

COLLECTIVE EPISTEMOLOGY AND THE PRIVILEGE OF THE COMMUNITY IN AFRICAN SOCIAL EPISTEMOLOGY

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Abstract

This article demonstrates the logic and viability of collective subjects in African social epistemology. It exposes the epistemology of collective subjects as one of the central issues in social epistemology. The question of collective subject proves a difficulty for traditional epistemology because of its individualistic approach. Traditional epistemology privileges the individual over a group or collective. However, social epistemology which is a more fluid form of epistemology discusses the fluidity of subjects beyond individual persons as knowers. The complexity of regarding a group or collective as a knower involves a lot of implications. This paper critically takes on some of the engaging objections against collective subjects. This paper exposes philosophical perspectives on the community and on this rational ground, takes the community, as an example of collective subject to discuss the philosophy of collective epistemology both from social epistemology in the West and African social epistemology.

It holds that the naturalist-structuralist view of the community which communitarianism is grounded on is well-reasoned. It defends the communitarian view of the community as a doxastic agent and shows that it does not undermine individual freedom or rationality as advanced by critics of communitarianism, rather, it enhances it. It concludes that the privilege of the community in social

epistemology and particularly, African social epistemology, is grounded on epistemological and ontological predisposition, yet, the community can be regarded as an epistemic agent, without diminishing the epistemic integrity of the individual. It holds that the individual knows through the community, which makes the individual's scope to know more holistic. This paper adopts expository and analytic methods in its approach.

Keywords: African Social Epistemology, Community, Communitarianism, Collective Knowledge, Social Epistemology.

Introduction

One of the essential differences between traditional epistemology (TE) and social epistemology (SE) is that the former is individualistic in approach, while the latter is social in approach. In traditional epistemology, there is the privilege of the ego; the “I” over the other; other minds. On the other hand, social epistemology begins from a starting point that there are other minds. It privileges the social character in knowledge acquisition. One approach to understanding SE holds that it studies the epistemic properties of individuals that arise from their relations with others, while a more robust vision that many scholars advocate about SE maintains that it is “associated with movements in postmodernism, social studies of science, or cultural studies that aim to replace traditional epistemology with radically different questions, premises, and procedures”¹ Some conservative scholars think any conception of traditional epistemology must square with the first approach in understanding SE. However, recent writings and development in the field of epistemology reveal that the conditions of knowledge or knowing are arguably more dependent on social conditions and factors than the internal and the individual. This latter vision of the social dimension of knowledge is what some scholars like Alvin Goldman boldly argue as in fact, *real* epistemology. Knowledge and epistemology at large are believed to be more social than individualistic.

Helen Longino in her paper, “What's Social about Social Epistemology”² explains succinctly five senses in which SE is social.

In the first, she says, social would mean the cognitive agent's social environment. A second meaning has to do with a group of individuals where groups take the mind of an individual or otherwise. The third sense of being social is the concern about the possible infiltration of scientific inquiry by non-cognitive factors, such as when commercial or political interests affect how data are collected and interpreted or enter into theory or model choice.³ The fourth sense is social for social epistemology is what she describes as “interaction”. By this, she means, “the mutual affecting of two or more agents in a way that alters each, consistent with their persistent entities”.⁴ The sense she intends to draw here is the notion of *joint action*. However, for her, the term, 'interaction' is stronger than the term joint action. There is a fifth sense of social which means “shared”. This holds, for instance, that a belief, attitude, or category may be shared among the members of a group, in the sense that all members hold that belief or attitude or are assigned to that category.⁵ It is this sociality of sharing, holding something like a belief in common, that is the basis for a community or communality of knowledge or what is being developed as communitarian epistemology.

It is this notion of the social that privileges the relevance of communities to individuals in epistemology, that this work seeks to expose and engage some hermeneutical overtures and epistemological objections on the subject matter. This work will expose the concept of collective epistemology and philosophical perspectives of the term, *community*. It will also expose Martin Kush's vision of collective epistemology where he exposes his communitarian epistemology; a vision of the social epistemology which advances the sociality of the notion of the “shared” as a social character of epistemology. Although Kush cannot be said to be the first to have developed the idea of communitarian epistemology, his thoughts are very symmetrical to those largely espoused in African Social Epistemology (ASE). The last section of this work will be devoted to a systematic exposition of the subject of the community, collective knowledge in African communitarian epistemology which is part of what this work understands as African social epistemology. This work adopts expository and analytic methods in its approach.

Collective Epistemology and Philosophical Perspectives of the Community

The subject matter of collective epistemology is broad and their spectrums have been developed along several interesting lines to deepen its understanding. This section will devote synoptic attention to areas that concern our conversation. It seems more helpful to begin the conversation on collective epistemology with what its concerns are rather than what is collective epistemology. A common ground concern would perhaps be the interrogation: what kinds of entities are capable of cognition? The traditional focus in epistemology would give ascription to an individual. The individual is the knower. Traditional epistemology as stated earlier in the introduction privileges the individual. Individualism in Western philosophy, arguably, became more prominent with Descartes. The Ego “I” became the Archimedean point of philosophizing. So, when one asks the question, of who the subject of cognition is, the individual would be an impulsive response, at least from the standpoint of traditional epistemology. Margaret Gilbert⁶ exposes to the contrary that everyday life is full of ascriptions of collective cognitive states. We say, for instance, the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) believes that the government of the day does not care about education. Our family knows that the Police were dishonest in their report. The Seminary believes in the honesty and sincerity of its students. Gilbert opines that such states are collective, yet, scarce attention is paid to this. In the examples, above, groups other than individuals were ascribed doxastic qualities of “belief”, “thinking”, “knowing” etc. This makes us appreciate the initial interrogative: who can hold cognitive states? Let us expand the question a little. Can groups be believers? Can a group have a mind of its own? The responses to these interrogatives are the subject matter of collective epistemology. Simply then, collective epistemology is the study of collective cognitive states.⁷

Jennifer Lackey in her introduction to the book, *Essays in Collective Epistemology*,⁸ exposes that collective epistemology involves talking and discussing about collective entities and this is the subject of a variety of epistemic evaluations. She holds that for the most, we acquire knowledge via *collective testimony*. For example,

we either found out from Wikipedia that Abraham Lincoln died on April 15, 1865, or found out from the Vatican Archives that the church waged a crusade against the Turks in the 16th century and so on. Most of our knowledge claims are testimonially-acquired and even so, from collective sources. Roughly, collective epistemology, therefore, refers to the study of the epistemological properties of groups and the significance of group knowledge production and acquisition.

Two key papers which have arguably provoked the origins of collective epistemology are Deborah Tollefsen's "Challenging Epistemic Individualism" published in 2002 and Margaret Gilbert's 2004 article, "Collective Epistemology"⁹

There are complex consequences to the central theses of collective epistemology. These largely form the issues, directions, and concerns of this field of study in SE. One central debate, however, which seems to run through collective epistemology is one between summativists and non-summativists. Summativism holds that group belief is to be understood in terms of the individual beliefs of the members of the group.¹⁰ The interpretation here is that the belief of the group supervenes on the individual group belief. It holds that the group's position is only a reflection of the collective or the sum beliefs of the members of the group. On the other hand, non-summativism holds that a group belief is not necessarily a reflection of what the individual members subscribe to. In this, the individual members may not necessarily subscribe to the view. For instance, a football club would believe they would beat their opponent in a forthcoming game. However, the players may not necessarily hold this position based on extant realities and their collective preparation. Some anti-summativists have talked about "joint-acceptance" rather than belief, where a group may jointly accept something, yet, they hold a different doxastic attitude towards this.

There have been various objections and defenses for both positions. The idea of a community as a doxastic agent is often canvassed along either of these lines. This is why the notion is important for our conversation. While some scholars hold that a community's position is a function of a summative vision, others hold something contrary. However, for a community to hold a doxastic state or attitude, it is an idea within collective epistemology. The latter

part of this work will discuss the notion of community as a collective entity in some detail. However, it suffices to look briefly at some philosophical perspectives on what a community is.

The work of John Dixon, Rhys Dogan, and Alan Sanderson, “Community and Communitarianism: A Philosophical Investigation”¹¹ helps with a fair theoretical foundation and a philosophical rubric for understanding a community. They offer a quadripartite distinction of a community and attempt to show the epistemological difficulties with each, especially, those who canvass communitarianism. Their work is important, to the effect that, it offers us a conceptual framework from the social sciences on how to investigate the perceptions of community, and collective action and show perceptual gaps which are often invisible between communitarian aspirations of a community and what community reality is.

Their argument is premised on the claim that we all have epistemological and ontological predispositions which also inform what we know or is knowable. Epistemological predisposition can either be based on naturalist propositions, whereby social knowledge must be grounded in material phenomena that either take analytic statements or synthetic statements based on deductive logic or inductive inferences, respectively, or hermeneutical propositions whereby social knowledge rests on interpretations or discourses and language.¹² On the other hand, ontological predispositions relate to people's positions about the nature of being, what, and does exists.

They argue that ontological predisposition is grounded either on structuralist propositions, that is, 'that social structures impose themselves and exercise power upon agency', or they are based on agency propositions, which indicate that 'individuals have some control over their actions and can be agents of their action, enabled by their psychological and social psychological make-up'.¹³ This ideological position is what gave rise to their four methodological families which represent possible ways of describing and explaining the social world. They are (1) the Hermeneutic-structuralist perspective, (2) Naturalistic- structuralist perspective (3) Naturalist-agency perspective, and (4) the Hermeneutic-agency perspective.¹⁴

Naturalistic-structuralism presumes “an objective social world, knowable by the application of scientific methods, in which social structures exercise power over agency, which makes human behavior predictable”¹⁵ In this methodological trapping, the community is another hierarchical social order. Hermeneutic-structuralism on the other hand presumes “a subjective social world, knowable only as it is socially constructed, with people's behavior being determined, and made predictable, by their collective interpretation of this reality.”¹⁶ The community in this vision is a collective that places high value on the commitment to engage in discourse to build shared ideas and values regarding their community interests. Dixon, Dogan, and Sanderson argue that communitarians fall under this and their representation of this communitarian vision or view of society makes the community fraught with a lot of epistemological difficulties because it involves the denial of naturalism; the conception of what makes a community is not necessarily grounded on ontology but more hermeneutical, it leads to the denial of agency for the community which seems to deny human freedom of individuals in the community and so on. This paper holds a contrary position that this critique of communitarianism as canvassed by Dixon, Dogan, and Sanderson is not farfetched and does not represent accurately the communitarian vision. The vision of the community which the last part of this work gives credence to, exposes to the contrary, that the community is grounded on ontology and also is agential in nature. Furthermore, naturalist agency which is another methodological family for viewing the social world “presumes an objective social world, knowable by the application of the scientific method, in which people are agents of their actions with their behavior made predictable by their unconstrained self-interest”.¹⁷ This view holds that individuals in the community do not necessarily have shared interests, but are self-interested individuals. The last methodological family; hermeneutic agency denies the objectivity of social reality which is only contestably knowable as what people believe it to be, with agency constrained by their subjective perceptions of social reality which makes human behavior unpredictable.”¹⁸ Summarily, therefore, the conception of a community means a lot, and its understanding cannot be presumed. It

lends itself to several understandings and each position taken has epistemological implications.

The concept of community in African epistemology is grounded in the understanding of African Communalism. Communalism is the viewpoint that underscores the idea of mutual dependence and organic relationships between community and individuals, and among individuals.¹⁹ Communalism in Africa is largely based on the belief that a person's social identity and personality is molded by community relationships, however, with some degree of development placed on the individual. It understands the community and the harmony of both social conditions and the environment of the individual. This concept of communalism is used coterminous with the concept of communitarianism which shares the same vision with it²⁰, and it is the subject matter of social-political philosophy, epistemology, and even metaphysics. However, discussing communitarian epistemology, as it were, is part of the subset of the overall picture of what can be described as African social epistemology.

African social epistemology applies to all such contentions that approach the study of knowledge with a leaning on investigating the social dimensions of knowledge, epistemic properties of groups, and collective cognitive states in African epistemology. The specification of *social*, to African epistemology is to distinguish it from any other epistemological engagements that deal with individual knowers or are individualistic in approach in African epistemology as similarly found in western traditional epistemology. While, it is needless to embark on the debate whether there is such a distinct field as African epistemology from western epistemology, or rather, epistemology as a broad term, the appropriation of backgrounds like western and African to the broad field, specifies the approaches adopted in such areas, granted that philosophy takes note of context, and this always becomes the most viable lens of seeing the world. Therefore, African epistemology in this context accommodates properly speaking, epistemologies in Africa that lend credence to the African milieu as a shared starting point. African social epistemology is simply epistemologies in Africa with the specific approach of a social dimension. This is not a clearly

delineated field because earlier descriptions of African epistemology grounds it on African ontology and African ontology is viewed within African culture which is largely social. Hence, it is believed to already be social. However, holding this position seems somewhat elementary and does not give room for specific issues in social epistemology to be discussed as understood from an African context. There are dimensions of individualistic epistemology in African epistemology, so, to clearly demarcate any such approach which is not individualistic but social in orientation and focuses on the same concerns can be described as African social epistemology, both for ideological clarity and safety and methodological distinction. It is rather safe to hold that just as social epistemology is still new, African social epistemology is still an evolving field with growing concerns.

To return to the ideological framework of community in African social epistemology, the community can be said to belong to the methodological prism of hermeneutic-structuralism espoused above. However, its interpretation differs from the conception of Dixon, Dogan, and Sanderson. The hermeneutical predisposition does not deny it from being grounded in naturalism. The community in Africa is both naturalistic, as it can be physically or tangibly seen, however, that is only an aspect of the community. There is a non-visible aspect. It is non-visible, but not invisible. The understanding of the community is grounded in African ontology which sees the world both from the natural and the metaphysical points of view.

Hence, its interpretative dimension does not circumvent or undermine its naturalistic foundations. The difference is that the physical world is only a partial aspect of the entire '*community world*' in Africa and the physical rests largely on the foundations of the metaphysical.

Furthermore, the community is further grounded in structuralist propositions, that is, 'that social structures impose themselves and exercise power upon agency'. The individual largely views the world through the community in Africa. To deny such a view or methodological outlook is counterproductive, that is because, essentially, we live most of our lives in societies and are shaped by her values, whether we live in denial of this or not. We may deny participation in the community, but we cannot deny its consequences.

We are essentially tied to the community, hence, man is hardly defined outside of his community. The community in ASE and metaphysics is made up of being; visible and non-visible. We are part of the community. To deny being part of the community is to feign a sense of social isolation which is conceptually contradictory. Be that as it may, this does not undermine individual freedom as purportedly advanced as a critique against this methodological prism.²¹ In fact, community in ASE is grounded in ontology, yet interpretative and then, it is structuralist to the effect that the community affects the individual, yet, the individual is not denied freedom. This will be better exposed in the section on collective epistemology and African communitarian epistemology.

Communitarian epistemology is not exclusive to ASE. Scholars like Martin Kush have canvassed a vision of communitarianism which is close to the vision systematized in ASE. It suffices as a background, to expose briefly the thoughts of Martin Kush's Communitarian Epistemology.

Martin Kush's Communitarian Epistemology

Martin Kush's Communitarian Epistemology is detailed in his book, *Knowledge by Agreement: The Programme of Communitarian Epistemology*.²² Although he denies his project as a SE, all description about it nevertheless shows both in orientation and direction as a profound version of SE. Kush's formulation draws upon views from political theory. The idea of communitarianism is a political theory that privileges the group or community over the individual. It means that the individual finds identification, meaning, and direction largely from the community. Kush explains that “knowledge and its cognates, like 'know' and 'knower', marks a social status and that the fundamental or primary possessor of knowledge are groups or people rather than the individual”.²³

Communitarian epistemology, therefore, explores ways the community is a knower or the individual knows only through the community. Kush's epistemology is important because he departs from a majority version of SE which has some individualism.

Kush's version is communitarian which gives primacy to the community as the primary knower and individual belief gets

interpretation and meaning only from the primary epistemic community. Judith Simon explains that Kush's perspective is dialogically against some theoretical approaches which aim at accounting for the social context of knowledge, like Keith Lehrer's consensualism, Donald Davidson's interpretationalism, etc.²⁴

Kush developed his communitarian epistemology by first advancing a communitarian epistemology of testimony. The treatment of testimony in traditional analytic epistemology signals the first flickers of SE which has been placed secondary to other sources of knowledge like perception. Kush's treatment of testimony attempts to redefine the primacy of testimony as a major source of knowledge and to advance an account of testimony that is communitarian. Kush begins by giving a critique of individualistic accounts of testimony.

He berates the narrowness attributed to testimony in traditional analytic epistemology but acknowledges that testimony should best be regarded as a *generative source of knowledge*. The important point for this advancement is a critique against the parochial understanding of testimony within the confines of transmission of existing knowledge and Kush finds this worrisome, rather than a generative source of knowledge. Kush outlines and defends testimony as a generative source of knowledge with the concept of *performative testimony*.²⁵

Jennifer Lackey who reviewed this text of Martin Kush, explains in some detail, how testimony is generative and almost all forms of testimony are performative, in which case is a generative source of knowledge. She gives the example that for instance when a minister says, 'I hereby declare you husband and wife', the minister's testimony is according to Kush, generating the knowledge that the bride and groom in question were married for all those present at the ceremony. From here Kush argues that in addition to individual performatives, there can be communal performatives, such as "we hereby declare that it is right to greet people by waving". Such communal performatives are typically made only implicitly, and they are widely distributed across individual instances of testimony".²⁶ The communitarian epistemology of Kush is incensed by the works of John Hardwig's work on the role of trust in knowledge and Michael

Welbourne's communitarian account of testimony developed in "Community of Knowledge, both Kush says are predecessors to his work, but his account is to give a more holistic picture to the place of testimony as a generative source of knowledge. Although, Kush has been criticized for mixing up perceptual knowledge with testimonial knowledge. The instances advanced by Kush for testimonial knowledge and square them as performative acts are misleading since performative speech acts involve words does not mean they are testimonial. While this is a criticism leveled against Kush, his account of communitarian account of knowledge opens up a wide vista of area for SE. In the latter part of his book, he develops how knowledge is a social status acquired by being a member of the community and so when *A* holds a belief and for it to be true, it is the same with what *B* holds and which conforms with the community, hence, knowledge by agreement. This view of knowledge makes the community a basis for justification. Kush holds that his thesis of communitarian epistemology is in tandem with our intuition and folk epistemology.

Folk epistemology explores how we ascribe knowledge to ourselves and others. Kush's development of his communitarian epistemology follows a few steps. First, his development of the concept of performative testimony, in the second step he develops the notion of *communal performativetestimony*, in the third that knowledge is a social kind and lastly that his development of his communitarian theory of testimony consists emphasizing the relevance of epistemic communities for the attribution of knowledge. Be that as it may, Kush's thoughts are not clear on the epistemic significance of *knowledge by agreement*.

The Community, Collective Knowledge, and African Communitarian Epistemology

Martin Kush's work is an important preface to understanding collective knowledge and African Communitarian epistemology.

However, there are some peculiar nuances that this section will define and defend. Peter Ikhane and Bert Hamminga's exposition on the community as knowing subjects in African epistemology are important resources for understanding collective knowledge in African social epistemology

The African way of knowing is more collective than individual. It is regarded as collective because it is more of a product of a social process than an individual epistemic or cognitive process. The African way of knowing involves the various means Africans employ in acquiring knowledge. There are several social ways without discounting the place and role of the individual. African ways of knowing include divination and soothsaying. Both means or ways of knowing, owe their relevance to the African worldview of reality which has been discussed above as holistic. The physical and the spiritual are on a continuum. It is believed that in the hierarchy of beings, the spiritual is superior to the physical. The information and contents from the spiritual generally are seen as justified. There can be a problem in the interpretation or conveyance of the epistemic contents from such spiritual consultation as divination and soothsaying. While divination involves recourse to the spiritual which includes: spirits, ancestors, or some suprasensible African force, soothsaying relies on a similar model of consultation to uncover hidden truths and mysteries.

In African ontology, diviners and soothsayers are epistemic bridges. They stand between the living and the living dead. They are usually agents of unveiling mysteries of human life. They use divinations to unveil commonsense, intuitive knowledge, and deep truths about nature and life in general. The scope of their knowledge is not limited to what is or what was, but it can cover what is to come. This ordinarily would provoke a deep philosophical question, whether the African ontological system is deterministic or fatalistic? The answer is not farfetched. Just the way reality is beyond the physical, so too is reality and time woven within the tripod of past, present, and future. African ontology holds that reality is a complex whole that cannot be explained in isolation. The African perception of reality which also interprets the African indigenous knowledge systems is “expressed in the ontological belief that reality is a harmony of beings of forces – permits a cultural thematic approach to conceiving African epistemology as elucidating the relatively similar epistemological experiences of indigenous Africans by drawing on the affinity of the metaphysical conception of reality of the African past”.²⁷ The knowledge system of the African is a complex one that

involves a synergy between the individual and the community and the spirit world.

In African ontology, there is an almost seamless blend between its metaphysics and epistemology. Ikhane puts it that in “the African conception, knowledge presupposes being; epistemology presupposes metaphysics”.²⁸ Ikhane further argues that the seeming seamless relation between metaphysics and epistemology in African epistemology makes us to delineates knowledge as *awareness*. It suffices to cite him for further clarity:

The nature of knowledge emerging from this relation between metaphysics and epistemology is such that knowledge is awareness of that which is known and can be known. It is also awareness of that which is known and can be known. It is also awareness of that which cannot be known and unknowable. What is unknown and unknowable indicates the irreducible component of a transcendent reality, which is integral to how knowledge was conceived by the indigenous Africans.²⁹

Knowledge as awareness explains that truth or what is only discovered by the knower. It exists already. Awareness is when the cognitive agent becomes privy to it. This further makes sense knowing that the African world view goes beyond the human senses. Western traditional epistemology talks of belief as a functional element or characteristic of knowledge, but the emphasis is on truthfulness and awareness.

The African "knowing subject" is not a person. The "I" does not know, but "we" know. This brings out the collective dimension in African social epistemology³⁰. Bert Hamminga explains profusely the collectivity of African social epistemology. It suffices to cite him elaborately:

As an African, when I was born, some ancestor has been "born into" my mother. I will carry his name. I am not this ancestor himself. It is not "reincarnation".

I *am* the vital power this ancestor is willing to invest in me. I am a link in the chain of vital power, the genealogical chain of procreation of my community. I pray often to my godfather when I need power. Give

us power, I ask. The living people depend for their survival on the power of their ancestors. We *are* nothing but forces endowed with that power. We are a force finding food, shelter, and partners to procreate.

And, the ultimate aim: to have vitally powerful children as many as our own vital power allows... Our community is a tree. (Dead) ancestors are roots giving energy to the adults. Adults from the trunk. They in turn supply the branches, leaves, and flowers, our children. The tree *knows*. "We" know. The tree is the knowing subject. Westerners can be surprised to see us all getting excited (or sad) at the same moment. That is because we are one body, a tree. *We* sing, *we* dance, *we* weep, *we* know. We are "together", in such a far-reaching meaning of that word that westerners will have a hard time understanding and believing this togetherness. Ironically, the West sent Christians to teach us about togetherness. But we, here in Africa, are the experts. *Knowledge is a form of togetherness.*³¹

The point Hamminga tries to establish is that African ontology is essentially collective and the pursuit of knowledge is not isolated from this understanding. It often goes on to establish the analogy of a tree and how evenly it binds the African people. The African community is not individualistic for that in itself is not a strength but a weakness. Hamminga fastens his explanation of the tree to explain the collective nature of the African ontology and also of knowledge by arguing, "that a tree does not choose an individual existence. No part of a body - and that is all you are - can meaningfully survive cut off from the rest. And everything you do, including the acquisition of knowledge and coming to beliefs, serves the purpose of enhancing the vital energy, the procreation of the tribe".³²

From the above explication, the clan or tribe is, therefore, the knowing subject. The clan or tribe is therefore a collective epistemic agent. Two maxims that further explain, according to the African is that all knowledge is power and all power comes from the forces preceding us: our ancestors. The clan as a collective epistemic agent

decides and holds norms and beliefs. The individual who does not share in the togetherness of the group alienates himself and must take responsibility for his departure. Since knowledge is like a tree, the branches cannot grow on their own. In the African group, one feels the same, though not about oneself, but about the community.³³

Just like group knowledge is arguably the primary form of knowledge in Western traditional epistemology, the African community as a collective agent, is the primary knower. The individual knows from the group. This does not diminish the individual, rather, it gives him meaning and rationality. If the individual holds a position not consistent with the group, then, he is likely missing out on some essential understanding and meaning.

Also, since the individual is grossly finite and limited, he rests so much on the community which derives power from the ancestors and such power includes knowledge. To Africans, it seems difficult to be an individual in the West because in western society they do not see a group in which they can be an individual.³⁴

Collective epistemic subjects or agents in African epistemology, therefore, would include the clan, family lines, ancestors, etc. These, however, pose some difficulty for western thinkers. They pose some difficulty that not an individual thinks, but the group. Nevertheless, this difficulty is not far-fetched. In western societies, social classes think, and corporate agents, think. If these collectivities could have minds of their own, there is no grave difficulty in seeing how in African ontology or epistemology, the clan or family line thinks.

Even then, ancestors as collective agents think through the elders as they are regarded as the roots of the tree, using the tree analogy to describe the epistemological web in African epistemology. Nowak Leszek has argued that epistemological collectivism is not the peculiarity of African thought. It first became apparent in European thought with Hegel and manifests itself wherever the Hegelian influence is or was discernible, e.g. in 19th-century British idealism or Marxism.³⁵ Therefore, epistemological collectivism is not just a historical fact, but one open to ideological dynamism.

This African epistemological enterprise is what is understood

as communitarianism. This philosophical concept emphasizes the connection between the individual and the community. Its overriding philosophy is based upon the belief that a person's social identity and personality are largely moulded by community relationships, with a smaller degree of development being placed on individuals. Although the community might be a family, communitarianism usually is understood, in the wider philosophical sense, as a collection of interactions, among a community of people in a given place or among a community who share an interest or who share a history.³⁶ Several African scholars have advanced this communitarian view of the African, especially in the works of Placide Temples in his *Bantu Philosophy*, John Mbiti in his *African Religions and Philosophy*, S. Samkange and T. M Samkange in their, *Hunhism or Ubuntuism: A Zimbabwean Indigenous Political Philosophy*, I. A. Menkit in his article, "Person and Community in African Traditional Thought", Kwame Gyekye in his *African Cultural values: An Introduction*, etc.

The idea of communitarianism does not exclude epistemic responsibility which is supposedly the bane for disdaining African epistemological collectivism. The question is how does a group take responsibility for actions since beliefs cannot be ascribed to an individual? This view of epistemic responsibility has been defended vigorously by some scholars like Munamoto Chemhuru in his article, "An African Communitarian View of Epistemic Responsibility".

He argues "that while one may find almost a uniform framework for the determination of epistemic responsibility in different philosophical traditions based on the rational scheme, in the dominant African communitarian tradition, there is more to responsibility than just individualistic traits like rationality. Thus, responsibility is seen from the communitarian perspective".³⁷ The question of epistemic responsibility ought to be part of the mission of addressing epistemological theorizing.

There is generally a universalist approach to viewing epistemic and moral responsibility which poses difficulty to a collective and communalistic view of knowledge or belief. This universalist view of responsibility is based on a reason-centered view of responsibility and comes with an epistemological assumption that

only humans are capable of reason alone. This rational scheme in Western philosophical thinking is influenced by the Platonic, Aristotelian and Cartesian view of responsibility which holds that only the individual person is a moral agent or capable of reason *res cogitans* (a thinking being). This individualistic philosophical tradition which was consummated in Cartesian philosophy shaped almost the whole of Western philosophy to limit thinking, actions, and responsibility to the individual. Munamoto calls it a 'person-centric view'.³⁸ To think of philosophy and moral action only from a person-centric view alone is very parochial. The African view of the community or communitarian perspective opens up philosophy and what agential evaluation can be. In African philosophy at large, man is not defined by his individual features alone. In fact, the dominant view of responsibility is grounded in communitarianism. The African man is not atomic, instead, he is grounded in the community and this includes how he knows and also the consequences of his action.

Responsibility, therefore, in African communitarian epistemology is collectivistic. Since the individual forms an intertwine within the community, his actions which are grounded in such a collectivist outlook can also be collective. For instance, a man's action is capable of bringing some ominous effects on a community or his family. This is why communitarian ethics is emphasized in Africa and why some people whose consistent bad and ill actions have brought a bad omen to the community can be ostracized. Ostracism from the community in this sense, is a form of death, because, without the community, the individual lacks foundation. There are certain knowledge or actions which are based on the individual, he bears the responsibility for those and there are those that are due from the community, and the community takes responsibility.

Munamoto cites, for instance, holding on to knowledge of various taboos that are aimed at safeguarding communalistic values, individuals are not held responsible for such, but the community bears epistemic responsibility.³⁹ Such communitarian views of epistemic collectivity are far grounded in such philosophies as *Ubuntu* and *Simunye*.

Ubuntu is a version and vision of African communitarian discourse, a Bantu word that translates as “I am because we are”. In a deeper philosophical sense, it holds a universal bond of sharing that connects all humanity. *Simunye*, on the other hand, is descriptive of *Ubuntu*, which literally means “we are one”. It further spirals the communitarian vision from the point of collectivity. Ubuntu ontology focuses essentially on the dialogical relationship between the person and the community. A person is not understood from the Enlightenment codification whose essential identification mark is rationality. In Ubuntu, a person is defined by his relationship with the community. Michael Eze explains that “a person's humanity is dependent on the appreciation, preservation, and affirmation of other person's humanity. To deny another's humanity is to depreciate my own humanity”⁴⁰. Personhood involves a social interaction in Ubuntu ontology and so too is knowledge which is largely dependent on the community. J. S. Mbiti captures this ontology succinctly:

In traditional life, the individual does not and cannot exist alone except corporately. He owes this existence to other people, including those of past generations and his contemporaries. He is simply part of the whole. The community must therefore make, create, or produce the individual; for the individual depends on the corporate group.... Whatever happens to the individual happens to the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual. The individual can only say, “I am because we are, and since we are therefore I am”.⁴¹

This Ubuntu intercourse between the person and community largely explains African communitarianism. Although this does not mean that the human person loses his individuality, especially with reference to his cognitive formation, he is largely tied to his community in many varied and foundational ways. What this essentially describes is the ontological primacy of community to the individual. This notion of the primacy or privilege of the community over the individual person has been questioned by some scholars like Michael Eze, who explains that a community is formed by a group of

individuals that live under a shared heritage and history.

The identity of the individual and community is given essence by this intersubjective formation. Although part of the community is formed by individual persons, it does not mean the individual persons have superiority over the community. The community too is not only constituted by living individual persons, but also the living dead. This understanding makes the argument stronger why the community is essentially primary over individuals. Therefore, the community is a collective subject that is equally a doxastic agent in this sense.

Conclusion

The focus of this work has been an effort to expose the subject matter of collective epistemology as a broad subject in social epistemology and focus on the community as a collective subject. If one has only been hitherto grounded on conceiving only the individual to think, know, hold beliefs and so capable of epistemic evaluations, it is pretty difficult to appreciate how collectives are subjects of similar cognitive states. When we talk of having a mind or holding a thought, we figure out some corporeal faculties responsible for this in the human body, like the brain, etc. To begin to ascribe such states to non-humans can be very conflicting.

However, one thing that the discussion on collective subjects bring out and which this work has been able to spell is the fluidity in our conception of personhood. Just as we can have legal persons who are non-humans, so too, we can have epistemic subjects that are not human individuals. This work has exposed that the concept of community is also not conceived in the only parochial understanding found in classical sociology of a community of people. This is just a naturalistic view. A community has a hermeneutical understanding which is conceived beyond naturalism, yet, grounded in African ontology. This is the African community. This work also attempts to resolve the epistemological difficulties associated with the communitarian view of holding the community as a collective epistemological subject. The place of the individual in the community is also spelt out and the difficulty of his freedom is not diminished. The possibility of fatalism or having individuals in the

African community as deterministic subjects are also clarified. The synopsis of our claim is, in African social epistemology, when we ask: who knows, we say, “We know”; “the community knows”. The individual knows through the community.

The community, therefore, is a non-summative collective epistemic agent and this epistemological position serves as one of the foundation stones in the sketching of an outline for a robust African social epistemology.

ENDNOTES

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