instance in Western philosophy, the whole gamut of the epistemological (knowledge) quest from Ancient to modern period had revolved around the contemplation of the basis of acquisition to justification of knowledge and truth. Similarly in the enterprise of African philosophy, there is an on-going concern about what passes as knowledge/philosophical; entrenching different traditions of thought that lay claim to diverse justificatory grounds; analytical, ethno-philosophical, sagacity, hermeneutico-historical etc. For details, see


References


