Knowledge with Sharing and Empathy: Lessons for the IT-Driven Modern World from Views on Knowledge in African Oral Culture

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Abstract

Today it is easy to acquire information with advanced information technology, but I argue that mere pieces of information gathered by internet keyword search are not knowledge. Then how can we turn information into knowledge? Conventionally, learning proceeds from basic to advanced material presented hierarchically in textbooks and reference books. But nowadays schools are playing a steadily diminishing role in teaching the knowledge needed to live. Given real-world demands, learning is becoming less hierarchical but more networked, requiring learners to judge and select from various sources, cutting across disciplines and including audio and visual as well as textual material.

In this paper, to consider the changing nature of learning and knowledge, I investigate the epistemology of traditional oral cultures in Africa. By doing so, I try to objectify and reflect on academic education and the classic Western epistemology underlying it, which we have taken for granted. Unlike written culture, where ideas are preserved in the texts, a predominantly oral culture constructs knowledge collectively, with speaker and audience responding to the context. While writing is predominantly cognitive and irrespective of context, the oral transmission of knowledge is sensory. In such a culture, an educated person is one who not only has a lot of information but also can interpret and apply it to meet the present situation. The speaker's moral authority is also essential to the audience's acceptance of what is said.

Today, with advancing communication technology and social changes, knowledge is less likely to be acquired exclusively by reading. Other media and sensory learning are gaining in importance. Based on these trends, I argue that we have entered a secondary oral culture. Accepting that knowledge is constructed through multifaceted interactions among presenters and recipients in writing, listening, and seeing, I point out the importance of fostering the moral quality of individuals to better enable them to judge and select knowledge.

Keywords: oral culture, writing culture, networked knowledge, epistemology, value judgment

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Introduction

How can humans say that they "know" something? Today, acquiring information has become very easy and we can easily feel like acquiring knowledge. Meanwhile, school subjects and academic disciplines have not kept up with the rapid changes in society, and increasingly we cannot learn what is required to live in modern society from textbooks and reference books. In other words, passive learning according to existing systems is not enough; what is required is an ability to generate knowledge independently. But how can one logically structure easily available information and convert it to knowledge? Many of us may end up being mere collectors of scraps of information.

In this paper, I reflect on academic education and the classical Western epistemology underlying it. To objectify these concepts, which we take for granted, I will discuss the epistemology of traditional African societies based on oral cultures. The reason for this exercise lies in my experience as a researcher on education and knowledge in African societies. I frequently visited countries that are said to be "underdeveloped," with a slow pace in spreading school education, and I questioned why the formal school system dominates the world as if it were the only way to teach and learn. Even when there were no schools, even before the culture of writing took root, people transmitted knowledge from generation to generation. Perhaps some societies have different perspectives on ways of knowing. Even though institutions like schools may qualify students for employment and social success, they may not impart knowledge that is rooted in daily life.

With the spread of the internet and new modes of communication brought about by information technology, in Japan it is now said that 21st-century problem-solving skills are needed to survive in a knowledge-based society. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically hastened changes in the environment for learning. As students could not attend school, self-directed learning using tablets and other devices became common. In light of questions about the value and nature of school-centered education, I have come to believe that African societies' ideas about knowledge may have useful implications for understanding how knowledge is acquired in contemporary Japan.

1. Knowledge generated in relationship
(1) Value judgments as the basis of knowledge generation

Earlier, I stated that knowledge is different from mere information. Then what

exactly is knowledge? Floridy, a philosopher of information, states that *data* is a list of meanings without interpretation; *information* involves interpretation, but without a judgment as to whether the connotation is right or wrong; *knowledge* is this semantic information linked with judgments about values (Floridy 2011, xiii).

In the genealogy of Western epistemology, cognition has been considered a mental process that consists of three elements: an object in front of an individual; an individual, who recognizes the object and comprehends what it is; and reliable reasoning as the basis of such recognition. Of these, the last corresponds to value judgments, the basis of the semantic system of knowledge, according to Floridy. In fact, much of the controversy in Western epistemology stems from differences about where to look for such reasoning. Authoritarian epistemology posits the existence of divine or supra-scientific authority as the premise for any subjective judgment. Rationalism based its judgments about reasoning on scientific evidence, while empiricism believed that the accumulation of experience leads the subject to reasoning (Todayama 2002). Although it is not the purpose of this paper to pursue these arguments in depth, I would like to point out that the various schools of thought agree that it is the human subject who judges the correctness of cognition and what constitutes knowledge. At the bottom of such judgment is reasoning. The challenge today is uncertainty about where individuals should look for reasoning as the basis for judgment.

(2) Networked knowledge generation in an IT-driven society

With the advancement of information technology, today it is easy for people to collect information online by typing keywords according to their spontaneous interests. Pieces of information gathered this way do not become knowledge unless there is a proactive decision to relate and unify them under a single semantic system. At the same time, the computer algorithm may present information according to the ranking (popularity) of search results for the typed keywords, without following the logic of any academic field or established structure. Such conjunctions of information, devoid of any established disciplinary structure, would not have happened in the past. In other words, in the modern world, knowledge can be formed in a networked manner by combining information from a variety of sources, using the searcher's interests as an entry point. The package of knowledge created in this way may well provide an opportunity to overcome the limitations of conventional frameworks of logic.

Further, in today's world, the sources of information can be music, videos, or cartoons as well as text. Transmission of information through these media is accelerating,

with circulation and interpretation of information happening almost simultaneously. These transmissions are lifelike and highly interactive; the meanings attached to the information and the modes of presentation constantly change in response to reactions of the audience and the environment.

Seeing such changes, we must accept that acquiring knowledge happens now not only by reading written texts but also by other methods that are increasingly important. Examining the nature of knowledge in traditional oral cultures may provide insights into how knowledge is generated in contemporary society.

2. Differences in knowledge generation and transmission in oral and written cultures

(1) Communication in oral cultures

In general, speaking is to convey a message to another person in the same physical space, face-to-face, in real time. It is also a process that collectively constructs a common understanding: not only does the presenter influence the receiver but also vice versa. Oral messages are transient and ad hoc. Because of this simultaneity, oral communication takes on a sensory nature.

The sound and rhythm of speech, the beauty of expression, and the speaker's charisma can elevate oral expression to the level of art. In oral societies, it is not uncommon for sharing and transmitting knowledge to take the form of theater. Taking the ancient Greek art of rhetoric and poetry as an example, Goody (1987) argues that no two performances, even of the same play, are exactly the same, since the characteristics of oral expression depend on the environment and the audience who share the same experience. But the introductions, episodes, and method of linking moral implications with the performance are consistent. Also, unlike written expressions, which can be read much later, oral messages can be recalled in detail for only a limited time. Therefore, to promote the recipients' understanding and memory, oral expressions often use sensory signals, such as rhyme or repetition of similarly-structured sentences, which give a rhythm to the utterance (Goody 1987, 211–220).

(2) Communication in written cultures

While communication in oral cultures is simultaneous and co-creative, in written cultures it is unrestricted in space and time, since utterances can be noted and stored. As

a result of careful examination of the structure and grammar of the written language, systematic methods for classifying and analyzing language are developed, and trained professionals are sought to deal with this complex system. Through writing, words are accumulated from the past to the present, and the vocabulary grows.

Writing also enables people to think about concepts that are not directly connected to their own lifeworld. Abstraction allows people to reconstruct memories and ideas logically in accordance with set objectives. The possibility of autonomous discourse, free from the context of the lifeworld, creates the opportunity for scientific progress and for structures such as governments and companies to manage activities between physically distant individuals (Ong 1982, 77).

While oral expressions are dialogical, collective, using all five senses, written ones are introspective, with cognition predominating over the other senses. If, as mentioned above, the accumulation of abstract and logical thought and the exchange of ideas through documents enabled the emergence of modern systems of politics, economics, and education, then it can be said that the foundation of modernization was written culture. On the other hand, it is a mistake to consider oral culture a lower developmental stage of society. Writing would not exist without speech; even in the most modern societies, aspects of orality remain. Writing and orality are not mutually exclusive but coexistent.

3. Theory of knowledge and education in traditional African societies

With a few exceptions, such as the Ethiopian Orthodox and Muslim clergies and Mediterranean traders, traditional agrarian and pastoral societies in Africa did not accumulate knowledge in writing, nor did they have an academic system to teach it to the next generation. Education in traditional societies is practical, experience-based learning, whereby people acquire the skills, values, and codes of conduct necessary to be part of a community through the various stages of life (Ishengoma 2005, 16). Furthermore, in many African ethnic groups, aphorisms and stories with educational significance are passed down orally.

(1) Oral narratives and education

In many African countries . . . aphorisms are used only by the truly educated and cultured, who give speeches full of imagination and metaphor. Aphorisms contain the philosophy, humor, symbolic meaning, and religion of the person who uses them.

> They are imbued with a deep knowledge of the world around them, of materiality and spirituality, and of social reality. . . . Education in traditional societies takes place through oral communication, not written. And aphorisms are a means of conveying social and moral teachings.
> (Appiah, Appiah, and Agyeman-Duah 2001, xii)

Aphorisms do not convey information in the literal sense. For example, there is an Akan saying, "The snake does not fly, but it catches the hornbills that live in the sky." When this saying is used in conversation, it does not matter whether a snake actually caught a hornbill nearby or not. The symbolic content of the saying is that "if you are resourceful, you can achieve what you are not skilled to do." However, to understand this requires knowledge of the culture and lifestyle of the Akan people. If we do not know that, to live in the rainforest, it is very important but difficult to catch birds as a source of protein, then we would not understand the message behind this saying.

Now, after knowing the background and taking in the moralistic meaning of the aphorisms, the most important task of the speaker is to apply it to the situation faced by the listeners and present an interpretation of why it happened. The event confronting them might be a simple quarrel within a family, or a case where someone has suddenly been struck by misfortune without obvious cause. Through education by the seniors, people in oral cultures acquire the ability to find the meanings of such events, applying the suitable aphorisms and considering the relationships among the spiritual, material, environmental, and human worlds.

(2) Epistemological difference between Representation and Presentation

Biesta and Osberg states that school education in the modern era has been based on an epistemology that presupposes that knowledge is to be represented (2008, 15–20). Truth is singular, and knowledge is the precise demonstration of the only way to explain what exists. The purpose of education is to develop an ability to constantly and repeatedly represent this relationship between existence and explanations.

By contrast, in traditional African societies, what exists in front of people can have multiple meanings, and a speaker will choose how to explain a phenomenon in a particular context. An educated person is the one with the ability to grasp the implications of a phenomenon and convey them to others convincingly. In other words, being educated is the ability to make a *presentation* based on interpretation rather than a *representation*. The essence of interpretation is condensed in aphorisms, but they are too

short to make sense on their own. Compelling interpretation requires extensive knowledge and insight to fill in the gaps.

Abdi states that an educated person in traditional African societies is often someone who has not been to school but who can think and explain with a good mix of moralistic wisdom, interpretive wisdom, and rational ideas based on the context in which the community is situated (Abdi 2008, 319).

Conclusion

As early as the 1980s, Ong foresaw that information technology would usher in an era of "secondary orality" (Ong 1982, 2–3, 133). Technology-enhanced media are the product of a sophisticated science developed within a written culture capable of accumulating, refining, and logically extending specialized knowledge. In this sense, communication using such technology is still an extension of the written culture. At the same time, the dissemination of knowledge today cannot be understood solely through the models of how knowledge is formed in existing systems. Precisely because information is so readily available, one should consider the nature of networked knowledge not only on its surface but also in terms of the underlying epistemology.

In cyberspace, relationships are constantly changing. An audience in one moment can be a presenter in the next moment. Opinions presented by influential figures are forwarded, retweeted, and "liked." At the same time, these spreaders interpret, add meaning, and sometimes even convert the originator's intentions. People with common interests may take collective action, but they remain anonymous to each other, and the group is constantly reshaping itself like an amoeba.

Online search engines provide information according to a site's popularity ranking. Can "popularity" be a valid criterion for judging information to be true in an IT-driven society? Can information recommended by algorithms be accepted as knowledge? In ancient oral cultures, knowledge was passed on with a moral message. The speaker of aphorisms and folk tales had to be a good performer but also a respected personality in the society. In contemporary secondary oral cultures, does the presenter have the character to bear the weight of what is presented? Does the recipient have the ability to distinguish between meaningful knowledge and misinformation? Intrinsic qualities of morality and justice hover over both the receiver and the presenter of communication but are difficult to acquire in cyberspace. Where do we learn the ability to judge the correctness of information and assemble our own knowledge packages? That may be the

role of schools today. The social function of schools in transmitting knowledge is in question. But school still has a role to play in this information age by becoming the place where future generations develop morality and the ability to make judgments.

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