Ikwerre Epistemological Foundation and Implications for Modern Day Clamour for Knowledge Economy

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Abstract

The Ikwerre ethnic nationality is one of the various communities of Rivers State, South South region of Nigeria. The Ikwerre People have a distinct language and are known as Iwherronwha. The Ikwerre People like other ethnic groups grave for knowledge. Knowledge plays a major role in human society. It was Francis Bacon who said "knowledge is power". Often times the concept of knowledge is misunderstood and misapplied in human existential experience hence this has created a lot of challenges to mankind. T.S. Eliot(1935) in Choruses from "The Rock", to ask"where is ths life we have lostin living? Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? Where is the knowledge we have lost in information? These are serious epistemological issues. In this current knowledge economy, the Ikwerre People are not left out in this knowledge search. These are the issues and perspective that the paper attempted to address. Its therefore very pertinent that mankind positions himself well to point that he will have better answers to the epistemological questions of knowledge economy.

Key Words: IKwerre, Epistemology, Knowledge Economy

Introduction:

Knowledge plays a major role in the human society. It was Francis Bacon who said, "Knowledge is power." Often times our reference to this assertion has concentrated on the positive effects of knowledge while neglecting the negative implication of wrong, false or faulty knowledge. Sometimes in our attempt to acquire knowledge we have lost the real substance of knowledge. This perhaps, T.S. Eliot (1935) in Choruses from "The Rock, to ask "Where is the life we have lost in living? Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?"This is very crucial; a scenario akin to the outcry of the Biblical Paul, this, "Because that, when they knew God they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful but became vain in their imaginations and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing to be wise they became fools" (Romans 1:21-22, KJV). So in the search for epistemological principles, one may lose the basic tenet of epistemology. And such a loss would spell a form of unwisdom with disastrous consequences. Little wonder, in all our knowledge, we are still grappling with diverse difficulties.

In addition to losing the basic tenet of epistemological principles, the condition for one's claim of knowledge has been a subject of unending controversy. This controversy includes what is expected to be the basic criteria for justified true belief. Different philosophers have different views on this. Is it the empiricism of John Locke and other British empiricists? Or is it the rationalistic principle of the continental rationalists? Is it Cartesian foundationalism or Husserlian phenomenology? The list of the controversy is endless.

But the Ikwerre of upper Niger Delta in Nigeria, have wonderful epistemological doctrines which no known study has been conducted in order to explore it for the good of the human society. This is why this study concentrates on these epistemological principles for Ikwerre traditional thought in order to contribute to knowledge economy.

Conceptualizing Epistemology

Epistemology is derived from two Greek words namely, episteme and logos. This, from the root word, simply means study of theory of knowledge. According to

Omoregbe (2011), epistemology is the branch of philosophy which explores the nature, scope and criteria for knowledge claims. When we talk of the nature of knowledge we mean whether knowledge is acquired through reason or by experience. When we talk of the extent of knowledge we refer to whether knowledge is limited to the sensible realm or does it extend to the supra - sensible realm. There are two strands of epistemology: they are evidentialism and reformed epistemology. Evidentialism maintains that if we must believe anything, we must have evidence for believing it. In other words, if we say I know there is a car, then there should be evidence. This evidence is perceived by the senses. But the reformed epistemologists argue on the contrary and posit that we can believe on something and still be justified even when we have no evidence for it. A typical example is the analogy that Alvin Platinga draws between belief in God and other minds. According to Platinga, "While we have no conclusive arguments that other people have minds (we can't see their minds or experience what they do), we are justified in believing that they do; since belief in God is similar to belief in other minds, we are likewise justified in believing in God (Sweetman 2007). This clearly portrays the position of the reformed epistemologists. We shall consider these two views under empiricism and rationalism; for they are restatement of these two views.

Empiricism is an epistemological principle that denies innate ideas and rather holds that all human knowledge is derived from sense perception and circumscribed in sense perception. For the empiricists, all knowledge comes from experience and experience in this instance refers to the original encounter between subject and object (Akanmidu 2012). All knowledge, according to the empiricists, are a posteriori, that is, they are directly from the truth which is contingent upon the meeting of subject and object in experience. This is why, David Hume contends that "We adhere strictly to the epistemological principle that our all our genuine ideas correspond to simple sense impressions (Aigbodioh, 2000). This was why Blaise Pascal holds that there is nothing in the intellect that was not first in the senses. Our sense, therefore are the means of acquiring knowledge. John Locke avowedly holds that the mind of a child at birth is a Tabula Rasa (Like and empty slate) and that it is impressions or experience that writes things on it. Another empiricist who denies a priori principles is David Hume. In his Enquiry into

Human Understanding, he contends, "If we take in our hand any volume; of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance; let us ask, does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number? No. Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence? No. Commit it then to the flames; for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion" (Aigbodioh, 2000). There was no better way Hume could have expressed his belief in empirical knowledge. Immanuel Kant was another empiricist who believed that reason is illusive. Though Kant does not deny the existence of immaterial or spiritual realities, he rather maintains that our human minds cannot knowledge them because the categories of human understanding cannot be applied to them. Kant divides reality into *noumena* and phenomena. *Noumena* are things in themselves while phenomena are things as we perceive them (Ozumba 2000). According to Kant, we can know phenomena but we cannot know *noumena*because of the reason we just mentioned. Before Kant, the human mind was passive in its encounter with objects of experience. But Kant on the contrary maintains that the human mind was active each time it came in contact with object of experience. The human mind imposes its categories on the subject of experience and interprets it according the categories. This is like the common saying that all things are yellow to him that have yellow fever. The categories of human understanding are the structure of the human mind and according to Kant they are twelve. Kant sub – divides them into four namely, Quantity, Quality, Relation and Modality. These are the structures of the human understanding which cannot be applied to spiritual realities. Hence, man cannot know spiritual realities even though they exist.

But on the other hand the rationalists contend that knowledge could be acquired through reason. These philosophers believe in the existence of a prior principles. In their view, knowledge can be acquired through the process of abstraction. The soul has innate knowledge and this was the position of Socratic. He held that the soul had knowledge prior to its union with the body in an unhappy *koinonia*.He therefore saw himself as Athenian Philosophic midwife to help men deliver the knowledge that was innate in them. He illustrated is belief in a prior knowledge in the allegory of the cave which was an embodiment of his theory of knowledge. To Socrates, knowledge is attained through the process of reminiscence or through the process of remembrance. In his allegory of the cave, he postulated a scenario where

some people are chained hands, feet and neck in a dark cave. They can only look straight forward to the wall of the cage. There was fire behind the prisoners. Between the prisoners and the fire there was a wall and a raised platform which stretches from one side of the cave to the other. Socrates further assumed that there were men carrying the statute of animals and other things across the cave and the fire cast a shadow of those things on the wall that the prisoners were looking at. The prisoners would think they were seeing the reality without knowing that it was shadow of the real things. Socrates continues. If one of the prisoners escapes from the prison and comes outside the cave, he would then see the reality of things. So if he goes back to the cave to speak to the other prisoners, they would not believe him and may even kill him they did to Socrates. The men who were changed are non – Philosophers who do not rise above the sense, the man who escapes from the cave is a philosopher. The sun is a form of the good. The cave is the world, outside of the cave is the eternal, intelligible world, the world of ideas. The chains are man's prejudices, preconceptions and preferencesTherefore, in Socrates epistemology, the senses can only give us appearance, sophistry and illusion. The real object of human knowledge is in the world of forms, the intelligible world and this is the ideal world.

Another problem in epistemology, is the denial of knowledge by the Sophists. The Sophists were of two kinds. We have the skeptics and the relativists. The skeptics denied the certainty of knowledge. A major proponent of skepticism was Gorgias who said, "Nothing can be known. Even if it is known, it cannot be communicated." Similarly, Timon of Philus, Pyrroh's disciple, said, "That honey is sweet, I refuse to assert, that honey appears sweet, I fully grant (Omoregbe, 2011a). Another group of the Sophists were the relativists represented majorly by Protagoras who was credited with the assertion that "Man is the measure of all things. Of those things that are that they are. Of those things that are not that they are not." By this the Sophists deny or reject absolute knowledge against Socrates view that knowledge is absolute, certain, stable and eternal. But the Sophists who denied the certainty of knowledge went about teaching people knowledge and collecting money for their services. And as St Augustine remarks, anyone who claims that all knowledge is doubtful is contradicting himself. If he knows that all knowledge is doubtful, then

all knowledge is by that very fact not doubtful. For it shows that at least somebody can know something (Omoregbe, 2011b).

Next is on what is the foundation for justified true belief? The question is how to reach a state of indubitability in knowledge. Edmund Husserl, in his search for epistemic justification or this indubitable state, laid the framework for rational knowledge on phenomenology. The process, according to Husserl, begins with the phenomenological reduction which has to do with removing from our minds or putting within brackets, our preconceptions, ideas and idiosyncracies about our objectof investigation. That is, to adopt a presuppositionless approach by opening our minds in the study of knowledge. Then, we would move on to *edeitic* reduction which requires the removal of existential characteristics from the object of our investigation and a concentration on the essences of things. Then we go further to do transcendental reduction where we put within brackets, our natural self and psychological attitude. By this recommendation, Husserl has moved from empirical, descriptive phenomenology to idealist, transcendental phenomenology. When we do this what would emerge is the transcendental ego or the transcendental self. The transcendental ego now takes control and becomes the only authentic source of knowledge. It also transcends the world and becomes and impartial observer (Omoregbe, 2011b). All true knowledge therefore comes from the transcendental ego and it is certain and stable. This was Husserl's way of erecting a philosophic edifice based on firm epistemological foundation. However, earlier than Husserl, Rene Descartes had developed his own model based on the methodic doubt. In his *Methodic Doubt*, Descartes discovered a truth which was difficult to doubt, that is, has reached an indubitable level, and this was the fact that he was thinking. Hence, his aphorism, "Corgito ego sum" meaning, "I think therefore I am." According to Descartes, other truths can emerge from this indubitable truth through the process of intuition and deduction. Intuition, as Descartes, opines, is the intuitive perception of things by the light of reason which is free from error. So whatever the mind graspintuitively, clearly and distinctively, is true. The mind then begins to make deductions from this truth bringing out by inference other truths that follow necessarily from it (Omoregbe, 2011b).

Epistemology in Ikwerre Traditional Philosophy

The Ikwerre of upper Niger Delta in Nigeria constitute one of the minor ethnic groups in Nigeria. They comprise four local government areas namely, Port Harcourt, Obio – Akpor, Emohua and Ikwerre. There are different accounts about the origin and settlement of the Ikwerre people. The Ikwerre of upper Niger Delta traditionally believed in a pantheon of gods. They are largely agrarian though industrialization and the invasion of Fulani herdsmen have reduced the intensity of farming activities. The acquisition of knowledge is a highly cherished virtue in Ikwerre. The Ikwerre see a knowledgeable person as one who can help the society with his knowledge and they hold such a person in high esteem. The importance the Ikwerre attach to knowledge is evidenced in the commitment to they give to its acquisition and attainment right from the birth of a child. The moment a child begins to speak, the Ikwerre adopt various means of bring him or her up in knowledge. The child is told tales, folklores, proverbs and so on. If the child is discerned to possess some extra ordinary gifts and calling, he or she is sent for apprenticeship with those endowed with supra - sensible knowledge and powers. The Ikwerre is not concerned with the theoretical disputations of knowledge like the western scholars and Onyeocha portrays this view succinctly, thus:

> African Epistemology is not particularly concerned with, logically maneuvering various concepts and principles into a coherent world view or with, analysis, definition of words. Rather, it wants to grapple with, data of experience and describe what affects the human condition. In this respect, much theoretical epistemology is of little relevance to them for the important question of human existence (Onyeocha2003:56)

On what constitutes knowledge, he contends that:

> For the African and for everyone, knowledge arises when a link is established between the intellect and reality or possibility of any sort. When the intellect registers a reality and can relate with it by way of contemplation or comparison, or judgment or analysis, knowledge has occurred. (Onyeocha, 2005:61)

Sources of Knowledge in Ikwerre Epistemology

i. Sensory Perception: The position of the empiricists is that there is nothing in the intellect that was not first in the senses. In the view of John (2013), sensory perception is a personal, immediate or felt knowledge. Sensory knowledge has to do with knowledge acquired from the senses. It is also known as experiential knowledge. In Ikwerre, it has do with an eye witness account of a thing or event. It is a first - hand knowledge of what is perceived. The Ikwerre adage *ohnu nanya kwe* which means "seeing is believing" places premium on sense experience or sense perception. The Ikwerre rely so much on this type of knowledge. This is why when an individual claims knowledge of a certain event or a thing, the Ikwerre would want to know how he came about it. Hence, the question, "Were you there?" "Did you see it yourself?" "Did you hear it yourself?" And so on. If the answers to the above questions are in the affirmative, the Ikwerre can accept such a claim to knowledge. Though the Ikwerre see sense perception as a source of knowledge, it denies that all human knowledge come from sense impressions.

ii. Reason: The rationalists believe that knowledge could be acquired through mental or rational processes. This is also the position of Ikwerre epistemology. Rational knowledge in Ikwerre is acquired by under – studying wise men who are seen as repository of wisdom on different issues and occasions (Wogonwu, 2021). In Ikwerre perception, this knowledge may not depend on age but on interaction and intend learning which acquaints the individual with the right knowledge for actions at any given time.

iii. Ontological knowledge: This type of knowledge, John (2013) opines, is the exclusive preserve of the elderly because of many years of experience. This is why the Ikwerre usually say, *nhe nye okomadu dumogu ali hnu, watakiri zu ohaa mu ogu zoru*, meaning "What an old man sees sitting down, a child cannot see standing up." They also cherish the adage, *e nkwu ha kwagu n 'elu ya eowhu dugu n'izor*, and this means that the height of a palm tree is what

determines the extent it can see. Thus, the Ikwerre believe that there are things only age and years of experience would teach an individual.

iv. Oral Tradition: Oral tradition is one of the oldest and widely used means of transmission of knowledge from one generation to the other. Oral tradition is the process of transmission of information, opinions, beliefs, customs, knowledge and theories. For Uduigwomen (1995), oral tradition, is that which exists in popular beliefs, inherited reputation or memory and consists of myths, stories, proverbs, folktales, songs and dances, liturgies and rituals, pithy saying, riddles, and adages, ideas, social attitudes, conventions, institutions and customs. This is a major source of knowledge in Ikwerre ethnic nationalities. In other words, people believe certain things to be true because they were told so by their fathers who also told the same thing by their forbears.

v. Extra Sensory Perception: Extra sensory knowledge is identified with medical practioners in Ikwerre cosmology. This includes the diviners, priests, herbalists, and the mediums. They are generally known as medicine men in Africa. These medicine men possess mystical or mythical knowledge which is not accessible to the senses. They can foretell future events with accuracy. They can discern the causes and cures of certain ailments. The community relies on them for guidance and actions from time to time. They are seen as intermediaries between God and man and so possess power to help or harm. Extra – sensory perception may be called revelation in Judea – Christian tradition and Islamic tradition and may be known as discovery in science.

vi. Common sense: It is an axiom in Ikwerre that common sense is not common. Common sense is conceived by the Ikwerre as the birthright of every individual (Wogonwu, 2021). John (2013) contends that common sense is an individual's ability to ingeniously seize the moment and come out with a solution in a complex situation. This type of knowledge guides the individual to differentiate between good and bad, right and wrong and to

take appropriate actions as occasion demands. This is why when it is lacking in an individual, the Ikwerre see the person as not knowledgeable.

vii. Premonitive Knowledge: Signs play a dominant role in the possession of knowledge in Ikwerre epistemology. Signs convey information or messages to the people. This is why they are not trifled with. A sign could be s sensational movement in a particular part of the body and it has its interpretation within the people's culture. It could be a good or bad sign or omen. For instance, when an individually who wants to embark on a journey suddenly hits his right feet on a stone, the journey is immediately interpreted to be a good one. But the reverse is the case if it was the left leg that hit the stone. In this case, the journey would be seen as a bad one which may spell ill – luck or bad fortunes. And things have most times turned out according to those signs and premonitions. But it is still doubtful if this could give us certitude in knowledge or are the accomplishments mere coincidences.

Elements of Knowledge in Ikwerre Traditional Philosophy

There are various constituent elements of knowledge in Ikwerre.

i. Myths: Myths, according to Alagoa (1978) are historical information transmitted orally by processes that are peculiar to each community or people. Marshall (1988) in Kanu (2015) contends that a myth is used to refer to stories that are fictional and hence, it has come to have a pejorative sense. Myths are invented stories about the gods, creation, sin, evil, etc. which may or may not be true. They are stories which accompany and allegedly form the basis of religious rituals. It provides explanation as to why we do what we do and not otherwise. From the above, we see that man is a myth – making animal. He is living in a bewildered universe and seeks to provide explanation for the many vicissitudes and wonders of life. Myth, in Ikwerre cosmology is a means of acquiring/generating and transmitting or transferring knowledge. It constitutes a body of rules, rituals and practices with rewards and sanctions. The Ikwerre have myths of origin, procreation, bifurcation of reality and so on. The Ikwerre use myths to teach abstinence,

respect, honesty and chastity of life. They also use it to illustrate reward for doing good and punishment for violation.

ii. Proverbs: Proverbs may be regarded as pithy sayings that express some fundamental truths of human existence in encoded or organized language. They are highly ornamented and figurative mode of language which convey the beliefs, ideas and customs of a people and serve as means of communicating knowledge. According to Okoh (2010) proverbs essentially reflect the realities of the society from which they are integral parts of. The proverbs are repository or embodiment of Ikwerre epistemology. For instance, when the Ikwerre want to convey the notion of a struggling man who does not succeed in spite of all, they say, *chi kwee eze, kwee ora*, that is, one whose guardian spirit permits neither riches nor poverty. There is another proverb which says, "Nye buru chia izo, ogbagbu ahua n'aso." This literally means "Whoever goes before his guardian spirit would run so much." This proverb teaches the need to be patient and allow things to take their normal course. It is like the saying that "Success is opportunity meeting with preparation." The implication is that no matter how prepared you are, you still need an opportunity to be successful.

iii. Folktales: Folktales are stories that are crafted from human imaginations. These stories as Iwu (2017) has observed, are made of endless exploits of the tricksters either as, hare, tortoise or fox usually narrated to children at night to provide a moral base for respect, communal cohesion, hard work, honesty and bonding in the family. They are told to children in such a way that the children are encouraged to follow the examples of the virtuous characters and shun the ways of the vicious ones. Usually they end with the consequences of each life style whether good or bad. My mother of blessed memory told us a story of how a girl who was lady died immediately after her mother's death. She had no father and the only one provided foer her was her mother, a peasant farmer. The girl was lazy and couldn't join her mother in farming activities. After the death of her mother, she had no one to carter for her. so she had no option but to begin the farming work that she never did in the past. But she cried on a daily basis as she went to farm.

When the spirit of her late mother saw her she cried and mourned, she took her along with her into the spirit world. This story was a strong motivation for us young children to be hard working because we did not want to die. Folk tales in Ikwerre are very effective ways of communication knowledge and evokingthe right action in people. One of the paramount folk tales in Ikwerre – Africa is the story of the tortoise and the birds. The tortoise and the birds were invited to a banquet by a friend and before they attended the meeting they chose their names. After the birds had chosen their individual names, tortoise said he name is, "All of you." Each bird had to give a feather the tortoise and forthwith they took their journey to the sky. When they got to the meeting the host prepared ameal and said to his guests, "The food is for all of you." Immediately, the tortoise claimed that the food was for only him since his name is "All of you." So he took all the food. The birds became angry and took their feathers from the tortoise and he could not come back from the journey. The Ikwerre use this story to discourage greed and graft. In the past, stories like this had enormous impact in the conduct of young people. The folktales in Ikwerre traditional philosophies can stand shoulder high amidst the anecdotes, allegories and parables in the Judeo – Christian tradition.

iv. Orality: We have noted earlier that oral tradition is one of the sources of knowledge in Ikwerre epistemology. It is also an element of knowledge. It can be referred to authoritatively. Knowledge gained from oral tradition is comparable to the authority of an expert in a particular field of study. This is why in Ikwerre traditional practice, people can even swear to oaths based on oral tradition. Historical events are generated and transmitted orally. Boundary delineation was done in the past on the basis of oral tradition.

Ikwerre Epistemological Principles and Knowledge Economy

There is the overwhelming clamour for knowledge economy in the modern times. Francis Bacon, as we noted earlier said, "Knowledge is power." All knowledge therefore must be geared towards power for control, not of human beings but events and situations that threaten the peaceful existence of man. Of what use is knowledge if it does not set man free from fear in the universe? Of what use is

knowledge if it does not solve human problems? Knowledge for knowledge sake looks like the cancerous cell which keeps growing without purpose. Ikwerre epistemological principles serve great purposes in human existence. There is the metaphysical import of this traditional philosophy and there is the physical dimension. The impulse to ask metaphysical questions is a natural one. The knowledge foundation of the Ikwerre provides rational explanation for the universe. There are situations that are inexplicable within the laws of science but explained in Ikwerre traditional philosophy. This, nonetheless, satisfies human curiosity. Ikwerre traditional philosophy also provides a basis for moral conduct. No society advances without commitment to moral principles. The German philosopher, Immanuel Kant said, "I make sense of my existence when I am moral…" The Ikwerreknowledge base prescribes the rules of human behavior. It also makes provision for the arrangement inter personal relationships. In Ikwerre, knowledgeable people are held in high honour because of the service they would render to their communities. This high premium placed in knowledge makes parents to send their children for apprenticeship, sometimes simply to learn the rules of engagement, leadership styles and patterns, settlement of disputes. This is why the Ikwerre learning process is more training that teaching. Teaching has to do with explaining but training, in addition to explaining, lays the example for one's disciple to learn. Training is usually more of "Do as I do" and this characterize learning processes in Ikwerre traditional philosophy. Ikwerre epistemological tenets also help to guide the society. During war and during peace. Revelation knowledge plays a major role in ensuring there is equilibrium between the divine and the human and if there are violations, the same knowledge could be used to recall the people to the path of righteousness, peace and equilibrium.

Conclusion and Evaluation

We have examined epistemology from the perspective of Ikwerre traditional philosophy. We have seen its points of convergence and divergence from the western conceptions. To the Ikwerre whatever is perceived through the senses is true. It cannot be denied. So in Ikwerre epistemology, there is the support for evidentialism. Experience is one of the powerful means through which the Ikwerre people gain knowledge which helps them to handle similar experiences whenever they occur in the future. Experience presents to them the knowledge to override situations and issues which must have troubled them in the past before their

knowledge of such situation and issue was made known by experience. We also saw that the Ikwerre hold knowledge derived from rational and mental processes as true. This is unlike the western scholars who are divided along the empiricist and rational lines. For the Ikwerre, the two perspectives as veritable sources of knowledge. Rational knowledge supposes that there are innate ideas or *a prior* principles. The Ikwerre belief in innate knowledge derived from the doctrine of reincarnation. In Ikwerre metaphysics, there are instances of memory recollections in which case a child begins to recall events that took place in his or former life at an astonishingly young age. This, to the Ikwerre, is a stark proof that the soul of the child possessed knowledge before its union with the body. So innate principles constituent elements of knowledge in Ikwerre traditional philosophy. We also saw that there is certainty of knowledge in Ikwerre Epistemology. Therefore, the skeptic and relativist views of knowledge are alien to Ikwerre Epistemology. To the Ikwerre there is the possibility and stability of knowledge. This is why the Ikwerre maintain that "Nhneimarnuimarnu" meaning "What you know, you." Another adage is *imarnunhne*which simply means you are wise or intelligent. The Ikwerre use this adage when expressing their commendation after hearing a person speak or act in a knowledgeable and wise way.

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