

TESTIMONIAL KNOWLEDGE AND THE EPISTEMIC VALUE OF YORÙBÁ PROVERBS

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Abstract

Despite the relatively late recognition as a source of knowledge and justification, testimony plays a significant role in our epistemic endeavours. The paper argued that testimony is a common practice in epistemic endeavours. Due to its social character, testimony provides a unique dimension to knowledge acquisition. This paper explored the social character of testimonial knowledge and argued that testimony is an inevitable practice to give or receive pieces of information within the day-to-day experience. Affirming the commonplace of testimony in our epistemic practice, Hume opines that there are no species of reasoning more common, more useful, and even necessary to human life, than that which is derived from the testimony of men, and the reports of eyewitnesses and spectators. Situated within Yorùbá conceptual scheme, the paper identified further that proverbs play a significant role in testimonial knowledge among the Yorùbá. Through a historical survey and critical analysis of the Yorùbá conceptual scheme, it is evident that proverbs serve as a reservoir of wisdom and guide for the practical living among the people. Furthermore, they contain philosophical issues that cut across epistemology, metaphysics, ethics, logic, and aesthetics. This is in support of the interest of advocates of social epistemology that society and culture influence our epistemic standard, and that knowledge is defined by

people's experience within a particular scheme. Therefore, the paper concluded that less arguably, proverbs are veritable instances of knowledge particularly as they share the basic structure of epistemic testimony.

Keywords: Epistemology, Proverbs, Testimony, Yorùbá, Thought System

Introduction

The status of testimony, when considered along with other sources of knowledge, except memory, became an issue of interest just in recent times. According to Michael Huemer, testimony, like memory, is an extremely pervasive source of knowledge that has been neglected by epistemologists.¹ In a loose sense, testimony is any statement or other communication that purports to state a fact or provide information. In the context of epistemology, testimony is not restricted to statements delivered by witnesses at trial, nor does it require a face-to-face encounter.² Instances of testimony include all cases in which a person asserts something, and another person hears, reads, or otherwise witnesses the assertion. That explains the reason why testimony became an issue of interest since arguably a host of what we know is received from others either in the oral or written form. Nevertheless, philosophers have variedly queried its reliability and justification as a source of knowledge.

The nature of testimony is its apparent social character, which is a unique dimension through which testimony enhances epistemology.

This social character provides a veritable chance to explore testimonial knowledge in the day-to-day experience among people in general and of particular interest among the Yorùbá and their conception of reality. It is a common practice among Yorùbá people to exchange testimony; to give or receive pieces of information.

These, as it were, are taken as sources of knowledge. In this interpersonal or mutual epistemic attitude, proverbs play a significant role.

From the foregoing, Yorùbá proverbs serve as a reservoir of wisdom and guide for practical living. The content of proverbs avails

the opportunity to learn from the wisdom of others which has been carefully preserved and presented from one generation to the other.

Hence, in the Yorùbá culture, proverbs along with other oral traditions have a base in historical reality, because they are the exploration account of group and individual's thoughts and opinions about their historical and reflective experience. Furthermore, proverbs constitute a core element of verbal dissemination of knowledge and information among the people in the Yorùbá nation.

These show the social dimension of proverbs as part of human activities within a society.

Meanwhile, this social dimension favours the consideration of proverbs as testimony since they both furnish the individual with knowledge originating outside of them. It follows then that as a social entity, testimonial knowledge is a common phenomenon among the Yorùbá people as it is evident in their daily experiences.

In other words, mutual exchange of testimony either in form of giving or receiving is prevalent among the people, and such instances are taken as generating knowledge.

The Nature of Testimony in Epistemology

Epistemology of testimony is built around the fact that a host of what we know comes from the world of others. We give credence to events, places, theories, and other issues coming from people and in most cases, without prior investigation, and thus we simply accept and live with them as true.

Testimony is a pervasive and natural source of beliefs. Surely many of the beliefs it grounds are justified or constitute knowledge. They may even constitute basic knowledge or basic belief, both in the (moderate) sense that they are not grounded in premises and in the sense that they play a pivotal role in the life of the believer. Beliefs that are based on testimony are psychologically, epistemically, and existentially basic. However, they are epistemically basic only in the sense that they do not inferentially depend on knowledge or justified belief of prior premises. They are epistemically dependent, in a way perceptual beliefs are not, on one's having grounds for knowledge or justification, and they are psychologically dependent on one's having at least some non-propositional ground - such as hearing someone

speak - in another, non-testimonial experiential mode.³

Hume correctly noted that “there are no species of reasoning more common, more useful, and even necessary to human life, than that which is derived from the testimony of men, and the reports of eyewitnesses and spectators”⁴

There are some issues surrounding testimony, such as: When are the beliefs from testimony justified, and why? When do they amount to knowledge, and why? How reliable are the sources of testimony? Is testimony an autonomous source of epistemic authority like perception, memory, learning, and inference? Christopher R. Green raises other sets of queries which include: What conditions should be placed on the recipient of testimonial-based beliefs? Must the recipient of testimony have beliefs about the reliability of the testifier or [inductive support](#) for such a belief? Or, on the other hand, is it enough if the testifier is in fact reliable, and a recipient may satisfy his epistemic duties without having a belief about that reliability? What external environmental conditions should be placed on the testifier? For the recipient to know something, must the testifier know it, too?⁵

Philosophers are broadly divided in the line between reductionism and anti-reductionism. The reductionists found the basis of their locus standing in Hume and Locke who gave a probative value to testimony. For Locke, it is practically unreliable to base one's knowledge on someone else's worldview. Hume, on his part, testimony is simply one form of inductive evidence among others.

From these suppositions, they argued that any justification formed by testimony can be reduced to other kinds of justification, such as; sensory perception, memory, and inference. This implies that our ordinary acceptance of testimony is justified only *a posteriori*. Therefore, it is not a fundamental source of warrant because testimony relies based on other empirical sources of knowledge.⁶

The anti-reductionist, on the other hand, following the argument of Thomas Reid postulated that testimony, in itself is a source of knowledge; it is not reducible to other sources, even if empirically dependent on them.⁷ Thomas Reid argued that to acquiesce to Hume's postulation would amount to having little grounds for holding on to our belief in the testimony of others.

According to him, humans have two innate tendencies which enable us to much more easily to gain knowledge through testimony—our intuitive tendency to tell the truth and our tendency to simply believe what others say.⁸

The reductionist and the non-reductionist views expressed above have implications on justification. For the reductionists, justification of testimony depends on other sources of knowledge. Thus, testimony is not a basic source of justification but can only be an instance of one when reduced or considered along with perception, memory, inference, and the like. While for the anti-reductionists, testimony is just as basic a source of justification as sense perception, memory, inference, and the like. The central claim of the Anti-Reductionist is that the epistemologies of perception, memory, and testimony should all look more or less alike.⁹

There are also arguments by those who argue for the receiver's background evidence in an addition to trusting a specific speaker for justification. In this case, Elizabeth Fricker opines that the onus is on the hearer to be partially disposed to deploy background knowledge relevant and careful analysis of the speaker's statement to detect the aspects of it that betray being trusted.¹⁰ That the hearer deploys background knowledge constitutes some challenges and raises the possibility of jettisoning reductionism for anti-reductionism. But this problem is averted since, by its very nature, testimony confers *prima facie* justification on the receiver. Tyler Burge opines that a person is entitled to accept as true something that is presented as true and that is intelligible to him unless there are stronger reasons not to do so.¹¹ Considering the high demand of the reductionists and the seemingly weak standard of anti-reductionists suppose caution in what the hearer takes as warranted testimony.

Another issue in epistemic testimony is the interpersonal view of testimony where testimony is considered as a form of evidence, an indication of the speaker's belief in what he asserts, along with the background evidence of the listener (a person's asserting *p* is evident that he believes *P* and the hearer regard this as evidence that *P* is true). However, the understanding of testimony and testimony reception is more than mere evidence as in the case of readings on a gauge or an instrument, because there are instances

when the speaker's evidence does not seem to be reliable enough and the speaker does not trust such. Hinchman and Moran believe that testimonial credibility which is a significant aspect of true communication is missing when a speaker is treated as a mere truth gauge, offering nothing more than words, and does not invite the hearer to trust what he said.¹² In testimonial-based knowledge, knowledge transmission flows from the attester purported to know the truth of the proposition in question to the hearer believing his testimony. In other words, testimony-based knowledge is grounded in the exchange of thoughts.

The Nature of Proverbs in Yorùbá Thought System

The Yorùbá constitute the majority of people in South Western part of Nigeria and are also found scattered in diverse countries all over the world. The Yorùbá, in general, have a rich cultural heritage rooted in their traditional thought system.¹³ They speak a general language which is Yorùbá and there are various dialects spoken in various communities to the other. Nevertheless, both the general language and the various dialects are rich in proverbs. Proverbs occupy a vital place in the Yorùbá frame work of thought and they are considered a strong means of communication in their daily interactions. Proverbs constitute a powerful rhetorical device for the shaping of moral consciousness, opinions, and beliefs.” They are a treasure in speech-giving and illuminating the grey aspects of any decision-making. The Yorùbá people value proverbs very highly, for they are considered to be the wisdom lore of the race.¹⁴

Francis Sotunde defines a proverb as a short familiar sentence expressing a supposed truth or moral lesson; it often requires an explanation beyond the literal meaning of the words used.¹⁵ In line with Mill's postulation, Yorùbá proverbs possess both the connotative (basic idea or literary) and denotative (thought or deeper) delineations of meanings. A connotative meaning of a word is the feeling a word evokes in its usage: the implied subtext of words rather than their literal meaning. While a denotative meaning is what such a word literally means.¹⁶ This is succinctly expressed by Oladele Orimoogunje thus:

Yorùbá proverbs are highly idiomatic, having both

denotative and connotative meanings. The denotative meaning tends to be the signifier of the connotative meaning, which, is the one held in high esteem. The semantics of the denotative structure, though in itself a truism, is a means to the signified end. The health-related meanings of the proverbs are in most cases restricted to the denotative meaning. At the connotative level, the meaning of the proverb may not necessarily be health-related. Denotative meaning considers the componential meanings of the symbols in the proverb while on the connotative level, the metaphorical and idiomatic meanings generated from usage context are taken into consideration.¹⁷

For instance, in the proverb, “*Aḡwó –fònnàkìdurorojò*” (Gossiping is a luxury for someone whose hands are not carrying fire). The connotative meaning refers to the meaning of the keywords in the proverb would just be gossip, hand, and fire, and this will portray no lesson. Nevertheless, the denotative meaning fire would be any unease situation for doing wrong, while hands would imply the freedom/free will of such an individual to execute such an act. Proverbial utterances are meaningful to the hearer due to the cultural affinity between the speaker and the audience.¹⁸

It is pertinent to note that proverbs are not figures of speech, rather they are an ingenious manner of speaking which could be deductive speculative affirmative, and empirical. As such they come about through active rational processes, observation of facts, analysis, and speculation on issues of life. Every proverb is a logical, practical, wise, witty, and pithy statement created by generations of alphabetic progenitors for our good and the good of future generations.

Proverbs have been, and remain, the most powerful and effective instrument for the transmission of culture, social morality, manners and ideals of a people. The reason behind the efficacy of proverbs is that as aphorisms or wise sayings, they are based upon people's experiences, and they reflect the social values and sensibility of such people.¹⁹ Proverbs are a significant part of Yorùbá heritage

and they are used within and beyond the cultural environment where they were fashioned. Adeyeye Ogunwusi noted that proverbs are a product of a thought process engaged in by our (Yorùbá) alphabetic progenitors who applied their power of observation and intuition to fashion the proverbs.²⁰ This reveals the depth of insight, and wisdom that are inherent in Yorùbá proverbs. They also contain knowledge and wisdom intended as a guide in dealing with the vicissitudes of life and finding practical solutions to life's challenges. However, this is sometimes not always obvious, as Sotunde rightly noted, it takes an enquiring mind to absorb its philosophical underpinning.²¹

As against the common popular conception of proverbs as considered as possessing moral principles only, it has been argued that proverbs contain insights that are related to all branches of philosophy. Adegboyega Oluyemisi argued that proverbs have philosophical issues that cut across epistemology, metaphysics, ethics, logic, aesthetics, and so on.²² This means that proverbs are laden with philosophy and can manifest themselves in various ways to diverse people and remain relevant. In other words, Yorùbá proverbs often state a philosophical dogma and give regulation for man's relationship with each other and the gods. They present both the positive and negative aspects of human experience, shedding light on them to help people make wise decisions for the good of the self and of others in society. Sotunde points out that 'proverbialism' can therefore be said to be a literary tool, a psychological device, and a philosophical vehicle of social cohesion.²³ Hence, Yorùbá proverbs give expression to the major method of inquiry into African philosophy, along with mythological, humanist, idiomatic, and logical methods.²⁴

Furthermore, proverbs belong to the category of oral traditions among the Yorùbá, and with others such as fables, folklores, riddles, and prose, with all having a base in historical reality.

Characteristically, oral pieces of literature provide the exploration account of group and individual thoughts and opinions about their historical and reflective experience.²⁵ Adebayo remarked that of all forms of Yorùbá oral tradition, Yorùbá proverbs (*owe*) have special attributes and characteristics, which make them particularly

unique and special. He situated this uniqueness, as stated earlier, in the fact that proverbs are handed down from one generation to another as truthful sayings having been tested by usage. Two issues are important in this assertion, namely that proverbs possess the two conditions of truth and testability. As such information, ideas, and thoughts obtained from them would be more reliable than those gathered from other oral pieces of literature.²⁶ Speaking of all forms of Yorùbá oral tradition, there is a special reference given to proverbs as it is said, “*Òwel'ẹsinòrò, òròl'ẹsinòwe, tíòrò básònù, òwe la fííwa*” (Proverbs are the prongs of discourse and if a discourse is riddled with meaning it is proverbs that we use to lose it).²⁷ Such statements as the one above affirm the importance of proverbs among the people.

On the issue of their sources, Olumuyiwa pointed out that it is said categorically that the sources of Yorùbá proverbs are unknown.

Proverbs are the product of human observations of what happens in the environment, and that is why Yorùbá 'proverbs could be deductive, speculative, affirmative, empirical, mythical, and superstitious²⁸ For Wande Abimbola, Yorùbá proverbs were derived from the *Ifá* oracle from which Yorùbá proverbs received their rich vocabulary and high semantics from its connection to the *Ifá* oracle. Hence, Raphael Areje asserted that since the proverbs are derived from the *Ifá* oracle, which is an embodiment of Yorùbá Philosophy and belief, they possess the attributes of the *Ifá* oracle. Actually, in a way, the proverbs are a microcosm of the *Ifá* oracle.²⁹ Proverbs are formed with the worship of *Ifá* and *Orishas* (gods) in songs, beating drums with proverbial sayings, as they settle disputes, as they make merry or drink palm wine (native drink from palm trees), as they tell family or local histories and other social-cultural events.³⁰ It is said that Yorùbá proverbs have socio-cultural origins according to the historical, and religious experiences of the Yorùbá people.

However, Sotunde identified three other sources of proverbs: social interactions between people and the folkloric experiences of communities including their prejudices, beliefs, superstitions, and myths; and third; animism and animatism, through which primitive people sought and found meaning to the immediate natural environment.³¹ Proverbs are considered to be traditional and originate from the observation of natural phenomena and human relations.³²

Irrespective of this discrepancy, one obvious point is the fact that proverbs come to play in the daily discourse and the oratory of Yorùbá from time immemorial and they are used to garnish, conceal and hint messages. They are simply informative.

Yorùbá Proverbs as Material for Testimony in Epistemology

As noted earlier, Yorùbá proverbs by their very nature are a verbal medium of dissemination of knowledge and information among the people. They are the experiences of people which have been philosophically woven together and presented as a compendium of wisdom to act as companions and guides in the life of the people.

There are originally transmitted orally but are now been preserved in written form. Nevertheless, being in oral form does not reduce their value: It is in the oral state that the beauty of proverbs becomes more eloquent. This means that Yorùbá proverbs validate orality as means of passing knowledge to others in African traditions. There have been influential philosophical ideas that for a long time remained verbal. They are considered sources of instruction and knowledge because they are taken as materials for knowledge. It follows that their words constitute testimony. This is in line with Searle's opinion that the primary speech act of testimony is a speaker's saying, telling, or asserting something. Assertion puts forth a proposition that the speaker represents as true.³³

An area that clearly shows Yorùbá Proverbs as possessing, being communally known, and shared in the society. Yorùbá proverbs are key in the social fabric of Yorùbá epistemic lives. This is in line with the interest of advocates of social epistemology that society and culture influence our epistemic standard. Yorùbá proverbs constitute valid examples of such epistemic perspective as they form an irresistible part of the daily interactions among the Yorùbá. Just as a child learns that the stove is hot because others said so, it is in the same way that the proverb "*Bìwọ́ọmọdẹ ò bátìkanẹkuidà, a kùbèèreikút'ópa baba ẹni*" (This will translate literally as "when a child has not gotten hold of the sheath of the sword, he dares not ask the manner of his father's death). The meaning of this proverb is that the exercise of power comes with maturity. Just as he lives with the knowledge he acquired through the

testimony of the hotness of the stove, he also learns that authority comes with age and prudence, because he has heard it from the oral testimony of the people. The simple line of argument here is that wisdom is profitable to guide.

The above shows the informative impulse of Yorùbá proverbs.

Earlier on in this paper, testimony is defined as any statement or other communication that purports to state a fact or provide information. Transmission of the information is the goal of testimony. This is also what proverbs are used for in the Yorùbá thought system, where the value of a proverb is based on how well it provides information. In other words, the value of proverbs is in their ability to inform people in their daily lives. This information provides knowledge and serves as a guide in making good judgments. This is succinctly expressed in the proverb '*Apeèpo'èhìnàgbà, àgbànbòwákàn ó, k'áwonomodér'òhun pa'* (He who strips the bark from the back of an elder (i.e. insults him), will become old so that the youngsters will find something to strip him of (i.e. insult him in turn), '*Apeèpo'* is one who strips the bark of a tree for medicinal purposes, etc and inculcates.³⁴ This proverb clearly provides instruction on learning to live in the right manner in line with some ethical virtues and injunctions.

Interestingly, the irreplaceable nature of testimony among Yorùbá is attested to in some proverbs. It is the general belief among the people that it is impossible that one lives all by his wisdom without recourse to the wisdom of others to complement his. This is further pushed forward with the proverb: "*ỌgbónỌlọgbón la fínsọgbon, ìmọ̀rànẹ̀nikan o t'óbọ̀rọ̀*". (One learns wisdom from other people's wisdom, one person's knowledge does not amount to anything).

According to AbiodunAderinto, this proverb above in the culture of the Yorùbá suggests that one person cannot claim the monopoly of knowledge and wisdom.³⁵ The proverb implies that we learn from other people and our knowledge alone cannot take us anywhere. If the wisdom of an individual would take him nowhere, it is inescapable for him to acquire the testimony of others either as a complement to or acquiring new knowledge altogether. This is not a

usual practice in Western philosophy where the premium is placed on the self and the issue of knowledge acquisition was conducted around the individual. Alvin Goldman remarked that Rene Descartes created a roadmap for epistemology. The plan was to meditate, reflect, and otherwise conduct one's intellectual affairs in a thoroughly self-absorbed way. Such a plan does not consider other people's thoughts or opinions, to how their knowledge might inform one's own. The great bulk of epistemology has followed Descartes' image of an epistemic agent as a solitary investigator, seeking truth by his own devices.³⁶ The proverb under consideration shows that credence is always being given to the other and the other is regarded as indispensable when it comes to the issue of acquiring knowledge in the Yorùbá thought system.

Another proverb also supports the testimonial nature of Yorùbá. The proverb shows how Yorùbá believes in tapping from the knowledge and wisdom of others with particular emphasis on the need to appreciate the wisdom of elders. It is said that:

“OgbónOlógbón òjẹ́ kápeàgbàniwèrè”

(Other people's wisdom saves the elder from being called a lunatic).

The insights of elders on issues are usually an outcome of deep reflection and meditation. Presenting such to a youth may sound nonsensical because what the elder says, for instance, in a worrisome situation may have defied the comprehension, and thought of the youth in question, who possibly have expected that such an instance calls for violence and that should be employed necessarily.

It is a given in the precinct of the Yorùbá epistemic thought system as in other spheres that an individual does possess what is sufficient for him to make an epistemic claim. Hence the common proverb - *enìkankì ìjẹ́ à wádé* (it is improper for a single individual to refer to himself as the whole). This is because any individual along with others rightly constitutes the whole. In Yorùbá proverbs, therefore, the social dimension is always emphasized. This is aptly captured in the proverb below:

Mo gbọ tán, momò tán, lós eikúpaaláimòkan.

(The claim of the fool to know it all, is the cause of his

death).

The onus to listen to the testimony of others lies on all who desire knowledge and long life. Let us go back to the instance of the hotness of the stove and the subsequent avoidance on the part of the child from being hurt. The child gets to know that a hot stove hurts from the testimony of others, and not from experiencing it. Refusing testimony of others is considered an act of self-impoverishment, particularly when there is no hindrance to such knowledge. The listener in this case comes to know because he is provided with such information. This is explicit in the following proverbs:

*Taníbáárúgbòlògbé? Talóbáàlejòwálátiileré? Ohun
a kòmò níparè akí da sí.*

(Where are the old man's childhood mates? Who was with the stranger at home? No one should dabble into what he is ignorant about).³⁷

Ignorance in this case is because of the non-disclosure of information by the person in question. To know in the light of the proverb under consideration here, the person in question must disclose information. Contrary to Alvin Goldman's claim that Hume seems to suppose that from our observations we can infer testimonial justification,³⁸ and observation is not sufficient because there is a considerable amount of information about an individual or an object that is never available to be experienced.

Conclusion

The paper presented the nature of Yorùbá proverbs working with the notion that proverbs are common means of transferring knowledge in the Yorùbá thought system. The use of proverbs is an integral part of oral tradition and a medium of communication among the people.

For this reason, proverbial utterances are held in high esteem and considered an expression of the wisdom inherent in the culture of Yorùbá people. The appreciation that proverbs enjoy at every instance is because it is an expression of the collective voice of the society. As a result of their ability to instruct almost at every given time, it is arguable that proverbs satisfy the conditions necessary for

testimonial knowledge particularly as it shares the basic structure of epistemic testimony, namely that the hearer receives the utterance of the speaker as true. So, juxtaposing Yorùbá proverbs and testimony, one realizes that both focus on the same goal which is the transmission of information. In both cases, the content of the transmission is considered a true and valid means of knowledge.

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