

FEMINIST EPISTEMOLOGY VERSUS YORUBA ETHNO-EPISTEMOLOGY: ADDRESSING AN UNWARRANTED EPISTEMIC DICHOTOMY

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Abstract

It is no longer news that the birth of feminist epistemology brought about a serious challenge to the Western traditional epistemic account and proposed a reconfiguration of the entire epistemic edifice. Upholding that the hitherto existing epistemic realities and narratives only portray knowledge claims and justifications from an androcentric perspective, it consequently contends for a comprehensive epistemic account arising from both male and female social standpoints. This work however points out the fact that the feminist epistemic account has only succeeded in producing an unwarranted epistemic dichotomy. It is albeit worthy of note that turning to Yoruba ethno-epistemology, one finds a more inclusive account of knowledge where a pluralistic mode of knowing, which is void of gender demarcation, is presented. To this end, this work shall examine feminist epistemology as a critique of the Western traditional account of knowledge whilst Yoruba ethno-epistemology shall be employed to salvage the subsequent needless epistemic dichotomy evolving from it.

Keywords: Feminist epistemology, justification, ethno-epistemology, knower, knowledge, gender, inclusiveness.

Introduction

Discourse in epistemology has taken varying dimensions over the decades such that there have been issues that concerning theories of knowledge, theories of truth, and theories of justification among others. In recent times, however, there has been a growing need to ground epistemic claims and justification on the cultural perspectives cum background of the knower. A protuberant position among diverse methods which epistemologists have employed to embark on the processes and practices of analysing and justifying knowledge claims is the feminist epistemological account. This scheme which has had a monumental contribution to the entire epistemological project in contemporary times is found in the contribution of theorists with feminist inclination and orientation, who have attempted to offer an account of knowledge of their own. The need for such an epistemological account was necessitated by the exponents' perception of the apparent requirement of an alternative account of knowledge that can overthrow certain presuppositions inherent in traditional epistemology. For this reason, it can be said that feminist epistemology employs the use of gender as a category of epistemic analysis and reconstruction. In other words, feminist epistemology may be expressed as a concern that demonstrates the influence of gender on our concept of knowledge and practices of inquiry and justification. However, it is pertinent to double-check if the epistemic problem has been solved or if there is a better approach that can be garnered from the Yoruba epistemological account. It is this very latter concern that this paper seeks to address thereby embarking on a critique of the

critique offered by feminist epistemology. Gleaning from Yoruba ethno-epistemology through the window of its linguistic composition, which reveals a gender-neutral culture, a more human-centred epistemic account is established rather than the accounts of knowledge laden with gender dichotomies.

On Feminist Epistemology

Feminist epistemology is an offshoot of the feminist movement which concern itself with the themes and activities that provide a demonstration of both the theoretical understanding of present realities and an attempt to employ this knowledge to transform the status quo. On this underpinning, feminist epistemology presents a radical rejection of the traditional epistemological project of validating epistemic norms from a transcendent viewpoint. Put differently, there is an emphasis on the epistemic salience of gender and the use of gender as an analytic category in discussions, criticism, and re-constructions of epistemic practices, norms, and ideals as traditionally approved. Efforts are therefore being made by feminist epistemologists to show the inadequacies that are inherent in what has hitherto constituted epistemology. Elucidating on the influence of feminism on our epistemic understanding, Lorraine Code aptly puts,

The impact of feminism on epistemology has been to move the question 'whose knowledge are we talking about?' to a central place in epistemological inquiry. Hence feminist epistemology involves the production of conceptions of knowledge that are quite specifically contextualized and situated and of socially responsible epistemic agency.¹

From the above positions of Code, it is clear that feminist epistemologists desire a total reconfiguration of epistemology where the cognitive status and the circumstances of the knower play a central role in making knowledge a possibility. Thus, the feminist approach tends to emphasize *how* knowers are particular and concrete, rather than abstract and universal.

Fundamental issue in Feminist Epistemology

As a reactionary and revolutionary application of feminism to the production and justification of human epistemic claim, feminist epistemology fundamentally preoccupies itself with *objectivity* of knowledge. It will be recalled that objectivity is a leading and principal feature of the Western traditional account of epistemic discourse, which necessitates that knowledge be abstract and certain. This account of knowledge as justified true belief places the principal criterion of knowledge as rational certainty which involves an objective reality and cognitive subject. This traditional view, according to feminist epistemologists, has led to an incomplete account of knowledge. They opine that knowledge is not complete when the multiple experiences of diverse groups in society and how their experiences are interrelated are not taken into consideration.

¹. Lorraine Code, *What can she know? Feminist Theory and Construction of Knowledge*.(New York: Cornell University Press, 1991), 276.

Oluwaseun T. Babatuyi

It is against this background that Code delineates central features to the traditional epistemology as follow:

1. The knower assumed in the 'S knows that P' formulation that begins typical contemporary analysis of knowledge treats S as an abstraction, or a generic epistemic subject because epistemic subjectivity does substantially differ from one rational individual to another.
2. Such analysis of knowledge seeks to find necessary and sufficient conditions of knowledge that will determine the positive epistemic status of any belief held by any epistemic subject.
3. Once a belief's epistemic status is determined by such conditions, it stands as knowledge.

This can be said to be responsible for the impact of feminism on epistemology which has relocated the question, "Whose knowledge are we talking about?" to a central place in epistemological inquiry. Hence, the need for conceptions of knowledge in a specifically centralized, situated, and of a socially responsible epistemic agency.²

A mixture of issues can be said to have inspired feminist interests in epistemic theories; for instance, stereotyped perceptions of women's nature and actions based upon them. Carol Gould laments this as being among the most intransigent of constructs that shape women's experiences and make it difficult for women to move beyond domination.³ Little wonder why mainstream epistemologies systematically exclude the possibility that women can be knowers or agents of knowledge. This is made obvious as history is written from the male perspective and the knower in traditional epistemology is always assumed to be a man. Various feminist epistemologists argue that dominant knowledge practice disadvantages women by excluding them from inquiry: denying them epistemic authority; denigrating their feminine *cognitive* style and models of knowledge; and producing theories of women that represent them as inferior, deviant, or significant only in the ways that serve male interests.

The abstraction and objectivity of traditional accounts of knowledge can be seen to be epitomized in scientific knowledge. This is the reason why feminist epistemologists have been seriously dissatisfied with modern scientific knowledge and are concerned with challenging it. Hence, the notion that the project of modern science crystallizes or informs 'masculinist' models of thinking has been a prominent theme in various contemporary feminist writings. Karl Stern argues that what we encounter in Cartesian rationalism is pure masculinisation of thought.⁴ In the same vein, Sandra Harding noted that the scientific model of knowing can be described as what represents a super – masculinisation of rational knowledge.⁵ It is not a ruse, therefore, to claim that the female's thought pattern has not been put into consideration all the while in what constitutes knowledge. James Hillman rightly puts it this way, "The specific consciousness we call scientific

². Code, "What can she know?," 277

³. Carol Gould, *Beyond Domination: New Perspectives on Women and Philosophy*, (New Jersey: Littlefield Adams Publishers, 1983), 14.

⁴. Karl Stern, *The Flight from Women*, (New York: Noonday Press, 1965), 104.

⁵. Sandra Harding, "Feminism and Theories of Scientific Knowledge" *Women* 11, no 1 (1990): 17.

western, and modern is the long-sharpened tool of masculine mind that has discharged parts of its own substance calling it due, female, and inferior”.⁶

Influenced by this marginalization of women's way of knowing, feminist epistemologists have critiqued science generally and the idea of objectivity as expressing an essentially male approach to knowledge and the world. This Ruth Bleier tells us that, 'Science is the male intellect: the active knowing subject: its relationship to nature- the passive object of knowledge – is one manipulation, control and domination: it is the relationship of man to woman of culture to nature'.⁷

This according to the feminist is known as the problem of androcentrism. It occurs when theories take the male's experience or “masculinity” as the norm or standard for humans or animals generally with female differences either ignored or represented as deviant.⁸ It also occurs when male activities or predicaments are represented as the primary causes or sites of important changes without regard to the roles of females in initiating or facilitating changes. Hence, we say androcentrism involves the attitude of viewing the world from the perspective of men's lives without regard to how women see them differently.

All the above put together, have constituted serious issues that feminist epistemologists have set out to grapple with in order to redefine what counts as knowledge. Code describes the dominant themes in traditional epistemology as the autonomous obsession of ideal knowers with the separation of subject from object or the knower from the known. According to her, there is therefore need to remap the epistemic terrain.⁹ Mapping out the epistemic terrain calls for an analysis of what it means to say that 'S knows that P'. The knower who occupies the S position is anonymous and interchangeable with any other S who is rational, self-conscious, and autonomous. It is also assumed that such a *knower* can have the same cognitive access to P. In other words, it will no longer be that the female experiences are side-lined or counted as irrelevant in the account of epistemic matters. The problems feminists are contending with lie not simply in the primacy of individual knowers, but rather that these individual knowers themselves are conceptualized as generic (or interchangeable) and capable of self-sufficiency in knowing.¹⁰

To this end, it can be said that feminist epistemologists are concerned with the possibility of an epistemic scheme which is that of a situated knower, and hence of a situated knowledge. This is knowledge that reflects the particular perspectives of the subject. The interest of feminist philosophers or epistemologists is thus in how gender situates knowing subjects. This made them

⁶. J. Hillman, *The Myth of Analysis* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), 250.

⁷. Ruth Bleier, *Science and Gender: A Critique of Biology and its Theories on Women* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984), 196.

⁸. Harding, “Feminism and Theories, 96.

⁹. Code, “What can she know?,” 24

¹⁰. Heidi Grasswick and Mark O. Webb, ed. “*Social Epistemology*,” in *Special Issue: Feminist Epistemology as Social Epistemology*, (Boulder: Westview, 2002), 24

Oluwaseun T. Babatuyi

demonstrate the importance of evaluating any epistemic event of the social arrangement of power and show the privilege by which it is legitimated or discredited. They also embark upon a critical project of demonstrating the privilege-sustaining, androcentric character of epistemological projects in most of its received forms and in transformative projects of reconstructing methodologies and justificatory procedures, to eradicate their oppressive and exclusionary effects.¹¹

Thematic issues in Feminist Epistemology

The entire feminist epistemological project is thematically surrounded by the critique of four traditional but interrelated assumptions that govern the mainstream account of knowledge. These assumptions are the idea of a generic humanity, the view from nowhere, the pure impersonal reason, and the Robinson Crusoe assumption.¹²

(a) The 'Generic Humanity' idea holds that there is one universal human nature. The implication of this for epistemology therefore is the assumption of a cognitive structure that is common to all individuals, whether male or female. Feminist epistemologists argue that this single universal human nature has been created so far using men's experience and psychology as the unquestionable paradigm, whereas other perspectives and models of humanity, particularly those that make use of female experiences, have been neglected from consideration. They are marginalized because they are considered too subjective or unconventional. The problem as identified by the feminists is that the tendency to make male viewpoint the norm infects most traditional theories of knowledge.¹³

(b) The second assumption is the *View from Nowhere* which holds that the particular identity of the knower is inconsequential to the production and assessment of that person's epistemic claims. Such identity can include gender, race, class, and historical circumstances. However, feminist epistemologists contend vehemently against this assumption. In the words of Helen Baber,

Advocates of feminist epistemology... reject the view from nowhere specifically on the grounds that the norms it embodies are male norms and hence that their acceptance sets standards which women find it difficult or impossible to meet. In particular, they hold that the traditional epistemic ideal of an objective, detached observer, conducting his investigations in isolation from any historical or social context, is alien to women's engaged concrete, contextual way of knowing.¹⁴

The traditional account of knowledge is no doubt suggesting the possibility of an ideal knower who is capable of approaching reality from any particular perspective or historical background which is not connected to any personal prejudices, interests, engagements, or concerns. However,

¹¹. Code, "What can she know?," 278.

¹². Edward W. Lawhead, *The Philosophical Journey* (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2003), 168.

¹³. Richard Foley, *The Theory of Epistemic Rationality*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 49

¹⁴. Helen Baber, The Market for Feminist Epistemology, *The Monist* 77 no.4 (1994): 403

this position, for feminist thinkers, is incoherent. This is because all knowers irrespective of their gender and ideology always approach the world from within some particular context. Of course, this context might be defined by the conceptual scheme, language, culture, gender, or whatever influencing factor. Harding reminds us that there is always a subjective person and point of view behind every knowledge claim.¹⁵

(c) The consequence of the above traditional epistemic assumption is the possibility of another assumption, which is that an ideal knower should have a pure, impersonal reason. In other words, there can be pure objectivity which is untainted by the subjectivity or the emotions and interests of the knower. It will be recalled that a characteristic of traditional epistemology is the existence of strict dichotomies such as reason in opposition to emotion, objective versus subjective, mind against body, logic opposed to intuition, intellect versus imagination, male versus female, and so on.¹⁶ Feminists' objection to this kind of assumption includes the fact that the supposed binary concepts in each case are not mutually exclusive dichotomies. Rather, they opine that knowledge has both subjective and objective components and that there is no reason to choose either one or the other. There is therefore no reason to place priority on one or the first member of the pair as the ideal knower while the second is devalued. It is no longer news that the preferred alternative is taken to describe the male approach while the second is assumed to be a stereotypically female trait. They concluded that what the traditional epistemic account refers to as objectivity is thus nothing but the subjectivity of the male.¹⁷

Another view of traditional epistemology challenged by feminist epistemologists is the claim that the acquisition of knowledge is primarily a project of isolated individuals. Such knowledge is independent of any social context and free of political implications. It is like Descartes' cogito, where the knower becomes independent and autonomous with complete detachment from any other philosophical and cultural assumptions that may be prevalent.¹⁸ However, for Lorraine Code, knowledge production is a social practice of embodied, gendered, historically, racially, and culturally located knowers whose products bear the marks of their makers and whose stories need, therefore to be told.¹⁹ In the same vein, it has been aptly contended that 'the development of knowledge is a necessarily social rather than individual activity, and it is the social character of scientific knowledge that both protect it from and renders it vulnerable to social and political interests and values'.²⁰ Knowledge is initially gotten from individual culture while a further quest for knowledge is informed by the epistemic community to which we are responsible.

¹⁵. Harding, "Feminism and Theories"

¹⁶. Jacques Derrida, *MarginsofPhilosophy*, trans. A. Bass, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 34.

¹⁷. Adrienne Rich, *On lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose: 1966-1978* (New York: Norton. 1979), 207.

¹⁸. Rene Descartes, "Epistemology" *Standfordencyclopediaofphilosophy*. [Plato.stanford.edu/entries/descartes](https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/descartes/) (Descartes, accessed 20 August, 2018)

¹⁹. Code, "What can she know?," 593.

²⁰. Helen Longino, *Science as a Social Knowledge: Values and Objectivity in Scientific Inquiry* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1990), 12

Oluwaseun T. Babatuyi

The Mission of Feminist Epistemology

The corollary from the above depicts feminist epistemology as thematically, a critique of the mainstream epistemology which will allow the kind of reconfigured epistemology the exponents advocate. This will involve firstly, the elaboration of genealogical and interpretive methods; secondly, the reconstructions of empiricism; thirdly, the articulation of standpoint positions; and finally, the demonstration of the potential of psycho-social and post-structural analyses to counter the hegemony of epistemological master narratives.²¹ It is obvious that feminist epistemology is not just a mere attack on the traditional account of knowledge. Rather, it is an attempt to proffer a better and new perspective toward our epistemic claims of the external reality. This project is carried out transformatively through a reconstruction of the methodologies and justificatory procedures inherent in the so-called androcentric model of the traditional account of knowledge.

In light of the above, the project of feminist epistemology can be captured well in the classification of Sandra Harding concerning the feminist critiques of science. For her, feminist epistemology can be divided into three well-developed programmes: feminist empiricism, feminist standpoint theory and feminist post-modernism.²² A brief explication of the above as it elaborates the project and programme of feminist epistemology are presented hereafter.

(a) The first programme- Feminist empiricism argues that it is possible to remove sexist and other partialities from the processes of research particularly when problems for study are initially being identified and defined, in the belief that once these have been eliminated, value-neutral work will be produced.²³ Harding regards this as an attempt to reform bad science, simply by adding women into existing frameworks rather than questioning the prejudiced assumptions that are constitutive of science per se. By so doing, new perspectives on women's lives specifically those that challenge sexist conventions will result in more accurate explanations of women's experiences. For this reason, it can be established that what constitutes the engagement of feminist epistemology in general is consideration of how scientific methods can be improved in light of feminist demonstrations of bias in currently accepted methods. Also, they are concerned with the impact of social practices relating to gender, race, class, and other bases of inequality on inquiry. They take seriously studies like sociology, history, and sciences in their analysis. Most also advocate a socialized epistemology in which inquiry is treated as a fundamentally social process and the basic subjects of knowledge may even be communities or networks of individuals.²⁴ They maintain that sexism and androcentrism are identifiable biases of individual knowers that can be eliminated by stricter application of existing methodological norms of scientific and philosophical inquiry.

²¹. Code, "What can she know?," 277

²². Harding, "Feminism and Theories", 138

²³. Harding, "Feminism and Theories", 10

²⁴. Jane Duran, *Toward a Feminist Epistemology* (Savage: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1991), 19.

(b) The second programme is Feminist standpoint. It claims that the prevailing worldview in any historical period is a clear reflection of the interests and values of the dominant group. Women's specific location in particular societies is thus posited by the theory as a resource in the construction of knowledge.²⁵ Similarly, it explains that an individual is advantaged in the evolution of certain claims about economic or social structure if he or she has been socially stigmatized, subordinated, economically deprived in relevant ways; and is subsequently or simultaneously empowered to reflect upon the implications of such experiences and their alternatives.²⁶ Feminist standpoint theory is thus a critical theory which attempts and aims to empower the oppressed to improve their situation. Women are regarded to be central to the system of reproduction – of socializing children and caring for bodies – as workers are central to the system of commodity production.²⁷ Hence, their epistemic privilege rests on the fact that they, as a class, have superior access to information about whose needs get better served under patriarchy. In a nutshell, the female gender is in a particular socially situated perspective where they can lay claims to epistemic advantage or authority. Harding's position explicates further:

Women's social experience provides the possibility of a more complete and less perverse human understanding –but only the possibility. Feminism provides the theory and motivation for enquiry and the direction of political struggle through which increasingly more adequate descriptions and underlying causal tendencies of male domination are revealed. Only through feminist inquiry and struggle can the perspective of women be transformed into a feminist standpoint-a morally and scientifically preferable 'location' from which to observe, to explain and to design social life.²⁸

If the claim that what we do shapes and constrains what we know is true, then the following can be implied: One, women can base their knowledge of the world on their common experience; two, by occupying such a location already, women can transform their knowledge based on their experience into an epistemological tool through their participation in the feminist movement.

(c) The third programme is feminist post-modernism. As an upshot from the overall notion of postmodernism, it embodies sceptical sensibility that questions the attempts to transcend our situatedness by appealing to such ideas as universality, necessity, objectivity, rationality, essence, unity, totality, foundations, and ultimate truth and reality. However, it at the same time stresses the locality, partiality, contingency, instability, uncertainty, ambiguity, and essential contestability of any particular account of the world, the self, and the good. Within feminist epistemology, Judith Butler opines that it has been deployed against theories that purport to justify sexist practices – notably, ideologies that claim that observed differences between men and women are natural and

^{25.} Harding, "Feminism and Theories", 21

^{26.} B. Laurence, *Epistemology: Classic Problems and Contemporary Responses*, (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002), 179.

^{27.} Richard Foley, *The Theory of Epistemic Rationality* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987)

^{28.} Harding, "Feminism and Theories", 130-131

Oluwaseun T. Babatuyi

necessary, or that women have an essence that explains and justifies their subordination.²⁹ In a nutshell, feminist postmodernism identifies the notable radical critique of both feminist empiricism and the mainstream as being compromised. Instead, it considers the feminist standpoint as being on a pathway to a more wholesome grounding for knowledge via women's experiences.

With the aforementioned components in the project of the reconfigured epistemology, feminists have argued that the cognitive status and circumstance of the knower(s) are central among conditions for the possibility of knowledge. Descriptive cognitive pluralism states that different people, or people in different cultures, go about the business of reasoning, which is, arriving at epistemic claims, in significantly different ways. This of course toes the line of feminist standpoint theorists. The idea of feminist epistemology as adumbrated above shows that it borders on how gender does and ought to affect our notions of epistemic claims, epistemic subjects, and epistemic practices of inquiry and justification. Due to this, effort is being made to show that the dominant conceptions and practices of knowledge attribution, acquisition, and justification systematically disadvantage, and strive to reconstruct these conceptions and practices so that the female interest is served. Hence, women will no longer be excluded from enquiry and will not be denied epistemic authority. Their feminine cognitive styles and modes of knowledge will not be belittled and will no longer be labelled deviant, inferior, or made significant only in an androcentric context.

Apparent from the ongoing is an unwarranted dichotomy in epistemic explanations. It shows that there are two ways of knowing as anchored on the dominant gender classification. This dichotomy is unnecessary as it has the tendency to result into a pluralistic epistemic discussion in the long run. For instance, we can begin to talk of other categories such as infants, aged, bisexual, transgender, white, black, and so on. A turn to Yoruba ethno-epistemology however shows an epistemic account that takes care of the avoidable categorization birthed by feminist epistemological account.

Yoruba Ethno-Epistemology in perspectives

Ethno-epistemology is not an *a priori* perception of human knowledge as contended by Western traditional epistemic position but rather an *a posteriori* perspective that takes into account entire epistemological practices of all and sundry. As posited by James Maffie, ethno-epistemology treats all human epistemological activities as fully natural to be described, understood, and evaluated from a broadly anthropological and fully a posteriori perspective.³⁰ Through ethno-epistemology, a proper perspective and a more clarified conception of knowledge is presented such that the idea of superiority and authority of western epistemic account is debunked and reduced to the negligible minimum. The fact that all epistemologies are forms of ethno-

^{29.} Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, (New York: Routledge, 1990)

^{30.} J. Maffie, "Ethno-Epistemology," Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, (accessed 20 Sept, 2019)

epistemology and one should not become a paradigm for assessing the acceptability of the other or not is embraced and defended here. This is further buttressed as Maffie claimed all epistemological activities are instances of ethno-epistemology and all ethno-epistemologies are instances of epistemology. Accordingly, ethno-epistemology examines the entire gamut of human epistemological activities ranging from those of ordinary folk and cognitive specialists; such as: diviners, shamans, priests, magicians, and scientists; to those of epistemologists themselves.³¹

Yoruba ethno-epistemology is thus an instance of epistemology where several epistemic topics such as knowledge (*imo*), truth (*ooto*), and belief (*igbagbo*) among others are extrapolated and explained from the cultural realities of the African Yoruba people. As observed by Barry Hallen, it is obvious and important to point out that Yoruba discourse does employ terminology and systematic criteria for the evaluation of any type of information.³² The epistemological question of reliability and justification are already taken care of especially when dealing with their oral tradition where most important knowledge was said to be preserved, ranging from medicinal recipes to children stories. This quickly brings to mind the role of language in epistemological understanding which corroborates the Wittgensteinian dictum that “the limit of our language is the limit of our world,” as quoted by M. Akin Makinde.³³ An epistemic understanding of a particular cultural or ethnic group is encountered and made analysable by recourse to their language. Talk about truth, meaning, justification, and other epistemic properties of any language, they are all demonstrated through language. No wonder Oyeronke Oyewumi argued that language is central to the formation of social identity because it represents major sources of information in constituting world-sense, mapping historical changes, and interpreting the social structure.³⁴ Ayotunde Bewaji in the same vein reiterated this by saying, 'apart from mere floundering gesticulations, language is the major vehicle for making sense out of diverse experiences'.³⁵

It is worthy of note at this point that just as the connection between language and epistemology cannot be overemphasized, the Yoruba linguistic convention is an indispensable channel through which the Yoruba ethno-epistemology is conveyed. There have been cutting-edge and well-systematized epistemic analysis done through the Yoruba linguistic framework in different magnitudes of human knowledge. It was noted for instance that the Yoruba have developed a complicated *Ifa* system with a complex scientific, metaphysical, economic, social, political, cultural, moral, medical, prognosticative, environmental, and other dimensions in the Yoruba

³¹. Maffie, “Ethno-Epistemology,”

³². Barry Hallen, “Yoruba Moral Epistemology,” in Kwasi Wiredu ed. *A Companion to African Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2004), 300

³³. Michael A. Makinde, *African Philosophy, Culture and Traditional Medicine* (Ohio, Athens: Ohio University Centre for International Studies, 1988), 17

³⁴. Oyeronke Oyewumi, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourse* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 32

³⁵. John Ayotunde I. Bewaji, *An Introduction to the Theory of Knowledge: A Pluricultural Approach*, (Ibadan: Hope Publication), 2007, 390

Oluwaseun T. Babatuyi

language.³⁶ Relying on the Yoruba ethno-epistemology as derived from its linguistic framework, it is hence not out of place especially to invoke this in order to dissolve the unwarranted dichotomy created in the reconstructive efforts of the feminist epistemological project.

Yoruba, unlike many other languages, is not a gendered language where there is the existence of masculine and feminine pronouns like he and she; and gender-categorizing words like son, daughter, boy, girl, brother, sister, uncle, and aunt. An analysis of Yoruba linguistic constituents and ethno-epistemology shows a non-genderspecific results. The culture in its entirety does not give room to gender categorization and marginalization albeit seniority or kingship positions might be a dominating factor amongst different people. Categorically put, a) there is no mark of gender in the Yoruba language (whereas seniority is linguistically marked and is therefore an essential component of Yoruba identity); b) Yoruba social institutions and practice do not make social distinctions in terms of anatomical difference.³⁷ With recourse to Yoruba ethno-epistemology emerging from a gender-neutral culture, one can hence escape the polemics of gendered knowledge of the mainstream epistemology which is produced by the male folks and privileges the masculine over the feminine. In Yoruba ethno-epistemology just as in the linguistic expression, feminine and masculine categories are not as pronounced as found in Western epistemic and linguistic culture. Aside from the specious classification of humans into men and women (*okunrin* and *obinrin*), there are no gendered pronouns, adjectives, or gendered verbal expressions. As noted by Oyewumi, there is no noun equivalent to “woman” or “man” in the Yoruba language.³⁸ The idea of *obinrin* and *okunrin* meaning female and male respectively are mere erroneous translations in the Yoruba linguistic convention. Hence, the proposition '*S* knows that '*P*' does not require gendered debates in Yoruba ethno-epistemology because the subject, in this case, does not carry any gender tag or colouration. For example, when we assert that '*S* knows that '*P*', where '*S*' is the subject or the knower, in the Yoruba epistemic equivalence, the subject is called '*oluse*' which can be replaced by the pronoun '*O*'. Thus we can have '*Ó mo wípe 'P*'. Here we are not bound to tell whether or not '*O*' who is the knower is a 'he' or 'she'. The question of 'who is the *S* that knows that *P*' is no headache when operating within the Yoruba ethno-epistemological paradigm.

Concluding Remarks

The idea of ethno-epistemology in general has a lot in common with feminist epistemology, especially as a reaction to the absolute and indubitable epistemic criteria of traditional account of knowledge. We have seen that feminist epistemology as a form of social epistemology, aims at incorporating the experiences of women within the existing epistemological framework. There is no other intent for this than to offer better ways of understanding and evaluating the female experience toward the recognition that everyone who knows something is a person occupying a position in one or more social groups. As a result, the social location of the knowing subject

³⁶ Makinde, “African Philosophy”, 5

³⁷ Oyewumi, “The Invention of Women”, 31

³⁸ Oyewumi, “The Invention of Women”

becomes pertinent to the epistemic evaluation of any subject's beliefs. Just as feminist epistemologists contend the *a priori* nature of knowledge and advocate the position and social status of the knower, ethno-epistemologists in like manner premise the preciseness of knowledge on the experience of the knower. This is done through dispassionate exploration of the linguistic contents of various ethnicities and cultures to extrapolate epistemic properties from them.

The entire feminist epistemological project is commendable in its confrontation of the mainstream epistemological criterion and thereby requesting for a reconfiguration of the whole epistemological edifice. However, a potential objection against feminist epistemology is contained in the idea of the concrete social-political-historical standpoint of a knower. In this situation, there will be certainly many perspectives which are products of different stand-points and of course, from different knowers. If it turns out like this, how then do we account for a concrete socio-political-historical standpoint of knower? Better still, how many perspectives are to be taken into consideration? For instance, Mary Belenky et al describe a generalized women's ways of knowing in their works which was based on interviews with certain women within their region.³⁹ Similarly, recent feminist writings have been discovered to represent primarily the perspectives of white, Middle-Class, American, British or European academic theorists. The different worldviews of women of colour, working-class, African, Asian, Middle-Eastern, and Latin American, have on the other hand been ignored. This thus left us with serious questions to grapple with. If the advocates of feminist epistemology emphasize the centrality of the perspectives and experiences of a knower in relationship to a particular concrete community, then is it possible to do away with the plurality of perspectives? That is, there will be as many epistemic perspectives as there are communities of knowers. In another sense, is it not that the final analysis of epistemic discourse will end up in irresolvable multiple worldviews?

Contrariwise, turning to and gleaning from Yoruba ethno-epistemology as expressed through its gender-neutral linguistic understanding, we see a synthesis of plural approaches to knowledge that cater for unwarranted dichotomy or unnecessary irresolvable multiple epistemic perspectives, emerging from the feminist epistemic account. It is therefore not out of place to jettison those ideas promoting the supremacy of Western mainstream epistemic account. Rather, we ought to settle with the view that a better interpretation, evaluation, and justification of knowledge claim is obtainable by making recourse to the provisions and productions of various ethnicities.

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Oluwaseun T. Babatuyi

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