

SYMBOLS AS OBJECTS OF EPISTEMO- LOGICAL COGNITION

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ABSTRACT

Man generally is regarded as a knowing being. A being with the capacity to know reality as a given. He is differentiated from other animals by the power of his rationality. There is no gainsaying that man has cognitive powers that enable him to know a thing or reality when presented with one. Man's knowing however occurs in a triad structure made up of the knowing subject, the object known and the process through which both the subject and object are connected to one another to produce knowledge. This paper acknowledges this obvious fact; however its primary concerns remain, to find out whether something standing in for another can be an object of knowledge. Expressed differently, the paper seeks to know if symbols can be objects of knowledge and if yes to what extent symbols can be objects of epistemological consciousness. To determine what roles, if any, symbols can play in the process of acquisition of knowledge. Symbols are mere representatives of the real objects, the paper therefore inquires if symbols that are representatives can lead to knowledge and if they can, the sort of knowledge they can lead man to. Using the analytic method, this paper discusses symbols as objects of epistemological cognition or knowledge. To achieve this, it highlights the functions of symbols in man's quest for knowledge and how symbols can stand as objects of human knowledge.

Keywords: Symbols, Epistemology, Cognition

INTRODUCTION

Knowledge occurs in a triad structure. This structure is made up of the subject that knows, the object that is known, and the process of knowing which connects the subject and the object. For knowledge to take place this triad structure must be complete. Thus an object of knowledge cannot be known without the presence of a knowing mind and the knowing mind cannot know if there is no process of knowing that links the subject and object together. Through this triad we are made to understand that there is a process that brings the object and subject together but what exactly this process is remains an open question among philosophers of knowledge or epistemologists. And that is why the epistemological question, "how do I know?" remains relevant till date. Though attempts have been made by the philosophers of the rational and empirical inclinations to proffer answers to this question, yet the question remains very open for discussions. The rationalists among who are Rene Descartes, Leibniz and Spinoza of the modern era of philosophy argue that we are born with innate ideas and through these innate ideas man is able to know. The empiricists (John Locke, George Berkeley and David Hume) on the other hand claim that at birth the mind of a child is like a tabula rasa, a clean slate with nothing written on it. Through empirical experience with the external world, ideas get registered in the mind of an individual. It is therefore against this backdrop that Locke would argue that from experience the objects of knowledge are represented as ideas in our minds. The question here is, if ideas represent the objects of knowledge in our minds, could it then mean that the ideas generated in the mind are not the real objects of knowledge and can we take them as real objects of knowledge?

This trend of thought actually has created room already for symbol in the knowing process. Nevertheless, the issue in this paper is not the question of ideas as symbols representing the objects of knowledge in the minds of the knowing subject. The attention is on

discussing symbols as objects of knowledge and the role they play as objects of knowledge and in epistemological cognition. Thus in this work a general overview of symbol, epistemology and cognition will be discussed. This will lead us to the analysis of the functions of symbols in epistemological cognition relating it to some Igbo-African symbols and their meaning. Finally the evaluation and conclusion will follow.

AN OVERVIEW OF SYMBOL

A symbol is an object or a concept that represents, stands for or suggests another idea, visual image, belief, action or material entity. This work further noted that symbols take the form of words, sounds, gestures, ideas or visual images and are used to convey other ideas and beliefs. Etymologically, symbol is derived from the Greek word *symbolon* which means a 'token or watchword'. *Symbolon* is a combination of two words: '*syn*' which means 'together' and '*bole*' which means 'a throwing, a casting' etc. variously then symbol from its etymology means 'throwing things together', 'contrasting', 'comparing', 'token used in comparisons to determine if something is genuine'. It also means token of identity verified by comparing its other half.

Merriam-Webster's Dictionary, defines symbol in the following ways:

- a. an authoritative summary of faith or doctrine.
- b. something that stands for or suggests something else by reason of relationship, association, convention, or accidental resemblance, especially, a visible sign of something invisible, e.g. the iron is a symbol of courage.
- c. an arbitrary or conventional sign used in writing or printing relating to a particular field to represent operations, quantities, elements, relations or qualities.
- d. an object or act representing something in the unconscious mind that has been repressed.

- e. an act, sound, or object having cultural significance and the capacity to excite or objectify a response

Conceptually, Campbell (2002) describes symbol as energy evoking, and directing agent. He expands this description further when he writes:

A symbol, like everything else, shows a double aspect. We must distinguish, therefore between the 'sense' and 'the meaning' of the symbol. It seems to me perfectly clear that all the great and little symbolic systems of the past functioned simultaneously on three levels: the corporeal of waking consciousness, the spiritual of dream, and the ineffable of the absolutely unknowable. The term 'meaning' can refer only to the first two but these, today, are in the charge of science – which is the provinces as we have said, not of symbols but of signs. The ineffable, the absolutely unknowable, can be only sensed. It is the province of art which is not 'expression' merely, or even primarily, but a quest for, and formulation of experience evoking, energy – waking images; yielding what Sir Herbert Read has aptly termed a 'sensuous apprehension of being (2002:153)

Campbell in the above quotation gives us the criterion for distinguishing the double aspect of symbol and this is through 'sense' and 'meaning.' It is on the basis of this that signs are distinguished from symbol. While signs belong to the level of corporeal of waking consciousness and the spiritual of dreams where meaning can be referred to, symbols on the other hand belongs to the level of the ineffable of the absolutely unknowable that could only be sensed.

Moyart (2004) opines that symbol is something such as idea, object, conventional or non-conventional that is used to represent

something else. It could be abstract or not. Umeogu in addition to this explicates that

The symbol is something; but it's something for something; that is something that stands with something, for something and to something. The symbol begins from something and ends towards something for which it is the symbol. As such, it provides food for thought as well as thought for food. As it signals, signs and flows what it is beyond and to what it shows (1996:75)

Umeogu in the above quotation maintains that symbol represents something other than itself. Dukor however highlights the importance of symbols when he notes that "the evolution of human mind was accompanied simultaneously with the evolution of symbols and concepts" (2010:200) and that man's understanding of the world, himself and the environment is characterized and associated with symbols. Thus man cannot have a sound understanding of himself and his environment without symbols. Symbols therefore enhance knowledge and understanding. Zimmer gives a concise overview of the nature and perennial relevance of symbols when he opined that:

Concepts and words are symbols, just as visions, rituals, and images are; so too are the manners and customs of daily life. Through all of these a transcendent reality is mirrored. There are so many metaphors reflecting and implying something which, though thus variously expressed, is ineffable, though thus rendered multiform, remains inscrutable. Symbols hold the mind to truth but are not themselves the truth; hence it is delusory to borrow them. Each civilization, every age, must bring forth its own (1969:1-2)

Symbols evolve every aspect of man and through it man makes meaning out of his environment and through symbols efforts are made to understand transcendental realities. As the meaning of symbols evolve and changes, every civilization should work hard to give their meaning to their symbols. Surely symbols that are meaningful to us now may possibly be irrelevant and meaningless in the past.

It is important to point out here that from the above discussions, symbols have deeper meanings that meet the immediate sight. Symbols are things that point or represent something deeper than itself. And to understand what symbol means requires an unravelling of the meanings embedded in the symbol. It is therefore pertinent to re-echo the views of Paul Ricoeur (1967), Umeogu (2012) who once asserted that a symbol gives food for thought. The onus of getting at the meaning carried by a particular symbol lies with the mind that perceives it since symbols give the mind food to ponder on.

AN OVER VIEW OF EPISTEMOLOGY

The word epistemology is a derivative of two Greek words, *episteme* and *logia* meaning knowledge and science of, respectively. It is that branch of philosophy that deals with issues concerning knowledge. It studies the nature of knowledge, what can be known by man and how man can know. It is also concerned with the validity of our knowledge and the extent to which we can know. According to Merrian-Webster's Dictionary, epistemology is the study of or theory of the nature and grounds of knowledge especially with reference to its limits and validity. Other important issues that are of interest to epistemology as the science of knowledge are the how we can know that we know and what makes up the process of knowing.

Of all the issues that concern epistemology, it is the issue of the source of knowledge that has so much concerned and divided philosophers into two major camps. The first group of philosophers is known as the rationalists. The major position of this group is that humans are born with innate ideas. The innate ideas according to them are the source of our knowledge as we do not need any experience before we can know. This theory is remotely linked to Plato who had earlier argued that what we get from experience are uncertain, mutable, changing and mere opinions while knowledge of the Forms that are innate are immutable, unchanging and certain.

The second group of philosophers is known as empiricists and their common landing is that experience is the source of our knowledge. They opine that at birth the human mind is likened to a tabula rasa – a clean slate with nothing written on it. As the mind of the child encounters the physical world, ideas get registered on the mind. The position of empiricists of the modern era is traceable to the views of Aristotle who had in the ancient time given credence to experience as the source of our knowledge.

The above controversy however was somewhat resolved by Immanuel Kant when he posited that knowledge begins from sense experience but that the ideas from the senses are not enough to lead to knowledge except it conforms to the inborn categories of the mind. However for Kant there are things the human mind cannot know; i.e. the thing-in-itself. For him our knowledge is limited to only phenomenal world and cannot extend to the noumenal world.

COGNITION IN SUMMARY

Cognition is the set of all mental abilities and processes related to knowledge, attention, memory and working memory, judgement and evaluation, reasoning and computation, problem solving and decision making, comprehension and production of language. Cognition is all about man's mental activities. Blomberg (2011)

agrees with this assertion when he writes that cognition encompasses the mental functions, mental processes (thoughts) and states of intelligent entities (humans, collaborative groups, human organisations, highly autonomous machines and artificial intelligence.

The human mind generally has four identified functions namely, memory, cognition, volition and imagination. Memory is the retentive or storage function of the mind. Omoregbe (1998:5) writes that the memory "is an aspect of the power of the mind, like a computer storage diskette where knowledge and experiences are stored up and played back (recalled) at will." Cognition is the aspect of the mind with which it performs the cognitive function. The cognitive functions include acquiring knowledge, thinking, speculating, reasoning or arguing, mediating etc. Another function of the mind is volition which is the aspect of the power of the mind with which it makes decisions and choices, and accepts or rejects anything. Imagination on the other hand is the power of the mind to picture what the mind is thinking about just like a photographic camera. The mind uses this aspect of its power to picture anything whether it is real or not.

These other functions of the mind were mentioned here just to let us know that cognition is not the only function of the mind. Cognition however remains the process through which the mind becomes aware of reality.

ROLES OF SYMBOLS IN EPISTEMOLOGICAL COGNITION

One fact that must be buttressed here is that there is a tight relationship between epistemology and cognition. For man to know a thing or acquire knowledge of something, the mind must be at work. The knowing mind must be cognitively alert by being able to evaluate, judge and reason or think. If these factors are lacking, knowledge cannot be acquired. Even in the case of

intuitive knowledge, the knowing subject must cognitively be aware that a flash of world changing ideas has flashed into his mind. It is therefore important to see knowledge which is the object of epistemology and cognition as a uniting factor between them since we cannot have knowledge without cognition and our cognition is meant to lead to knowledge. Knowledge becomes the meeting point between epistemology and cognition. With this clarification made, our search then becomes a search for the role and functions of symbol in knowledge and these roles are representation, meaning carriers and expression cum communication.

Representation:

Symbols play the vital function of representation as objects of epistemological cognition or in the knowing process. They represent something other than themselves. This representational function of symbol is the expression and explication of already stored ideas and feelings. A typical example of this can be seen in *ofò* in Igbo African philosophy. An *ofò* is a cultural symbol among the Igbo extraction of Africa that generally represents authority, truth, justice and honesty among other things. The people of the Igbo extraction already have these ideas embedded in their mindset. Thus the *ofò* for an Igbo person represents something far beyond the mere piece of wood tied with red piece of cloth and in most cases stained with sprinkles of animal blood. It is a symbol of truth, authority, holiness and even the spirit of the ancestors. Dukor (2010) describes an *ofò* as an ancestral staff or mace of authority that is handed over from son to another son and from generation to generation. It is one of the artefacts in traditional religion and philosophy that evokes awe. It is a traditional staff to affirm or stamp the truth. It is a symbolic instrument representing truth and a means of creative process. This explicates the representational function of the *ofò* as a symbol such that when we see someone holding it we should understand both the personality and character of the *ofò* carrier. The *ofò* tells you that the carrier in Igbo tradition

is a man of authority that is truthful, honest and holy in all circumstances. Umeogu explains the representational function of symbols when he writes that:

... symbol is always of a representative importance. The philosophy of symbolism is a philosophy of representative importance as regards communicative functions. Symbols, representation and communication are all interlinked in that there cannot be one without the other. The power of symbols is gotten from its ability to represent something that can effectively communicate its meaning to the receiver. (2013:114)

Among the Igbo extraction, not only is an ofo a symbol but there are many symbolic expressions that make whole lot of meaning to the people. Some of these symbolic expressions are: *Ofo bu eziokwu* (Ofo is truth), *ofo je ekpe* (It is ofo that will judge); *okwu ekwulu n' ofo bu okwu Chukwu* (The word spoken with the ofo is the word of God); *ofo bu ike mmuo na mmadu* (ofo is the power of spirits and men). These symbolic expressions connote the various meanings the *ofo* as a cultural symbol represents to the Igbo extraction.

Relating this to knowledge, it is obvious that a symbol of *ofo* represents to the Igbos knowledge far beyond a mere piece of wood. The above symbolic expressions capture the meaning an *ofo* makes to the Igbo man. No wonder Paul Tillich (1965) asserts that symbols always point beyond itself to something that is unquantifiable and mysterious.

Within the religious circle majority of the activities are symbolised. They are symbolised because man does not have all the concepts and words to capture the divine reality. Within the African Traditional Religion especially among the Igbos as practised by our

fore fathers, we were made to know that they offered sacrifices to carved images and sometimes to trees. What baffles me sometimes about this history is that most of the trees that were sacrificed to were very big trees like the Iroko tree. And we understand that they believed that it is the *Chukwu* that resides in such gigantic trees. The Igbo traditionalist at this point believes his *Chukwu* 'big *Chi*' is very big and can only be contained in a very big tree. This is symbolism at work and symbols playing vital representative role in man's worship of the Divine.

Meaning Carriers:

Symbols are meaning carriers even when they are representatives. They are both meaning and content carriers. A symbol carries within it meaning that in most cases cannot ordinarily be linked to it as a symbol. For example a piece of kola nut (*oji*) is actually a fruit from a tree but in Igbo land it means more than a fruit. It is a cultural symbol and is also an object of epistemological cognition. *Oji* symbolises the being and becoming of the Igboman. It is the highest symbol of hospitality in Igboland such that no matter what is presented to an Igbo guest by his fellow Igboman, the exclusion of *oji* renders the whole thing meaningless. No occasion starts among the Igbos without the presentation of *oji*. Its presentation signifies the proper beginning of the occasion because it is a symbol of acceptance of life and unity among the people. It is therefore not surprising when in an Igbo gathering a whole lot of 'rituals' (protocols) are performed before the breaking of *oji*.

At the presentation of *oji* to an Igboman, two epistemological cognitions are made. First, he is welcome and accepted by his guest. Secondly, his guest wishes him well because for the Igbo people, *onye wetera oji wetera ndu* – he who brings kola nut, brings life. The presence of *oji* to an Igbo man connotes unity, oneness, love, acceptance etc. Thus as a cultural symbol, *oji* carries all these meanings within it and communicates such to its people. Against this background Ernst Cassirer in Umeogu (2012) once

affirmed that scientific laws, religion and language are all symbols created by the mind in an attempt to produce a world of understanding. Symbols therefore remain meaning carriers.

Communicative and expressive function:

Our communication systems both verbal and non-verbal are made up of symbols. Symbols play the role of correspondents and they convey meaning. Without symbols we cannot transport an idea from our environment to our brain, from one part of our brain to another, or from one person to another. No wonder philosophers who favour representationalism would uphold that when one sees a dog, the picture of the dog gets represented in our minds and you perceive it as such in your mind. Zimmer (2015) maintains that symbols allow human brain to continuously create meaning using sensory input and decode symbols through both denotation and connotation.

However, symbols can only play this communicative and expressive function effectively when the how and where the symbol is used are duly understood by the parties involved in the communication and they all have good level understanding of what is communicated. This can be achieved through the help of culture, background and education. An example is proper here: if someone communicates that the Director of the unit is a lion, this can only be meaningful if both parties understand that the word lion as used in this context in most cultures is a symbolic representation of bravery and power. Thus the truth value of such statement must not be understood literally. There is no gainsaying that symbols are complex and their meaning evolves, thus the meaning which a symbol communicates must be sort for within its contemporary meaning for any attempt of searching for the meaning outside of its contemporary will lead to misunderstanding and misrepresentation.

Furthermore, it is also important to state here that symbols always come to the aid of man when he gets to point of the un-say-able, i.e.

the point where he lacks the word or concepts to communicate what he wants to say. At this point man goes back to symbols to depict that which his words cannot express. The world is full of technological graphics today in the forms of icons. The icons are mere symbolic representations of realities that are ordinarily linked them. We have computer programs today expressed symbolically. All these are objects of epistemological cognition.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In this paper, efforts have been made to analyse, highlight, as well as clarify the fact that symbols are also objects of epistemological cognition because of the three major functions they play. The paper argued that epistemological cognition is geared towards the acquisition of knowledge. Thus epistemology and cognition means nothing without knowledge. Symbols on the other hand have three important functions through which they are able to lead man to knowledge of reality. By the fact that it represents reality means that the reality it represents can be known through it. As a representative of reality symbols are meaning carriers. Every symbol we see has hidden meaning it carries and such meanings communicate knowledge. Symbols also perform communicative and expressive functions. By this they communicate to us the meaning they carry in order to enable us know the reality they represent. The paper also tried to exemplify some of these functions of symbols using symbols that are best known to us after all we all speak from somewhere in order to showcase the fact that symbols are objects of epistemological cognition.

Our conclusion in this paper therefore is that man is a symbolic being and symbols remain vital objects of epistemological cognition. Accepted that it may not be very easy decoding the meanings encoded in symbols but man must go beyond letters and alphabets in our quest for knowledge. Attention must be paid to the interpretation and understanding of the meanings symbols represent, carry and communicate to us as this will enhance man's

understanding of himself in the world in particular, his fellowmen and his environment in general. It is therefore recommended that the study of symbols be taken very seriously since what man cannot say in words can easily be said in symbols.

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