



Epistemic Conceptualisation of the Correlates Between Wisdom, Knowledge and Understanding: A Western and African Analogical Model

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Abstract- The triad of wisdom, knowledge, and understanding stands at the very heart of epistemology, yet the precise nature of the relationship binding these three concepts remains a matter of considerable philosophical dispute. While the Western epistemological tradition, running from Plato's dialogues through contemporary virtue epistemology, has largely treated wisdom, knowledge, and understanding as discrete though interrelated achievements of the mind, African epistemic traditions, particularly among the Yoruba and Igbo peoples of Nigeria, have long conceived of these three faculties as strands of a single cognitive rope. The problem this paper addresses is the absence of a unifying framework capable of illuminating both the convergences and divergences between these two traditions without reducing one to a mere appendage of the other. Employing a comparative, analytic, and hermeneutic methodology, the paper juxtaposes Western models, especially the propositional-knowledge, understanding-why, and wisdom-as-virtue distinctions, with African models, particularly the Yoruba triad of *imo*, *oye*, and *ogbon* and the Igbo notion of *amamife*. The paper finds that although both traditions distinguish knowledge as the raw material of cognition, understanding as its organisation, and wisdom as its practical consummation, the African model integrates these three moments more seamlessly within a communal and moral matrix than does the individualist orientation of much Western epistemology. The paper concludes that a synthetic, analogical model, attentive to both traditions, offers the most adequate account of how knowledge ripens into understanding and understanding matures into wisdom.

Keywords- Wisdom, Knowledge, Understanding, Western epistemology, African epistemology, Analogical model.



I. Introduction

Human beings have never been content merely to gather facts; they have always longed to make sense of those facts, and beyond mere sense-making, they have yearned to live well by them. It is this threefold longing, to know, to understand, and to be wise, that has animated epistemology since the earliest recorded reflections of humankind, whether one traces those reflections to the marketplace of ancient Athens or to the palace courtyards of old Ile-Ife and Nri. Wisdom, knowledge, and understanding are words that trip easily off the tongue in ordinary conversation, yet beneath their apparent familiarity lies a philosophical terrain as contested as it is fertile. Is wisdom simply an accumulation of knowledge, the way a granary is simply an accumulation of grain? Or does wisdom instead require some further ripening that mere information can never by itself supply? Does understanding stand between knowledge and wisdom as a bridge stands between two riverbanks, or does it rather encompass and outlast them both?

This paper takes up these questions not as an idle exercise in definitional hair-splitting, but as an urgent philosophical task, for the confusion of knowledge with wisdom, and the conflation of information with understanding, carries consequences that reach far beyond the seminar room. It reaches into the classroom, where examinations too often reward retention over comprehension; it reaches into the public square, where credentials are too readily mistaken for competence; and it reaches into the corridors of government, both in the West and across Africa, where the possession of degrees has too often stood in for the possession of good judgement. If the philosopher's task is, as it has always been, to distinguish shadow from substance, then the distinguishing of knowledge, understanding, and wisdom must count among philosophy's oldest and most pressing labours.

The present study approaches this labour comparatively, holding up the Western epistemological tradition and the African epistemic tradition as two mirrors angled toward the same object, so that what escapes one may be caught by the other. It argues, imaginatively, that knowledge, understanding, and wisdom are best conceived neither as three unrelated islands nor as three names for a single undifferentiated mainland, but rather as three confluent streams which, much like the Niger and the Benue meeting at Lokoja, retain their separate characters even as they merge into a single, more powerful current. The paper proceeds by clarifying the three concepts, examining the Western



analogical model that has historically distinguished them, turning to the African analogical model in which the Yoruba triad of imo, oye, and ogbon and the Igbo notion of amamife offer their own distinctive picture, and finally drawing out the correlates, the points of confluence and divergence, between the two traditions, before reflecting briefly on what this comparative exercise might mean for education and governance in contemporary Nigeria.

II. Conceptual Clarification

1. Knowledge: The Raw Material of Cognition

Knowledge, within the dominant Western analytic tradition, has customarily been defined as justified true belief, a tripartite formula traceable to Plato's dialogues and refined across two and a half millennia of subsequent commentary.¹ The formula is elegant, for it insists that mere true opinion, however fortunate, does not amount to knowledge unless the believer can also supply adequate grounds for the belief; yet the formula's elegance was famously shaken by Edmund Gettier, who constructed cases in which a subject holds a belief that is both true and justified, and yet, owing to a lucky accident, fails to know.² Since Gettier's intervention, Western epistemologists have laboured, with only partial success, to repair or replace the justified-true-belief formula, but the underlying intuition, that knowledge is more than a fortunate hit of information, has remained largely undisturbed.

Within Yoruba epistemology, a comparably rigorous distinction separates ìmò, verified firsthand experiential knowledge, from ìgbàgbó, belief accepted on the authority of others; only the former is accorded the status of reliable, well-grounded cognition, for it rests on conscious, attentive perception rather than mere hearsay.³ Correspondingly, among the Igbo, the term amamife designates knowledge restricted to those things and events for which good reason can be offered and which can be verified through sense perception and observation, a restriction that closely parallels, without simply duplicating, the Western insistence on justification.⁴ Both traditions, then, converge on the conviction that knowledge, whatever else it might be, cannot be reduced to bare true opinion; it must be earned, whether through argument, as the West insists, or through attentive lived experience, as African epistemic communities insist.⁵



2. Understanding: The Organisation of Cognition

If knowledge supplies the bricks of cognition, understanding supplies something closer to their architecture, for understanding is generally held, in contemporary epistemology, to involve a grasp of how various pieces of information hang together, of how one truth explains, supports, or depends upon another.⁶ Linda Zagzebski has argued that understanding possesses a first-person transparency, an ability to articulate one's grounds, that plain knowledge does not always require, so that a chicken-sexer may know the sex of a chick without being able to explain how she knows it, whereas genuine understanding of a subject demands precisely such an explanatory grasp.⁷ Jonathan Kvanvig extends this line of thought by insisting that understanding, unlike knowledge, is not easily undermined by a single false belief embedded within an otherwise coherent picture, since what matters for understanding is the overall coherence of one's grasp rather than the truth of every last constituent proposition.⁸ Duncan Pritchard, for his part, distinguishes understanding-why a state of affairs obtains from mere knowing-that it obtains, arguing that the former, though not necessarily the latter, requires a cognitive achievement that is significantly the agent's own doing.⁹ Understanding, on this composite Western picture, is thus knowledge organised, explained, and internally owned.

A structurally similar, though culturally distinctive, notion appears in Yoruba thought under the term *oye*, frequently glossed as understanding or discernment, and described by Yoruba philosophers as a form of experiential comprehension that goes beyond the mere possession of *imo* to include the capacity to interpret, relate, and apply what is known.¹⁰ *Oye*, in this sense, is not a private cognitive achievement alone but a socially recognised competence, the kind of discernment communities expect their elders to display when interpreting proverbs, adjudicating disputes, or reading the deeper meaning of an oracular corpus.¹¹

3. Wisdom: The Consummation of Cognition

Wisdom occupies, in both traditions, the summit of the epistemic hierarchy, though the two traditions locate its distinguishing mark somewhat differently. Aristotle, in the sixth book of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, distinguishes *sophia*, theoretical wisdom concerned with the highest and most unchanging truths, from *phronesis*, practical wisdom concerned with deliberating well about human goods and acting rightly in particular circumstances.¹² It is *phronesis*, rather than *sophia*, that most closely approximates the ordinary sense in which a person is called wise, for the *phronimos* is



precisely the one who knows not merely what is good in the abstract but what is good to do, here, now, in this particular tangle of circumstances. Contemporary virtue epistemologists have revived this Aristotelian insight, arguing that wisdom is best understood not as a further increment of propositional content but as an intellectual virtue, an excellence of character that governs how knowledge and understanding are deployed in the conduct of a life.¹³ Comparative work on wisdom across philosophical traditions, including Confucian treatments of benevolence and timeliness, similarly locates wisdom in the capacity to act well and appropriately, rather than merely to know much.¹⁴

The Yoruba term *ogbon* captures a strikingly congruent idea, for *ogbon* is frequently defined as the fusion of *imo*, empirical knowledge, and *oye*, interpretive understanding, into a single practical capacity for living rightly and governing wisely, a fusion memorably expressed in the proverb that wisdom rules the visible world just as good character rules the unseen one.¹⁵ Sophie Oluwole, comparing the Yoruba sage *Orunmila* to Socrates, argues that both figures exemplify wisdom precisely in their refusal to separate theoretical insight from lived moral practice.¹⁵ Among the Akan of Ghana, a closely related conception obtains: Kwame Gyekye observes that *nyansa*, wisdom, in Akan thought, is inseparable from moral sensitivity and social skill, such that a person may be reckoned intelligent without being reckoned wise, precisely because intelligence alone does not guarantee the practical and moral discernment that wisdom demands.¹⁶ Kwasi Wiredu likewise insists that African folk epistemology has always distinguished mere cleverness from the deeper, morally inflected sagacity that communities honour in their elders.¹⁷

III. The Western Analogical Model

An imaginative analogy may be permitted to gather these Western distinctions into a single, memorable picture. Let knowledge be likened to bricks, individually fired, individually true or false, individually justified or unjustified, yet, taken singly, incapable of sheltering anyone from the rain. Let understanding be likened to the architect's blueprint, the pattern that shows how the bricks are to be arranged, which walls bear weight, which openings admit light, and how the various rooms relate to one another, for it is understanding, on the Western model, that transforms a mere heap of true propositions into a coherent, navigable structure of thought.¹⁸ Let wisdom, finally,



be likened to the completed and inhabited house itself, the dwelling in which knowledge and understanding are not merely displayed but lived in, a house whose worth is measured not by the number of bricks it contains but by whether it shelters its occupants well, in fair weather and in foul.

This architectural analogy captures, moreover, a distinctly individualist orientation that has characterised much of Western epistemology since Descartes, for the architect, on this picture, works largely alone, assembling bricks and applying blueprints according to standards that are cashed out primarily in terms of the individual knower's own cognitive relation to the world.¹⁹ Even where contemporary epistemologists acknowledge the social dimensions of testimony and collaborative inquiry, the fundamental unit of analysis remains the individual epistemic agent, whose knowledge, understanding, and wisdom are assessed chiefly by reference to her own justificatory resources, her own coherent grasp, and her own settled character.

IV. The African Analogical Model

A different, though not unrelated, image emerges from African epistemic traditions, one perhaps more naturally rendered through the imagery of a river than through the imagery of a house. Imagine the numerous small springs and tributaries scattered across a landscape, each contributing its modest trickle of water gathered from direct, attentive contact with soil, rain, and rock; these scattered springs correspond to *imo* and *amamife*, the discrete units of experientially verified knowledge gathered by individual farmers, healers, diviners, and elders across a community.³ These tributaries do not remain isolated for long, however, for African epistemology places a marked emphasis on the communal validation of knowledge claims, such that individual perceptions are cross-checked, debated, and either confirmed or corrected through dialogue with other knowers before they are accorded the status of settled belief.²⁰ This confluence of tributaries, where individual streams of *imo* are gathered, tested, and organised into a single navigable current of comprehension, corresponds to *oye*, the interpretive understanding that elders, diviners, and custodians of oral tradition are expected to exercise when they relate proverbs and precedents to present circumstances.²¹

The river's final and most consequential stage arrives when the gathered waters reach the sea or spread across a fertile delta, nourishing farmland, sustaining fisheries, and



enabling the flourishing of entire communities strung along its banks; this stage corresponds to ogbon, wisdom, which is not merely a private cognitive attainment but a socially fruitful capacity, valued precisely because it sustains the moral and material life of the community.¹⁵ The Yoruba insistence that ogbon fuses imo and oye into a single practical excellence, and the parallel Akan insistence that nyansa cannot be divorced from moral sensitivity and social skill, both testify to a river-like model in which knowledge and understanding do not merely accumulate but actively flow toward, and are ultimately judged by, their capacity to nourish a shared communal life.¹⁶ Unlike the solitary architect of the Western model, the African epistemic agent labours within, and is answerable to, a community of co-inquirers, so that even the wisest elder's ogbon is confirmed, contested, and continually renewed through ongoing communal dialogue rather than settled once and for all within a single mind.²⁰

V. Correlates: Comparing the Two Models

Placed side by side, the architectural image and the riverine image reveal a striking correlate: both traditions agree that knowledge, understanding, and wisdom stand in an ascending, non-reversible order, such that wisdom presupposes understanding, and understanding in turn presupposes, without being reducible to, knowledge.^{7 13} Neither tradition, moreover, is willing to identify wisdom with a mere quantity of information, for both insist, in their own idiom, that a person may possess a great store of knowledge, and even a considerable capacity for interpretation, while still falling short of wisdom, if that knowledge and interpretation are not brought to bear rightly upon the practical business of living well.¹⁷

Yet the two models diverge instructively on the question of where, precisely, the glue lies that binds the three moments together. The Western model, epitomised by the architect labouring over blueprints, locates the glue chiefly in internal coherence, justificatory adequacy, and settled individual character, so that a person's wisdom is ultimately a property of that person's own cognitive and moral constitution.¹⁹ The African model, epitomised by the river flowing toward a shared delta, locates the glue chiefly in communal validation and social fruitfulness, so that wisdom is only fully wisdom when it is recognised, tested, and confirmed by the community it serves.²⁰ A further and perhaps more vivid correlate is offered by the common image of the three-legged stool, a household object whose stability depends on the equal length and



simultaneous presence of all three legs; a stool missing even one leg, however sturdy the remaining two, topples whoever attempts to sit upon it.⁵ Knowledge, understanding, and wisdom, on this image, are the three legs of a single epistemic stool, and a mind, or indeed a nation, that rests its weight upon only two of the three legs, however impressive those two legs may individually appear, courts an inevitable and often costly fall.

VI. Implications for Education and Governance

This comparative analysis is not merely of antiquarian interest, for it bears directly upon pressing questions of education and governance in contemporary Nigeria and, by extension, across much of the African continent. Nigerian scholars of education have argued persuasively that curricula modelled narrowly on the transmission and examination of propositional content, valuable as such content undoubtedly is, risk cultivating *imo* without adequately cultivating *oye* or *ogbon*, producing graduates well stocked with information but insufficiently practised in interpretation, discernment, and morally responsible judgement.¹⁰ A comparable diagnosis applies with even greater urgency to public life, where the possession of degrees, certificates, and technical credentials, however genuine, is too readily mistaken for the possession of the practical wisdom required to deliberate well about the common good, to resist the seductions of narrow self-interest, and to govern in a manner answerable to the community's flourishing rather than to the officeholder's private advantage.¹¹ A synthesis of the Western and African models suggests, accordingly, that any adequate programme of education or of leadership formation must attend not only to the accumulation of *imo*, information duly justified and verified, but also to the cultivation of *oye*, the interpretive skill by which information is organised into genuine comprehension, and, above all, to the nurturing of *ogbon*, the practical and moral wisdom by which comprehension is finally brought to bear upon the shared task of living well together.⁵

VII. Conclusion

This paper set out to address a genuine and persistent difficulty in epistemology, namely the absence of a framework capacious enough to hold together the Western and African understandings of wisdom, knowledge, and understanding without flattening either tradition into a mere footnote of the other. By attending closely to the Western



analogical model, in which knowledge, understanding, and wisdom are pictured as bricks, blueprint, and inhabited house, and to the African analogical model, in which the same three moments are pictured as tributary, confluence, and life-giving delta, the paper has shown that the two traditions share a common conviction, namely that wisdom is never a mere accumulation of facts, and yet part company on the question of where the ultimate warrant for wisdom is to be found, whether chiefly within the coherent, justified mind of the individual knower or chiefly within the tested, communally validated life of the wider community.

The image of the three-legged stool, indigenous to much of West Africa and yet immediately intelligible to any Western reader who has ever sat upon a wobbling chair, offers perhaps the most fitting summary of the paper's central thesis: knowledge, understanding, and wisdom are not competitors for a single throne but co-equal legs of a single indispensable stool, and any epistemic culture, whether academic, political, or personal, that neglects one leg in favour of the other two builds for itself only the appearance of stability. It is the hope of this paper that its comparative, imaginative treatment of wisdom, knowledge, and understanding will contribute, in however modest a measure, to a philosophical culture, both in Nigeria and beyond, that no longer mistakes information for insight, nor insight for wisdom, but instead labours patiently to cultivate all three together, much as the wise elder cultivates the farm, the river, and the family compound in their proper and interdependent seasons.

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