

# LWATI

ISSN: 1813-2227

A Journal of Contemporary Research

Volume 9 Issue 1

March 2012



UNIVERSAL   
ACADEMIC SERVICES



LWATI: A Journal of Contemporary Research, 9(1), 186-205, 2012  
ISSN: 1813-2227

## The Relevance of Proverbs in African Epistemology

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### ABSTRACT

The paper is an attempt amongst series of other efforts to justify and defend the existence of African Philosophy. It is also to proof that Africans philosophers have grown beyond the age of wallowing in an endless and unnecessary debate over whether African philosophy exist or not, to actually doing philosophy. This they do by reflecting on the African experience. Consequently, this work argues as its thesis, that African proverbs is necessarily essential in the understanding and in transmitting African epistemology. This is because, knowledge has been acknowledged to be indispensable for human existence, as well as the core of epistemology. Proverbs, of the African type, is the core of African epistemology. This is premised on the fact that general epistemology, African epistemology and proverbs are concerned about creating knowledge for the betterment of human existence. The rationality of such proverbs are evidently displayed in the Efik proverbs used in this work, in terms of their relevance to burning existential situations. Sequentially, and for proper comprehension, this paper is divided as follows, abstract, introduction, definition of terms, nexus between language, language and knowledge, proverb, language African epistemology, the epistemic relevance of African proverbs then a conclusion.

### INTRODUCTION

According to Cletus Umezina some African philosophers who discuss African themes from African perspectives, employ proverbs in order to overthrow the opinions points of view that they do not endorse. However, besides, the use of proverbs by contemporary African thinkers is fast becoming alamode. This is because of the lucidity, luster and credence they add to philosophical claims (255). He explains further that "Etymology as analytic instrument, when compared with proverbs, does not achieve much in terms of philosophical elucidations because the meaning embedded in



proverbs does not easily change over time. Hence, proverbs are of paramount importance in the substantiation of philosophical claims" (253). The above significance of proverbs can be said to be an emulation from Greek culture of philosophizing. Notably because the importance of proverbs in the enhancement of philosophical theory appeared in Plato's attempt to use two opposing proverbs to determine what it is that brings about true and lasting friendship. There are "like is dear to like" and "the opposites are dear to one another" (248). In light of above, it becomes clear that the great masters in Greek philosophy set a historic step when they profusely employed proverbs to serve as bulwark to their philosophical claims. Okere as quoted by Umezina corroborates the above view, and argues that proverbs are foundation upon which justice rests. He adds that, to confront Africa's problem of war and violence, the principle of justice and peace must be applied. Here, peace is justice and justice is peace (252). Logically speaking, peace and justice reigns only where truth is upheld. Example, is Plato's theory of the state (ideal). If properly rationalized, Okere simply means proverbs is a tool in philosophical search for knowledge, reality and or wisdom. To support Okere's position, Ver Steeg opines that proverb is the horse which can carry one swiftly to the discovery of ideas (27)). In addition, A. J. A. Esen in a similar trend of thought, argues that, proverbs are oral museum, the verbal archives of Ibibio thought and philosophy (15).

In spite of the foundational significance of proverbs to the formation of philosophy within the African setting, there are criticism against proverbs. Hence, "Proverbs have been criticized thus, firstly, that it may not be widely known, and based on a possibility that one may compose a proverb on the spur of the moment and use it as unimpeachable evidence to make his case. Secondly, that there may be proverbs that are contraries, in this case, African proverbs are said to be numerous and at times opposing and contradictory.

In response to the criticisms above, it is noted that such objections are real but are not insurmountable. Umezina recommends the following solutions to solve problems that may arise from proverbs.

- (i) A proverb that supports the conclusion of a philosophical reflection should be one that is generally known by the people.
- (ii) Difficulty which concerns the existence of contrary proverbs, can be overcome or surmounted by situating them in their appropriate context (256).

In another criticisms against proverbs, P. O. Bodunrin holds that proverbs cannot be part of African philosophical inventory because proverbs are not unique to Africa. In the same vein, J. O. Donohue criticizes proverbs thus; "African proverbs cannot contribute anything worthwhile to the study of African philosophy, because African proverbs are notoriously contradictory and often consist of nothing than cynical pieces of advice on how to cheat successfully" (Azenabor 65). However, according to Momoh in a logical reaction to Bodunrin and Donohue's criticism, argues that, uniqueness is not the sole criterion for measuring what counts as a people's

philosophy or else, we cannot tenably talk of philosophy as being western, Eastern or Greek. In addition, he pointed that, even if granted that proverbs are not unique to Africans, it is doubtful if there is any other race or people that has made pronounced use of proverbs in their cultures like Africans (66). Reacting further, Momoh asserts that Donohue's view of African proverbs in extreme by parochial, for it does not make sense to say that proverbs are contradictory, because they are not the intellectual output or product of one's mind. He adds that, even, Western philosophy is a world of contradictions, pointing however that contradiction is a principle of logic and a core item of reality, so is cheating a part of reality. Thus, what teaches one to cheat successfully is for him dealing with an aspect of reality.

Undoubtedly, within African philosophy proverbs are being presented as philosophy. African proverbs constitute one important and strategic area where African philosophy can be extracted, because ancient African philosophy was not preserved in writing. Consequently, proverbs have been said to be the ancient African philosophy, and are therefore what references and authorities are to the academic. Hence, as certificates provide a scale of ranking and placement in learning, so does knowledge, mastery and appropriate usage of proverbs in traditional societies provide a scale of placement in learning (67). In fact, Azenabor opines that provides like myths, have proved very helpful and useful to the study of African philosophy. Moreso, like myths, they also have important metaphysical, moral, logical, epistemological, spiritual and psychological dimensions. C.I.S. Nyembezi while supporting the view above, traced the origin or source of proverbs in Zulu to myths (67).

### **Definition of Terms**

#### ***Proverbs***

A proverb is a phrase, saying, sentence, statement or expression of the folk which contains above all wisdom, truth, morals, experience, lessons and advice concerning life and which has been handed down from generation to generation. Another but similar definition sees proverbs as a short, generally known sentence of the folk which contains wisdom, truth, morals and traditional views in a metaphysical, fixed and memorizable form and which is handed down from generation to generation. Yet another meaning holds that it is the horse which can carry one swiftly to the discovery of ideas. Proverbs and sayings may sometimes give an indication of the moral ideas underlying native attitudes. The repetition of stories, proverbs and traditional sayings it is said, may be an integral element of culture, corresponding among illiterate people to literature among the literates. There may as well be educational or a form of intellectual recreation. It has differently been construed to mean a popular saying among a people, which is meant to advice, teach or warn. And that in the hands of a shrewd user, they become very powerful weapons that can unite, build and strengthen, or divide, wreck and scatter.

### **Epistemology**

This is one of the core areas of philosophy, concerned with the nature, source and limits of knowledge. It deals with problems relating to the investigation into the sources, nature, justification and the extent of the limitation of human knowledge. It attempts explanation to one of the central questions in philosophy "What can we know and how do we know it?" Attempts to provide explanation to the above questions have resulted in several theories of knowledge, namely rationalism and empiricism, to mention but a few. Rationalism holds that true knowledge can be gotten through the power of reason, with the help of logico mathematical method. For the empiricist, true knowledge can be arrived at through sense experience.

### **African Epistemology**

African epistemology is that epistemology which is rooted in the ontology of the Africans. It is an epistemological view that is consonant with African metaphysics. It adopts the view that knowledge is the understanding of the nature of forces and their cosmic interaction. Here, true wisdom or knowledge lies in ontological knowledge. It is the intelligence of forces, of their hierarchy, their cohesion and their interaction. It is an epistemology which holds that God is the supreme force, the supreme Agent of motion. He is also Wisdom in that He knows all forces, ordering, their dependence, their potential and their mutual interaction. Under this knowledge situation, a person is said to know or have wisdom in as much as he approaches divine wisdom. This happens when one's flesh becomes less fleshy; that is, the older a person gets, the more wisdom he has.

African epistemology is also founded on the foundation of unity. Epistemology from the African point of view is derived from the premise that knowledge is one form of togetherness. Put differently, the African believes not that "I" know, but "we" know. This perspective of epistemology, which is African in outlook, considers as a matter of necessity, the method through which African thought system is transferred from generation to generation. This means that the elderly and the wise men that are regarded as the purveyors of the thought system, are as important as the thought system itself. The epistemology under consideration is one that can be successfully articulated through the help of oral tradition.

### **Epistemic**

The word epistemic implies that proverb has the ability to create knowledge. Proverb has theoretical, rational and empirical potentials in the creation of knowledge or intellectual recreation. Proverb is a symbol of intelligence, rationality and also qualifies as a mechanism of survival. It remains a nature of knowledge as well as a source of knowledge with justificatory evidence.

### **LANGUAGE AND KNOWLEDGE**

Language is a product of the human mind, and has the power to structure physical objects to conform to what the mind perceives as being real. This is why language can be said to shape reality, and is used to name the objects in the physical world [Fram Cohen 1]. Thoughts in one's mind are made public by expressing them through language, language on the other hand helps to give an individual a mental representation of an object, which would not have been known. This relationship between language and reality is thus complimentary. It is one that exist between thought or ideas and object of knowledge. Language reveals our object of knowledge, and also helps to identify, communicate or express what is known about such object.

Language and thought are therefore related. This is evident in their complementary role. Language stimulates certain images or ideas in the hearer or reader, according to Jenkins. And that learning a new language goes with learning the frame of reference for meaning and thought that goes with such language. Learning the language of the local culture helps to mould our thought patterns into the proper thinking expected and required in the new culture. Here, language gives a unique internal insight into the thought world of the people who speak that language. This thought-world for him, is the realm in which concepts are set and decisions are made (1). Omoregbe argues in support of this view, thus "rationality is the power of thinking, but that thinking is inseparable from language, for thinking is done in and through a language. There can be no thinking without a language, because according to him, language is not just a vehicle through which thought is conveyed, but that the relationship between language and thought is much more than that of being a means through which thought is conveyed. Rather, thought cannot be formed except in a language" (37). Consequently, Isaac E. Ukpokolo's argues that "people have the capacity at birth to construct, understand and communicate thought symbols primarily by using language" (21). This position, though it parades the rationalist concept of innatism, suffices largely due to accumulation of experiences, which also influence one's mental construct.

J. H. Randall and J. Buchler, in a critical submission explain that the general position that language is an impediment to knowing, that it obstructs or distorts or is basically inadequate for genuine understanding, is by no means rare in the history of philosophy (123). They however observe that certain philosophers hold frankly that, knowledge is possible only because of language, mainly because we cannot be said to know what we cannot be said to know what we cannot express in language. Since the essence of knowledge is basically to solve existential problems, it follows that any knowledge that cannot be expressed, automatically fails to realize its fundamental purpose.

Jenkins captures this fundamental significance or role of knowledge in his attempt to identify the relationship between language, thought, knowledge and reality. He opines therefore that, "But I know the way I

frame my thoughts, define questions, sort answers, and reflect on life" (1). The truth here is that thought is closely related to language. So thought like ideas, knowledge or concepts, can be expressed through language as the easiest means of applying the wealth of one's ideas, wisdom, knowledge, intelligence etc towards solving issues of human existence. Ayn Rand puts it thus, "Any word has a referent in reality, and implies indirectly that all concepts can be described by their manifestation" (4).

#### **THE NEXUS BETWEEN AFRICAN (EFIK) PROVERBS/LANGUAGE AND AFRICAN EPISTEMOLOGY**

According to James'L. Christian, epistemology is the branch of philosophy which studies human knowledge. He explains that in exploring this field, we are touching one of evolution's fundamental mechanisms of survival, for it is by knowledge that we orient ourselves in the world. Accurate knowledge of our two worlds and the inner world correctly informs us of the conditions we must cope with. And that to know the facts is to survive, not to know or assess one's environment wrongly is to lose the fight or survival (161).

Ozumba avers that, "though the African is interested in knowledge, his immediate interest is not knowledge for knowledge sake, but knowledge as a way of enhancing his knowledge of the universe and the opportunity which it offers him in living harmoniously with nature (51). Infact, he argues that knowledge is indispensable for existence. The purpose of knowledge however it is sought for, is to improve on man's existential possibilities. The question is, how then is epistemology whether general or African, related to proverb or language? There are related essentially by their aims and purposes, taking into consideration Iroegbu's word, that the linguistic expression of a people is definitional of their essential being and acting, it is the soul of culture, the heart of the environment and the spirit that innovates and directs a people's life (134). In a nutshell, it is through the help of proverb or language, that the knowledge claim of a people is defined, clarified, expressed and used. This is true because an idea not well defined and whose meaning is not very clear cannot amount to anything if put to use. It is true therefore that one's local language is a door to the world of the people.

This paper explores African epistemology from three perspective, holistic view, ontological view and from oral tradition.

#### **Holistic View**

This approach to African epistemology is premised on the argument that knowledge about human experience does not call for self-detachment. Here, to know the truth about personal experience, a person must put himself in the context of that experience to feel, live with and grasp its relation. There is no sharp distinction between the ego and the world (Aja 79). Truth within this

African knowledge pattern is lived and felt, not only the thought of it, but involves the totality of man and his faculties. This epistemic approach holds that the subject cannot know the object if it is detached. Here, it means that there can be no knowledge of reality if an individual detaches himself from the object to be known. This is actually because everything for the African is full of life and with life force. Knowledge in this case is complimentary. Both subject and object of knowledge inputs into the process of knowing. This African approach to knowledge is really fulfilling in the sense that it affirms the argument that local language (proverbs), imparts to one's concepts, associations and feelings as well as insights which one would have ordinarily missed. It follows therefore as Aja argues, that to know the truth about personal experience, a person must put himself in the context of that experience to feel, live with and grasp its relation.

Consequently, Ozumba opines that, "African languages are very rich in terms of their linguistic malleability, profundity and resourcefulness. That a man who knows his language well has a great advantage and his words are more likely to be regarded as expressing the truth than those who do not have the mastery of their language. This is very true of African proverbs (language), because as part of people's language, proverb is truly the horse, which can carry one swiftly to the discovery of ideas. [Ver Steeg 27].

The above perception of language is realizable within the Efik culture. Offiong posits that information about Efik worldview are deduced from their folktales, myths, legend, poems, riddles and proverbs [50]. For example, in this Efik proverb that says, "Iyak ama asanga akanare ke mmong (idim) enye kut udia" (Chief Inok Oqua – Oral interview, 2009). (when a fish moves around in water (river) it finds food). This proverb simply reveals that, any normal human being must not think that the world is a bed of roses. Success does not come on a platter of gold and silver. One needs to strive very hard before success can be achieved in life. However, it is until investment is made that one will expect to reap and have the best of life. One does not just get the goodies of life like manna from heaven. All things hoped for must be worked for, else the effect of not working will certainly manifest in the life of such an individual usually in the form of poverty. The inseparability of ego and the world or subject and object in the wholistic knowledge pattern of the African is as a matter of fact exemplary of its worldview. In this worldview, realities are not seen as separate beings, but as one united existent, where all things are seen to be related or connected. It is a world that is relational. Events and relationships are seen as the main components of reality.

Under this wholistic view, knowledge is either given as an object nor sense datum in the event of perception, but a unity of experience in which the subject and object cannot be discriminated. This unity of experience according to A. F. Uduigwomen is associated with F. H. Bradley who refers to it as the felt totality in perception, which is in other words called immediate experience (37). Similarly, K. C. Anyanwu posits that there can be no knowledge of reality if an individual detaches himself from it, bearing in



mind that for the African, a life force, is not a passive spectator of the universe but one active participator of life-event. So he operates with the logic of aesthetics, which holds that the whole is real (94). Knowledge for this reason comes from the cooperation of all human faculties and experiences. He sees, feels, imagines, reasons, thinks and intuits all at the same time. Anyanwu therefore argues that it is only through this method that one can claim to have knowledge of the other.

Nasseem in light of the above, avers that African cosmology is unitary as opposed to the analytic world of the west. The traditional epistemology for him, does not approach the problem of knowledge by dividing its domain into the rational, empirical and mystical. Rather, in both the intellectual and the concrete divisions of reality, the three traits of thought-rational, empirical and mystical constitute a single mode of knowing (1). The African uses all the epistemic faculties he has in the process of knowing. He uses either the senses, rational faculty and or the spiritual forces at any time he desires to do so. It further goes to show that most Africans can be rationalist, empiricist and mystics all at the same time. Ijiomah supports this line of idea when he explains that the world of thought of the primitive African is a complex communicative and incommunicable experience, a mixture of mythical, religious and rational phenomena. This for him is a web that is called the natural thought pattern of the primitive African man. It is a thought pattern in which all involved patterns are harmonized. He calls it harmonious monism (135). We consider it a thought pattern that is related to each other, unitary and complimentary in outlook. Nasseem corroborates this position thus; that it is for this reason, impossible within the African cultural reality and experience to speak of art as if it were detached from mythical feelings and these feelings as if they were detached from moral principles and political idea (1). It is a setting that is strongly bound together by a force of oneness or unity of purpose. Ijiomah again argues that though the African passes spontaneous confidence in the ability of the senses as well as that of reason, their view of reality does not permit a separation between the sensible, rational and spiritual in the process of knowing. Rather, there is some degree of complementarity between all that are involved. He notes that for the African the "sources of knowledge include intuition, ancestral revelation, innate ideas and experience (12).

The wholistic approach to knowledge within African thought pattern, and as embedded in its worldview, is also a characteristic found in Efik worldview. It is expressed in the Efik proverb which says; "Eto isidaha ikpon iforo akai" (a tree does not make a forest) within the Efik society just like in the African worldview, no one individual is a reservoir of all knowledge. It is connected to the communal humanism of the African, in which case, success in any event is attributed to the complimentary effort of all section of the society. It portrays inter-dependence as a fruitful criteria for achieving one's goal in life. It is applied in events that affects humans socially. In another Efik proverb which says "ubok otuk edem, edem otuk ubok" (Chief Inok Oqua). (as the hand washes the back, the back washes the

hand). life is characterized by the principle of give and take. A task that is jointly sponsored, is easily accomplished. In this case, one who decides to live in isolation, that is, without learning from the experiences, mistakes and achievements of other members of his immediate surrounding is likely to fail in the race of life. It thus stresses on the need for teamwork as the key to unity and success, given the combined benefits resulting from complementarity in pursuing one's aspiration. This complimentary feature of the wholistic thought pattern in African epistemology, is captured by Hamminga thus; "knowledge is one form of togetherness. Togetherness is our ultimate criterion of any action, the pursuit of knowledge being just one of them" (1).

The basis of the said togetherness in traditional African knowledge is that it is social. Not "I", but "we" know. Traditionally speaking therefore, African epistemology is said to be founded on the ground that 'we are, therefore I am'. It means "I", presupposes a "we", "I" is contingent upon "we". An epistemology of this nature is thus a univocal term drawn from the ontological unity beneath the phenomenal (1). This outlook of African epistemology simply implies that in Africa, what is accepted as knowledge is deduced from inputs or ideas gained from all facets of the society. It is the society that approves of any claim to knowledge not the individual.

### **Ontological Approach**

Ontology is the branch of metaphysics which deals with the nature and mode of existence of things in the universe. Sometimes it is defined as the science of being as being. Ontological knowledge has been defined as the knowledge of the ontological balance of life forces, of their classification and hierarchy. In this chain of life forces, God is said to be at the apex, divinities are next in the hierarchy, then the ancestors, then the elders, and so on (Uduigwomen 38). Ontological knowledge, according to Nasseem, arises from the metaphysical oneness of the African past. He avers that African epistemology is rooted in its ontology. In a further explanation, he argues that metaphysics is necessary for art, morality, religion, economics, sociology, for the abstract sciences, as well as for every branch of human endeavour considered from one practical single. Such relevance, he maintains, is due to the fact that metaphysics is the foundation upon which one builds one's career consciously and unconsciously, it is the guide; the author of the human interest; and upon its truth or falsity depends what type of man you may develop into (1). The consonance of African epistemological view with its metaphysics he argues, presupposes that for the African, "being" is that which is force or the thing in so far as it is force. This means being is inconceivable without it being force or inherently endowed with force. African conception of reality holds that, the supreme force or supreme agent of motion is God. Based on this, African epistemology adopts the view that knowledge is the understanding of the nature of forces and their interaction. True wisdom (knowledge) under this epistemic pattern, lies in ontological

knowledge, it is the intelligence of forces, of their hierarchy, their cohesion and their interaction. Here, it is believed that God is also wisdom, in that He knows all forces, their ordering, the dependence, their potential and their mutual interaction (1).

Knowledge flows from the highest being (force) who is the wisdom itself as far as ontological hierarchy is concern in Africa. It is God that releases knowledge to other lesser forces. This conception of reality as held by the Africans is actually linked to its worldview, which says, God is the Creator of all things. It is further linked to the Efik worldview, which also holds that, it is "Akwa-abasi Ibom" (God Almighty) that created "ererimbot" (the world or universe), both spiritual and physical realm, and everything therein. A confirmation of the authentic nature of these worldviews, is found undisputably in the Bible. Thus, it is recorded in the book of proverbs chapter 1, verse 7, that "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge". And in chapter 2 of the same Proverbs, verses 6-7, the Bible adds that, "For the Lord gives wisdom, from His mouth come knowledge and understanding. He stores up sound wisdom for the upright" (594).

This Biblical injunction stands in opposition to Protagoras opinion that "man is the measure of all things." Bacon's position that no one creature is a measure of all the differences in the universe" (Tilts and Tilts 68), also calls for a reexamination of Protagora's dictum. We are rather inclined to think like Ijiohah, that although there are three forces that rule the universe, the power of man is physical, intellectual and spiritual, and that though man can change the world through his physical, rational or spiritual powers for good or evil, he is however limited. Spirit and ancestors influence the world also, because they are nearer to God, and so, are less limited than man. He argues again that God is supreme and his influence overtakes all other influences (134). This means that spiritual significance portrays the existence of something more powerful, but not material, born out of the assumption that the more powerful, immaterial and invisible metaphysical significance, subsequently subdues the subsidiary visible material aspect. What it simply implies is that God is all-knowing and is ultimately the source of all knowledge. Hamminga confirms the above when he writes that, "our community is a tree, (dead) ancestors are roots giving energy to the trunk, the adults, who in turn supply the branches, leaves and flowers, our children. The tree knows "we" know. The tree is the knowing subject" (1). Knowledge in the African thought pattern is what is given. It flows from the spiritual to the physical. It is what is revealed to man by divine forces.

Onywuenyi in the bid to explain the existence of forces, maintains that, for the African forces differ in their essence or nature. There is the divine force, terrestrial or celestial forces, human forces, and vegetable and even mineral forces (34). What is significant about the nature of forces classified here is that as Nasseem rightly explains, a person within the ontological flow of knowledge in African thought pattern, is said to know or have wisdom in as much as he approaches divine wisdom. One approaches divine knowledge when one's flesh becomes less fleshy, that is, the older a person gets, the

more wisdom he has (1 of 3). This is for him, the metaphysical rationale for the authority of the aged in African epistemology. The older members of African societies are regarded as very important human agent because there are the closet to ancestors, and are in-turn significant in the African ontological pattern on the basis that, they are not ordinary humans, but spirits. They are those who lived a good and honourable life and who were regarded as custodians of knowledge and wisdom within their families and communities. This is a perception deeply rooted in African worldview. Jenkins sums it thus, it might appear superficially that the African traditional view of the departed ancestors would indicate a sacred and a secular reality for Africa. But that it actually illustrates the unity of reality for the African.

The big question now is, how is African proverb or language related in the ontological knowledge flow? Or what role does language play in this thought pattern. The relationship between African proverbs or language is in the fact that a man who knows his language well has a great advantage and his words are more likely to be regarded as expressing the truth than those who do not have the mastery of their language. This idea is rightly expressed in the African (Efik) proverb that says, "Ama diogho nke, oworo mo diogho etete fo." (if you know proverbs, you know your forefathers and as such are more likely to know and speak the truth). The belief here is that one who speaks in proverb, has an indepth knowledge of his/her local language, that is, by his interaction with the elders of his community, who are considered wise based on their pool of experience in life. In other words, they have ideas, which reveal truth possibilities, or wisdom embedded in the thought pattern of his people. They are persons who have enjoyed the profuse use of proverbs among their elders. They are those who were brought up close to the ground, who have for long eaten of the prudent hands of the grey-haired. Thus proverbs are invaluable reservoir of age-old wisdom.

The importance of the aged or elders in the ontological knowledge pattern of the Africans is further demonstrated thus, "Osong owo osong ifiok", (He who is older than a person, is older in knowledge). The proverb expresses a universally held belief that naturally, the older a person is the more knowledgeable he/she is supposed to be, all things being equal. Simply, it shows that we can benefit immensely from the wisdom of those who may be older than us either in age or in experience. Within the ontological pattern of knowledge in Africa, and among the Efik people, a person is said to know or have wisdom in as much as he approaches divine wisdom. In this sense, one approaches divine knowledge when one's flesh becomes less fleshy. That is to say, the older a person gets, the more wisdom he has.

The elders are so important that it has even been said in a proverb that, "When the elder is not in town, the town witnesses destruction." In a nutshell, elders are so cherished and respected because of the experience they have garnered over the years. They are the custodians of wisdom and they are believed to be morally upright persons in whom the people repose a lot of confidence. The Efik proverbs we have used above are by their illustration and application, clear indication that African (Efik) proverbs/languages are



useful keys to express African epistemology or the knowledge claim of the Africans.

### **Oral Tradition**

The metaphysical rationale for the authority of the aged in African epistemology guarantees an examination of the role oral tradition plays in knowing or acquiring knowledge in traditional African thought pattern. We consider it germane to understand the meaning of oral tradition, before we articulate its relationship with African/Efik proverbs and African epistemology.

Oral tradition has been defined simply, to mean, those recollections of the past that are commonly or universally known in a given culture. There consist myths, legends, stories, proverbs, belief, folktales, songs and dances, liturgies, rituals, pithy sayings, riddles, adages, ideas, social attitudes, conventions, institutions and customs (Uduigwomen 39). There are, in other words, testimonies of the past which are deliberately transmitted from mouth to mouth. It forms the main available source for a reconstruction of the past (Andah 203). Implied in this definition is the fact that oral tradition is formed out of the intangible heritages of the African past, which are handed down to future generations through words of mouth. The question now is why is the word of mouth preferred than any other means? Vincent Muli Wa Kituku answers the question, by arguing that, the human voice is the key element in oral tradition. Oral tradition relies on human voice to communicate varied messages. Voice was the vehicle in which knowledge was passed on from generation to another. Voice unified a family, clan or community. Enforcement of customs depends on voice. It is for such reasons he argued, when a person died, his or her voice was no longer heard. It meant then, as if a whole library had been destroyed, because of the importance of voice (2 of 3).

To buttress the position above, Uduigwomen avers that the importance of oral tradition, lies in their ability to convey religious feelings, sentiments, aesthetic feelings, ideas and truth (39). He argues that oral tradition are important means of transmitting knowledge in African traditional society, through handing down of thought system from generation to another by words of mouth or by practice. This is actually where African (Efik) proverbs or language becomes useful in African epistemology. This is because, as Uduigwomen further posits, the practice of transmitting the African traditional thought pattern was, and is the sole responsibility of the elders and the wise-men who are regarded as the purveyors of the thought system. The elderly Africans see themselves as duty bound to bring up their children in line with the all-important traditional education. In this case, traditional education occupied a fundamental place in the up-bringing of a child, essentially, due to the fact that, Africans believed that knowledge starts with the understanding of oral tradition (40). Again, a child who lacks such knowledge (oral tradition) cannot be regarded as having known anything at

all. If one may ask the rationale behind the authority acquired by elders in African societies, the answer is simply in the fact that, they are the ones that are firstly, nearest to the divine force or source of knowledge. Secondly, they know or have detailed knowledge of their languages. By this, they are able to express truth about their worldviews, having mastered their languages. The elders usually make use of proverbs to drive home their points, this is why it is said that proverb is the oil with which words are eaten. Moreso, if one knows proverbs, it is believed that such a person had known his/her forefathers, and is likely to speak the truth, arising from his in-depth knowledge about his culture.

In addition, the Africans believe that, if one uses proverbs for the knowledgeable, he will be led to deeper knowledge. All that is implied here is specifically that, in the African setting, knowledge has a very serious link with language (Ozoigbo 46). Again, the repetition of stories, proverbs (which is part of a people's language) and traditional sayings, are integral element of culture corresponding among illiterate people to literature among the literate (Le Gros Clark et al 206). What we are trying to bring out here is the point that the truth, idea, concepts, wisdom, experiences and lessons which make up or enrich African thoughts, were stored in, and transferred through proverb or word of mouth. There were stored in the memories of the African man. These memories were likened to the book libraries of today. So in the event of death of an elder, it indirectly lead to destruction of memories that could have been consulted when the need arises.

The positions and arguments advanced so far, agree with the tenet of Uduigwomen, that the study of African epistemology cannot be successfully carried out without an examination of how the African thought system were transferred from generation to generation. He maintains also that the question what is African epistemology, can be asked along side with the question – what principles under-lie the acceptance of any body of knowledge said to be purely African? The answer, according to him, is simply that these principles cannot be located in any written works of individual philosophers, but in the oral traditions of the African people. It implies for him, therefore, that there is no way one can explain African epistemology without a reference to the tradition that is orally expressed (42). It is very true of African epistemology because of the significant part played by the human voice in the knowing process. The truth about this human voice, as the key way of transmitting knowledge in African epistemology is foundational to the idea of Grace A. Ogot. Here, Ogot posits that only through the oral tradition – music, folk songs, myths and other oral arts does the African utilize various means of knowing (Nasseem, Zubairi 'b, 1). To explain this is to say that oral tradition is the single instrument that offers one the opportunity to knowledge within the African thought system. As she explains further, African legends are expressions of oral literacy activities, and that the distinctive feature of this literature is that it represents a form of collective or group activity.

Proverb is a form of oral tradition, expressed as a coded language of a particular culture but remains an indisputable source of all human wisdom in Africa, and even among the Efik culture. The Efik proverbs are used severally and on daily basis, basically for the proffering of solution to the daily needs of the people. Such Efik proverbs are loaded with ideas and wisdom of the people, and are demonstrated by its application, as a way of finding solution to different conflict situations which arises in daily human or social interaction. For instance, a proverb like this, "Akpan owo utuk enye akpan mkpa", is translated in English to mean (He who stops two persons from quarreling, prevents death). Its illustration shows that this proverb is used when a grave consequence is envisaged, arising from a misunderstanding or quarrel between two persons. It points to the fact that in the midst of such bitter ranchor or violence, if a third person who is neutral gives an advice, that is ask them to stop quarrelling, it is believed that the adviser is indirectly trying to stop an impending death, which may arise as a result of the envisaged fight that would ensue from the quarrel. This proverb is applied mostly when there is need to enhance peaceful and harmonious living among people. It encourages us to be our brother's keeper and to be always ready to help our neighbours out of harmful events that cannot be clearly understood. This proverb really shows that Efik/African proverbs which are part of the people's oral tradition, can truly be utilized for knowing.

#### **THE EPISTEMIC RELEVANCE OF AFRICAN PROVERBS**

Having articulated, explained and established the basis for, and the relationships between proverbs and language, language and knowledge and that of African proverbs (language) and African epistemology, the epistemic relevance of African proverbs can be deduced as follows: The usage of proverbs in any tribe or society implies the application of the wisdom, truth, morals, experience, lessons and advice, contained in such proverbs to issues that enhance the living condition of human beings. It provides knowledge needed by man, which he uses as a guide while interacting with his environment. In other words, it is with such insight that man is able to understand his world, and thus makes progress. It is my considered opinion therefore that proverbs have philosophical significance in the sense that the basic essence for the use of proverbs is similar to the fundamental nature and purpose of philosophy. Philosophy is an aspect of the general human intellectual endeavour to acquire self-knowledge – that is, knowledge of the human person in relation to the environment. That philosophy is nothing unless it permits the kind of self-examination that enables persons (both individual and as social collectives) to look into themselves and affect their environments in positive ways (13). Oladipo avers further that the philosophical enterprise is concerned with activities which have ultimate connection to human condition and provide a vantage position from which to

have a clearer, even deeper view of the human condition (17). Philosophy, he says again, is the search for the guide of life (21). This philosophical purpose is the same with that of proverbs. Our argument, therefore, is that it is only through an epistemological approach, that the aim of proverb, which is philosophical, can be attained.

It suffices therefore as Ozumba opines that "epistemology is the core of philosophy (38), as well as a catalyst for philosophical development (39). Proverbs (language), philosophy and epistemology as necessary sine-qua-non to build a thorough theory of knowledge. This is in view of the definition given by L. O. Bamikole, that knowledge, an individual or a group of individuals are able, to some extent, to control its environment in virtue of a privileged access to information, especially about the future. It tends to have a peace of mind which will enable it plan and organize its life (31). Thus since the major reason for which proverbs are used falls in line with the general aims of both philosophy and epistemology, then African (Efik) proverbs have indubitable significance in the construction of a worthwhile and generally accepted African epistemology. Based on the above justification, Efik proverbs have relevance in any epistemology that can be said to be truly African, reasons that if we take a look at the Efik proverbs used in this study, it really shows that those proverbs, just as in their illustration and application, are used to define and give meaning to real human and existential issues concerning the welfare and living condition of man, as he strives to succeed in life.

We argue therefore that African (Efik) proverbs have epistemic relevance for the following reasons:

It is of epistemic relevance in view of the fact that, as part of African oral tradition, it delivers explanation to the mysteries of the African worldview, and the meaning of life on earth. It suffices, as earlier argued, that language is a means of describing reality. Again, given the fact that culture itself is derived from "Colere", meaning to cultivate one's self in an effort to attain the ideal of wisdom[Ukpokolo]. it follows that proverbs, language and a people's culture work together to achieve a single purpose. This is because proverbs and language are useful in defining and clarifying the aspirations of a people. In this case, it helps to direct and guide their life, which is also fundamental in the philosophic and above all, epistemic activities.

The import of proverb, agrees with several definition of epistemology. One of such definition by James L. Christian. says, epistemology is the branch of philosophy, which studies human knowledge. He explains that in exploring this field, we are touching one of evolution's fundamental mechanism of survival, for it is by knowledge that we orient ourselves in the world. "Accurate knowledge of our two worlds and the inner world correctly informs us of the conditions we must cope with. And that to know the facts is to survive, not to know or assess one's environment wrongly, is to loss the fight for survival" (161). Olusegun Oladipo agrees with the salient import of our definition of proverb and or epistemology. He argues that knowledge is



crucial to human survival and flourishing. It is for him one means by which human beings seek to master and control their environment and regulate their social interaction.

A careful presentation of both definitions of proverb and epistemology reveals that there have the same role in the society. This role is that there create knowledge needed by man and which aims at guiding him to understand properly, his universe, and so is able to make progress, having gained good information. His success in life is dependent on such knowledge.

This paper contends strongly that because proverb plays a role, which is to give man the means to rule his environment, then it is goal-tending and therefore shares in the essential, central and fundamental role of all epistemology. Hence it has epistemic relevance. Any conscious use of proverb, is for the promotion of human existence. Whenever or wherever a proverb is conceived, the wisdom, truth, experience, lessons and advice there contain invokes ideas or knowledge which are usually applied to settle issues about life. The African is not left out in this endeavour.

Proverbs also have epistemic relevance in the sense that the wisdom and experience of the African people were stored or preserved by memories in form of proverb. There serve as theoretical base of African epistemology, from which practical wisdom are expressed. This practical wisdom manifest during settlement of disputes, in which case proverbs are used to smoothen or achieve sound deliberation. When judgement is eventually passed, proverb serves as the means through which theoretical ideas are expressed as practical wisdom. It is for this reason that J. I. Omoregbe opined that "since the philosophy of the African was preserved by memory rather than by books, the memories of the elderly should be consulted in order to find out the reasoning process that led to those knowledge which have been handed down to us (Uduigwomen 41). This applies to almost all disciplines, where theoretical wisdom serve as engine or power-house, from which ideas are drawn for practical application.

The epistemic relevance of proverbs is also revealed in the rational capability of the African man. It shows that the African mind is creative, and can achieve or arrive at truth or reality through thinking. The ideas conceived by the African can better be expressed in his peculiar language, which is unique. These ideas that are orally expressed offer the speaker the privilege of originality. Like Descartes will put it, as quoted by Quine, man is the only animal endowed with mind, the others are automata. Man is the only animal endowed with language, and that no appreciable, mental activity is conceivable without linguistic aids (Quine 80). Descartes position is true because it is only man that can think and acknowledge, appreciate and express what is known. It dispels the argument by Henry Olela that the African mind is in no way capable of any systematic philosophy, on the basis that man whether in the West or Africa has a mind, and a language, which are very essential, and a sine qua non for any epistemology or rational activity to be conceived.

Proverb, serve as a means of transmitting traditional African knowledge. It share the same fundamental aim of epistemology due to the fact that it helps man to understand and master his environment, in order to enhance his living. Our contention, therefore, is that it has epistemic relevance, in as much as it reaffirms the nature of philosophy as the search for the guide of life (Ebijuwa 21); and also because epistemology is a catalyst for philosophical development (Ozumba 39). This is a truism, as epistemology is a core area of philosophy. It is moreso because, philosophy is both content and method. Its major business being knowledge bought and sold in the international and intercultural philosophic market of ideas (38).

Proverbs, we would opine again, have undoubted epistemic relevance for one very obvious reason. One of such reasons is the fact that in the hierarchy of beings, man is the fourth agent, (the gods, divinities, ancestors, then elders). This position of man in the hierarchy of beings, makes man privilege. It is this age long experience that gives man the insight, wisdom etc which they express through proverbs. It is indubitable that in all African societies the words of elders, spoken through proverbs are held in high esteem. This is so because when these elders preside over meetings, their judgement reveals truth that carries exceptional abilities and virtue. No wonder Ozumba avers that knowledge is the reprehensive views or opinions of the select cream of the community that is sampled and accepted (45). It suffices again why Berkeley's position as cited in Magee, that truth is the cry of all, but the game of few can be accepted as being true. (Magee III). It is moreso for the same reason, that we accept Nasseem's position that, one approaches divine knowledge when one's flesh becomes less fleshly, that is, the older a person gets, the more wisdom he has (1). This for him, is the metaphysical rationale for the authority of the aged in African epistemology. Elders really, convey the wisdom of gods through proverb, as their words they say, are the words of the gods.

The epistemic relevance of proverbs also derives from the fact that as a means of transmitting traditional African knowledge, it cannot be empty of ideas. It is a symbol of intelligence. This is why oral traditions are always seen as didactic. Indeed, from the tale, to the myth, proverbs and riddles and even epic narrations, there is always a teaching to pull, a value to instill in the child. A. F. Uduigwomen summarises that, in some African societies, proverbs are a means for formal education and transmission of cultural traditions as well as instruments of education and socialization (132). It is again for the same reason that he further argues that for the Africans, knowledge start with the understanding of oral tradition (40). I agree with him because it is in the culture of the people that reality is revealed and life is made meaningful.





### CONCLUSION

From the foregoing, this paper has been able to articulate precisely that to do African philosophy in the real sense, the said philosopher cannot reflect on the African experience without giving adequate attention to the people's oral tradition in general and proverbs in particular. This is because apart from the ability of proverb to carry one swiftly to the discovery of ideas, it as well enables one to penetrate or have access into a people's way of thinking, beliefs, metaphysics, ethics and knowledge. This proverbs which is a product of a people's language, is also the transmitting medium of whatever meaning it gives. Its epistemic relevance in African epistemology is anchored on the fact of its relationship with the very essence for which knowledge is need. Specifically, that of enhancing or improving the life of those who seek to have it. This is obvious in the different Efik proverbs used to demonstrate such relevance in this work. One can see conspicuously that every Efik proverb, has a referent in life and performs an epistemic role, that of guiding an individual rationally in the pursuit of his/her life endeavour.

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