

DIVINATION AS A THEORY IN AFRICAN EPISTEMOLOGY

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Abstract

This work is a philosophical exploration of divination as a theory in African epistemology. The motivation behind this is that apart from the derogatory remarks about divination as a theory of knowledge and justification, African epistemology seems to be an underexplored aspect of African philosophy. Again, until the dynamics in accessing knowledge within the African space is explored and connected, we may be jeopardizing objectivity and certainty in our knowledge claims and indeed the scope and the richness of what we can know. To this end, the work argues that African epistemology is a holistic approach to the issue of knowledge and for this to be achieved, both the physical and quasi-physical realities that make up African ontology must coalesce, be properly understood, and connected. Thus, the paper argues that divination as an African theory of knowledge is an attempt to give a comprehensive and holistic insight into what it means to know and how knowledge is achieved in the African space. To go about this, the work subscribes to the analytic and critical methods of philosophical analysis as useful tools.

Keywords: Divination, Knowledge, Justification, Epistemology, Africa.

Introduction

In the past decades in the history of African philosophy, some African philosophers and scholars have made a significant attempt to build different philosophical systems. Significant efforts have been committed toward the project of African philosophy, ranging from decolonial studies, moral thoughts, global injustice, etc., however, much has not been done when it comes to African epistemology especially when it comes to the formulation of theories¹

¹ Chimakonam J. and Ogbonnaya L., *African Metaphysics, Epistemology, and a New Logic: A Decolonial Approach to Philosophy* (Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 197.

Recently, Jonathan Chimakonam² propounded his theory of cogno-normative epistemology. According to this theory, knowledge is both cognitive and normative. Thus, questions concerning knowledge are not only about the nature of knowledge but also about the value and impact of knowledge on human existence. Within this theory, it must also be added that the integrity and the moral fiber of the subject who makes knowledge claims or dishes out such knowledge is expedient in lending credence to the objectivity and certainty of such knowledge claim. Also, Evaristus Eyo and Precious Obioha³, building on the complementary philosophy of Innocent Asouzu⁴ developed the system of complementary epistemology as an attempt to solve the problem of epistemic injustice against women in African epistemology. African epistemology here, is grounded on the complementary logic devoid of any form of bifurcation and polarization. All these are attempts to give African epistemology a human face and the richness it deserves. That is, an African epistemology that is all-inclusive, all-comprehensive and seeks to bring value to human existence and improve the human condition, especially regarding knowledge. However, what is still left out are formidable theories of knowledge that will pay attention to the quasi-physical source(s) of knowledge.

In this work, we shall seek to present the old question with a new understanding. That is, the question of theories of African epistemology shall be represented using the new paradigm. It is an old question because it has been there right from the time past, interrogating it in the new paradigm implies that we shall employ new logic of complementation paying attention to African ontological reality as the raw material for African epistemology. The work shall seek to argue for divination as one of the African theories of knowledge, this portrays the comprehensive outlook in African epistemology. It shows that both the physical and quasi-physical realities are parts of the whole in the African knowledge economy.

For purpose of clarity, the paper shall be divided into two parts. The first part shall discuss African theories of knowledge, the aim is to engage in a different understanding of what constitutes knowledge and how knowledge is produced within the African epistemic space. This shall be followed by a discourse on divination as an African theory of knowledge, within this fulcrum, we shall argue that for there to be a comprehensive epistemic enterprise, both the physical and quasi-physical realities must enter into a conversation to complement each other while retaining individual identities. This will

² Chimakonam J., “The Knowledge Question in African Philosophy: A Case for Cogno-normative Epistemology”, in *Atuolu Omalu: Some Unanswered Questions in Contemporary African Philosophy*, ed. Chimakonam J. (Maryland: University Press of America, 2015), 671.

³ Eyo E. and Obioha P., “African Epistemology and Epistemic Injustice Against Women: Complementary Epistemology to the Rescue”, *Sapientia Journal of Philosophy* 16 (2022): 154.

⁴ Asouzu I., *Ibuanyidanda: New Complementary Ontology Beyond World Immanentism, Ethnocentric Reduction and Imposition* (Munster: Litverlag, 2007), 27.

bring about an inclusive epistemology devoid of injustice and unnecessary bifurcation and polarization.

African theories of knowledge

How do Africans come to the knowledge of reality? This “how” question seeks to unravel ways through which Africans come to the knowledge of reality. In answering this question, different theories have emerged, each trying to offer a robust means or ways in which Africans understand reality. However, it must be understood here that beneath African theories of knowledge, lies African ontology as the foundation of knowledge. Thus, to understand the African knowledge system, one needs to understand the African ontological view which depicts both reality and logic.

For instance, Ukpokolo⁵ argues that knowledge is achieved in African society when there is epistemological intercourse between the knowing subject and the object of knowledge. This position entails that there is no abstraction or alienation between the object and the subject of knowledge, rather, a close relationship, a conversation. The plausibility of this theory could be adjudged when arguing for epistemic relatedness. Epistemic relatedness here means an undeniable relationship or nexus between the object and subject of knowledge to produce knowledge. Anselm Jimoh⁶ underscores this point when he argues that “there cannot be knowledge of reality if man detaches himself from reality, the subject is always involved, seeing and thinking, as well as experiencing and discovering reality”. This means that the subject and the object of knowledge must meet at the point of conversation where vistas for knowledge are opened. This is in itself a critique of Hursel’s transcendental epoche.

Similarly, Jonathan Chimakonam⁷ argues that knowledge is both cognitive and normative. The argument is that we can come to the knowledge of reality through the process of cognition and moral norms. This will give African epistemology a human face. It is a kind of knowledge aimed at solving man's existential problems in his environment. Cogno-normative epistemology seeks to show the epistemic value of any knowledge claims. Here, the epistemic value is not only on mere possession of knowledge, but also on the process of such possession and the instrumentality of such knowledge in terms of its socio-moral value. Within this purview, the intellectual burden or responsibility of

⁵ Ukpokolo I., “Enriching the Knowledge of the Other through Epistemology of Intercourse” in *Handbook of African Philosophy of Difference*, ed. Elvis Imafidon (Cham: Springer, 2020), 76.

⁶ Jimoh A., “An African Theory of Knowledge” in *Themes, Issues, and Problems in African Philosophy*, ed. Isaac Ukpokolo (Cham: Springer, 2017), 127.

⁷ Chimakonam Jonatham. and Ogonnaya Lawrence., *African Metaphysics, Epistemology, and a New Logic: A Decolonial Approach to Philosophy* (Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 33.

epistemologists is not only to show the nature of knowledge, but also the implication of any epistemic adventure. Tersely, it suffices to argue that while the cognitive component of knowledge seeks to reach certainty or greater understanding, the normative component seeks to weigh the moral value of the cognitive component⁸ It must also weigh the integrity and the moral fiber of the person who holds such claim. For instance, if the subject is such a character that is always fraudulent, given to lies, a cheat, a morally bankrupt personality, whatever knowledge she makes claim to or advances would be held with a pinch of salt or sometimes outrightly rejected because from experience, she lacks the integrity or the moral capital to command acceptance and approbation for knowledge justification⁹

Tavernaro-Haidarian¹⁰ developed the idea of deliberative epistemology which is predicated on *Ubuntu*. “Deliberative epistemology” is derived from the cohesive, harmonious, and relational notions of power implicit in *ubuntu* and from the related concept of “deliberation culture”¹¹ The idea of deliberative epistemology seeks to establish an African-inspired epistemological framework, predicated on Ubuntu with inspiration from conversational philosophy and complementary reflection. She argues that there are three orientations in African epistemology: “the theological orientation, Western orientation, and pure African orientation”¹² For Tempels¹³, Idowu¹⁴ and Mbiti¹⁵, the theological orientation is those religionists who proposed that an African way of knowing follows from African ontology and that Africans have known God well before being colonized. The Western orientation, on the other hand, are those who reject the ethnocentric nature of African epistemology and used Western concepts to interpret African experience such as Horton¹⁶ and Wiredu¹⁷ while the African orientation is those who exerted effort to study African epistemology by adopting distinctly African categories in the persons of Bedu-Addo¹⁸ and Hallen and Sodipo¹⁹. This last set as argued by Tavernaro-Haidarian²⁰, seeks to liberate non-Western epistemic space from the Western hegemony.

⁸ Jonatham and Lawrence, “African Metaphysics”, 180.

⁹ Obioha Precious, “Authentic Personhood in Traditional Igbo (Africa) Thought” *OGIRISI: A New Journal of African Studies* 16, no. 1(2020): 113.

¹⁰ Tavernaro Haidarian, “Deliberate Epistemology: Towards an Ubuntu-based Epistemology that Accounts for a priori knowledge and Objective Truth”, *South African Journal of Philosophy* 37, no. 2 (2018): 232.

¹¹ Haidarian, “Deliberate Epistemology”, 229.

¹² Haidarian, “Deliberate Epistemology”, 231.

¹³ Tempels P., *Bantu Philosophy* (Paris:Presence Africaine, 1959), 21.

¹⁴ Idowu Bolaji, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief* (London:Longman Group, 1962), 68.

¹⁵ Mbiti John, *African Religions and Philosophies* (New York:Anchor Books, 1969), 11.

¹⁶ Horton R., “African Traditional Thought and Western Science”, *Africa* 37 (1967): 19.

¹⁷ Wiredu Kwasi, “Conceptual Decolonization as an Imperative in Contemporary African Philosophy: Some Personal Reflections”, *Philosophies Africaines* 36 (1985): 85.

¹⁸ Bedu-Addo J., “On the Concept of Truth in Akan” in *Philosophy in Africa: Trends and Perspectives*, ed. Peter Bodurin (Ife: University of Ife Press, 1985), 98.

¹⁹ Hallen Barry and Sodipo Olubi, *Knowledge, Belief and Witchcraft: Analytic Experiment in African Philosophy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 17.

²⁰ Haidarian, “Deliberate Epistemology”, 232.

This accordingly creates a debate between those who believe that there should be a distinctive way of accounting for knowledge within African space and those who believe that human experiences are universal and the same. It becomes imperative to posit that the African way of knowing is different from the Western way of knowing; it was on this note that Ruch and Anyanwu²¹, differentiate African epistemology from Western methods by emphasizing that the sense of interdependence of subject and object, self and external world, material and immaterial world, physical and spiritual world, as it relates to sense-perception, imagination, intuition, and reason. These bring about the tension between the Particularists and the Universalists. It was on this note that deliberative epistemology becomes relevant.

Erected on the foundation of complementarity and conversationalism, deliberative epistemology is “profoundly other-centered”²² because knowledge within this purview emphasizes listening to others as they narrate their own experiences and giving consideration and attention to other perspectives. It can be rightly argued that it is an inclusive, complementary as well as a discursive epistemology since everyone shares their ideas with others with no feeling of being subjugated, eclipsed, hegemonized and undermined²³. This points to the relative nature of knowledge and truth which are contextual-dependent rather than objective; thus, according to Tavernaro-Haidarian, “different knowledge or truths are thought to emerge from the same discourse because each person adds to it their contextual positions”²⁴. In furtherance of the argument, Tavernaro-Haidarian posits that:

It is distinctive yet not opposed to, but rather bound up with other ways of thinking and seeing. In this way, its knowledge base enriches other knowledge bases while also learning from them. This open-mindedness allows for a “fusion of horizons” and a “pooling of knowledge drawn from all.” ... Ubuntu epistemology recognizes and works “with” rather than against other ways of knowing, creating space for self-disclosure and cross-cultural validation²⁵.

From the above locution, it can be said that deliberative epistemology seeks to give equal consideration to all cultures and people within the epistemic space. Deliberative epistemology is based on the principles of *ubuntu* and transcends some of the tensions and binaries that ensue when we assess reality through the dominant lens²⁶. It is predicated on social relations of power and harmony without any form of tension-laden hegemony. However, it has been argued that Deliberative

²¹ Ruch A, and Anyanwu K, *An Introduction to the Main Philosophical Trends in Contemporary Africa* (Rome: Catholic Book Agency, 1981), 308.

²² Haidarian, “Deliberate Epistemology”, 233.

²³ Jonatham and Lawrence, “African Metaphysics”, 179.

²⁴ Haidarian, “Deliberate Epistemology”, 234.

²⁵ Haidarian, “Deliberate Epistemology”, 233.

²⁶ Haidarian, “Deliberate Epistemology”, 238

Epistemology (DE) is a conversational philosophy and complementary reflection because it is located within a framework of conversational philosophy and draws on discursive elements provided by deliberation culture²⁷. Her idea of complementarity explicitly entails interrelatedness and interdependency in the process of knowledge production, which reflects Asouzu's dictum that "anything that exists serves as missing links of reality"²⁸ corroborated by Obioha²⁹ while conversational disposition is explicit in her critical engagement of the ideas which leads to contestation and protestation of different epistemic views; More importantly, it has been able to pave the way for inclusive epistemic hegemony which will give an equal epistemic right to all within African epistemic space; it is through this approach that epistemic injustice can be overcome and epistemic balance achieved. this complementarity is pertinent for development.³⁰

Complementary epistemology (CE) is yet another African theory of knowledge. The idea of complementary epistemology as espoused by Eyo and Obioha³¹ is an offshoot of Innocent Asouzu's complementary reflection. Complementary epistemology holds that knowledge is not achieved through any form of bifurcation of reality, but rather through a complementary framework during which both the physical and quasi-physical realities are considered. This will pave way for an inclusive epistemic edifice erected on the foundation of justice and equality. This epistemic outlook aims to obliterate the problem of epistemic injustice and marginalization which has kept African epistemology at the margin of intellectual and philosophical discourse. The value of complementary totalizing mindset minimizes the individualized atomistic mode of rationality that enthrones selfishness and hegemony in knowledge economy³². Complementary epistemology attempts to remove the tension and unequal binary opposition created by mainstream epistemology through bivalent logic. It opposes all forms of exclusion, marginalization, and seconderization of any epistemic view. Eyo and Obioha underscore this point when they posit thus:

...we ground African epistemology on complementary logic, which is trivalent, thus, African epistemology should be done in a complementary way in which all stakeholders and mature discussants

²⁷ Jonatham and Lawrence, "African Metaphysics", 181.

²⁸ Asouzu I., "*Ibuanyidanda*", 27.

²⁹ Obioha Precious, "An Afro-communal Ethic for Good Governance", *ACTA UNIVERSITATIS DANUBIUS* 13, no.1 (2020): 26.

³⁰ Obioha Precious, "A Communitarian Understanding of the human person as a philosophical basis for human development", *The Journal of Pan African Studies* 6, no. 8 (2014): 252.

³¹ Eyo E. and Obioha P., "African Epistemology", 155.

³² Obioha Precious, "An Afro-communal Ethic for Good Governance", 31.

are allowed to blaze their epistemic trail without any form of discrimination³³.

The preceding entails that complementary epistemology subscribes to the trivalent logical system which according to Chimakonam³⁴ is a prototype of African logic. Complementary epistemology frowns at the unequal binary bifurcations such as knower/known, mind/body, subject/object, reason/emotion, rationality/irrationality, substance/accident, superior/inferior, etc. thus, an attempt at the deconstruction of these existing dichotomies or reverses the privileging of the rational discourse in favour of men to accommodate all perspective in knowledge production and distribution. It incorporates all aspects of reality as means of achieving knowledge of reality. It is important to note that the ontology that guides African epistemology is the “philosophy of integration”³⁵. This entails that African epistemology is a holistic approach to knowledge, it is beyond rational/empirical dichotomy as it pays attention to both physical and non-physical realities. At this point, divination as a theory of knowledge is justified within the African knowledge economy. We shall now turn to another section for a detailed discussion of this theory of knowledge.

Divination as a theory of knowledge in African Epistemology

In the preceding section, we have discussed different recent theories in African epistemology, the aim was to show the contemporary trends in African epistemology and to make a case for divination as a theory of African epistemology. It is not a gainsaying that there are different theories of knowledge in African epistemology, and one of them is divination. Unfortunately, divination has not been given much attention because it is seen as spiritism or fetish. It is only referenced as a means of justification³⁶, or as a means of revealing knowledge. However, within the context of this work, we shall contextualize divination as an African theory of knowledge; as a theory of knowledge, it shows how comprehensive, inclusive knowledge is achieved both by paying attention to the physical and quasi-physical/spiritual realities.

We begin by stipulating that divination is “a power in man which foresees and explains those signs which the gods throw in his way, and the diviner must therefore know the disposition of the gods towards men, the import of their signs, and by what means these signs are to be obtained”³⁷. Interestingly, some scholars have argued that African epistemology centres around a supernatural approach devoid of any form of rigorosity, criticality, and logicity. However, this allegation of

³³ Eyo E. and Obioha P., “African Epistemology”, 153.

³⁴ Chimakonam Jonatham, Ezumezu: A System of Logic for African Philosophy and Studies (Cham: Springer, 2019), 19.

³⁵ Anyanwu K, *The African Experience in the American Market Place: A Scaring Indictment of western Scholars and their Distortion of African Culture* (New York: Exposition Press, 1983), 309.

³⁶ Nwosimiri O, *Epistemology in African Philosophy* (Kwasulu: University of Kwasulu Natal, 2020), 5.

³⁷ Schmitz L, “Divinatio” in *A Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities*, ed. Smith, W.(London: John Murray, 1875), 415.

supernaturalism as constituting African epistemology is misleading because African epistemology is erected on the logic of conversation and complementarity³⁸, but at the same time does not rule out the place of divination as a source of knowledge. As a theory of knowledge, divination entails a kind of knowledge gotten through the process of revelation. Here, it is believed that the knowledge of the past, present, and future can be achieved when a proper inquiry is done, it also aids in the understanding of the cause of a particular event. John Woodward³⁹ underscores this when he argues that divination is “an attempt to form and possess an understanding of reality in the present, and additionally, to predict events and reality of a future time.” This entails that African epistemology does not entertain skepticism because there is always a possibility of knowing something.

Divination is a veritable means of epistemic justification in African epistemology. African epistemology is said to have a “context-dependent approach to the justification of knowledge and is predicated on African ontology”⁴⁰, and this ontology is both physical and spiritual. This ontology accentuates African worldview. In expressing what constitutes the African worldview, Lancinay Keita⁴¹ opines that, “The thought systems of the ancient Egyptians represent the most literate expression of the African in ancient history. These thought systems were based on the essentially African view of the world as being both subject to empirical and metaphysical interpretations...”. Keita appreciates the dynamism between the spirit world and the physico-material world. In the same vein, Christopher Udofia writes that, “The African believes that the whole universe, that is, the visible and invisible world is charged with the life-force and that this life force is in constant interaction with each other”⁴². For Udofia, the world, albeit reality is viewed as a unitary sphere. According to him, “It is a world where everything interpenetrates, where the physical and the spiritual coalesce. It simply a world of amazing unity and interaction among all things”⁴³. Therefore, any genuine attempt to make a gnoseological meaning of reality within the African space must recognise and appreciate this unity and interconnectedness of the physical and the spiritual in African causal explanations.

As reported in the extant literature, both the physical and the spiritual realms constitute objects of knowledge in Africa. To have a holistic view of reality, one must know both the physical and supra-

³⁸ Jonatham and Lawrence, “African Metaphysics”, 181.

³⁹ Woodford J, *Culture and Customs of the Central African Republic* (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2006), 31.

⁴⁰ Jimoh A, “African Epistemology” in *Themes, Issues and Problems in African Philosophy*, ed. Isaac Ukpokolo (Cham: Springer, 2017), 194.

⁴¹ Keita L, “African Philosophy” in *African Philosophy: An Introduction*, ed. Richard Wright (USA: University Press of America, 1979), 65.

⁴² Udofia Christopher, “A Comparative Analysis of the Notion of Causality in Western and African Thoughts” in *From Footmarks to Landmarks on African Philosophy*, ed. Andrew Uduigwomen (Lagos: Obaroh and Ogbinika Publishers, 2009), 565.

⁴³ Udofia Christopher, “Causality in Western and African Thoughts”, 565.

sensible (quasi-physical) realm since, according to Jimoh⁴⁴, knowing the intentions (spirits) provides grounds for understanding physical occurrences. He further stressed that Africans conceive reality as one large system in which personalism is expressed in concrete consubstantiation of spirit. This implies that both the physical and spiritual realms are necessary for understanding reality in the African context. African weltanschauung (which is very important and necessary for making a gnoseological sense of reality) coalesce the physical and the spiritual, the material and the immaterial worlds and present them as being dependent in understanding reality in the African space. It is experiential knowledge that takes into cognizance all aspects of reality because knowledge in the African context is the combination of spirit and matter, and it is predicated on the ontology of integration; this ontology is unitary and communal as it sees beings or realities as interconnected and interrelated. This does not in any way imply that Africans are not critical in their knowledge pursuit as erroneously claimed by some anti-Africans and Eurocentric scholars, rather, just like Kantian phenomena and noumena, African epistemology is also beclouded with both perceptible and transcendent realms. But unlike Kant's noumena which cannot be penetrated by the human mind, the transcendent realm can be known in African epistemology, and this is possible through the process of divination. This accounts for the rationale behind multiple sources of knowledge in African epistemology, such as perceptual knowledge, knowledge by inference, testimony, common sense, extra-sensory, etc. a detailed discussion of these sources is outside the scope of this work.

If it is granted that African epistemic space comprises both the physical and spiritual realities; it can be argued that these different realities must be given due epistemic attention to have holistic knowledge. Both the cause and effects must be understood because African ontology subscribes to the idea of causality: anything that happens is caused by something else, be it physical or spiritual. Thus, to have a comprehensive knowledge of any event, both the physical and spiritual dimensions must be understood. Godwin Sogolo⁴⁵ in his book, *Foundations of African Philosophy* reinforces this belief in his explanation of causation in African thought. In this context, Sogolo talks about primary causes and secondary causes. Primary cause refers to predisposing factors not explicable in physical terms which may arise from supernatural entities like deities, spirits, witches and those which may come as result of contravention of communal morality. On the other hand, secondary cause refers to direct causal connection alien to the cause-effect relation in the germ theory in orthodox modern medicine. In the case of a strange sickness, the primary cause may have to be propitiated before the secondary cause can be handled. In this case, the healer may perform the double role of a herbalist and diviner. In Yoruba culture, *Ifa* Divination is a viable way of knowing the spiritual realm, other cultures have their ways of penetrating the spiritual realm, and this entails that there is a possibility of knowing the

⁴⁴ Jimoh A, "An African Theory of Knowledge", 194.

⁴⁵ Sogolo Godwin, *Foundations of African Philosophy* (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1993), 23.

transcended realm in African epistemology. This justifies the metaphysical principle which asserts that *omnis effectus causam habet* which can be translated to “for everything that has effects, there must be a cause.”

Conclusion

Divination as a theory in African epistemology is a veritable means of epistemic justification. It is a form of knowledge that takes into cognizance both the physical and quasi-physical realities as both constitutive of authentic knowledge. However, some scholars over the years have repudiated and tagged it as a form of irrational knowledge without possible verification. Such objection is due to the hegemony of power, who has the right to determine what constitutes knowledge? Is knowledge context-dependent?

This work argues that since knowledge is culturally inspired but not culturally bound, divination is one of the aspects of African ontology, thus, it is an aspect of the African theory of knowledge because it brings about a holistic understanding of reality that recognizes both the physical and the quasi-physical realities.

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