

The Concept of Truth in Bini World View

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Abstract

Truth remains one fundamental problem in the history of philosophy in particular and in human thought generally. For the Binis of Edo state in South-South region, Nigeria, the concept of truth plays a very key role in their expressions and social experience. This paper takes a critical look at the Bini conception of truth and explores an hermeneutical approach in analyzing the differences between truth in principle and truth in social operations. Truth in Bini worldview seems to cohere to the empiricist's correspondence theory in principle on one hand, but is relative and social constructive in usage on the other hand. Meaning that, its application is pragmatic and relative to situations and perspectives. The uses of truth and its understanding must thus be seen within the purview of situation ethics. This work project the normative conception of truth in Bini thought system against the background of epistemic conception in Western tradition with a view to establishing that Bini conception of truth provides a surer basis for regulating human conduct and evolving a viable and appropriate social order that would engender development in society. The primary objective of an analysis of truth in Bini is to show the causal relatedness of truth to other concepts, value, practices and habits that not only define the dignity of human person, but are also instrumental to evolving the kind of morally desirable social order that can engender development in human society.

Key Words: *Bini, correspondence theory of truth, truth, worldview*

Introduction

Truth is one concept in philosophy which has eluded a definite and generally acceptable definition. This has been so since the ancient through contemporary times in the history of philosophy. In traditional African discourse, this crisis still pervades. For the Binis of Edo State in South-South region, Nigeria, the idea of truth plays a pivotal role in their existential domain. Their meaning and understanding of the concept can therefore be deciphered in a careful study of their general worldview on reality. It is in the light of the above that this study becomes so important. What then is truth in Bini world-view one may ask? In trying to understand a people, an understanding of their worldview is imperative, as every people develop their world view based on the peculiar experiences, culture, beliefs and tradition. A world-view is “a unified picture of the cosmos explained by a system of concepts which order the natural and social rhythms and the place of individuals in them” (Oguejiofor, 2009: 2). For Oguejiofor, it is man's rational ability which enables him assign meaning to his being, his activities, events around him, his environment, allowing him to find a unifying factor or frame of meaning that is viewed as a *terminus a quo and terminus ad quem* - beginning and end of his existence” (Oguejiofor, 2009:2)

The Bini world-view is not different from the meaning captured in Oguejiofor's explanation. It furthermore, informs their moral code, and so their virtue and vice are judged in conformity with or opposed to these beliefs. In it they are able to picture a meaning in their individual and collective existence, their environment and events around them. In simple terms, it is captured in their concept of reality. What then is their conception of reality? The truism of John Mbiti's injunction that, “Africans are notoriously religious,” a background which permeates into all the departments of life, (Mbiti, 1970:1) cannot be more apt when the Bini world-view is to be considered. It sets a background to an understanding of the Binis and their notion of reality. Mbiti's assertion further supports this claim when he writes that:

because traditional religions permeates all the departments of life, there is no formal distinction between the sacred and the secular, between religious and non-religious, between the spiritual and the material areas of life. Wherever the African is, there is his religion: he carries it to the fields where he is sowing seeds or harvesting a new crop; he takes it with him to the beer parlour or to attend a funeral ceremony; and if he is educated, he takes religion to the examination room....if he is a politician he takes it to the house of parliament.... It nevertheless accompanies the individual from long before his birth to long after his physical death. (Mbiti, 1970:2)

Mbiti added that although modern changes have occurred, affecting the traditional religions, they are by no means extinct. He argues that in times of crisis they

often come to the surface, people still revert to them in secret. (Mbiti, 1970:2) Okaba and Appah also agrees with Mbiti and added that religion reflects the responses of man to the wonders and inescapable perplexities of life.(Mbiti,1970:2) More so it informs the general thinking of a people. The most common element shared by the various tribes in Africa is their belief in a supreme being who is responsible for the creation of the world. The Supreme Deity in the various African world-views are called by different names because of language differences but appears to be conceived in similar terms, having similar features or attributes.

The Western Theories of Truth as Epistemic Conceptions

It is possible to formulate the epistemic conception of truth in many ways, but the basic idea is that this conception of truth describes the attempt to analyse the concept of truth in terms of epistemic notions such as knowledge, belief, verification, justification, experience, argument, proof and perspective.(Cozzo,2008) As Damian Cox explains it, “epistemic conceptions of truth are those tying the truth of a proposition to some function of its warrant for belief.”(Cox, 1999:149) This conception is grounded in the intuition that when we ascribe truth to a proposition, one is primarily signaling that the proposition ought to be believed. What therefore supplies the substance for this conception of truth, according to Cox, is “...the epistemic role of truth, rather than its utility....” (Cox, 1999:150) The epistemic conception of truth can be broadly classified into three categories, although this is by no means exhaustive. The classifications are the *verificationist* theories, the *perspectivalist* or *relativist* theories, and the pragmatic theories.

The first of our classifications of epistemic conception in the foregoing section is the *verificationist* theories. The distinctive clam of *verificationist* theories is that a proposition is meaningful, and thus capable of being true or false, if and only if it is verifiable, whether by sensory experience as in positivism, or through reason as in apriorism. Theories of truth that can be classified under this category include the correspondence and the semantic theories.

The Correspondence Theory of Truth

Narrowly speaking, the correspondence theory of truth is the view that truth is correspondence to a fact, but the label is usually applied much more broadly to any view explicitly embracing the idea that truth consists in a relation to reality, that is, that truth is a relational property involving a characteristic relation to some portion of reality. Correspondence theorists have employed various concepts to describe this relation, such as correspondence, conformity, congruence, agreement, accordance, copying, picturing, signification, representation, reference and satisfaction, as well as various concepts for the relevant portion of reality like facts, states of affairs, conditions, situations, events, objects, sequences of objects, sets and properties. Despite this preponderance of substantive and terminological differences, the main

idea of the analysis of truth given by the theory remains the same, and it is that a statement or judgement is true, if there is a 'fact' or 'state of affair' corresponding to it in the world, and false if there is no 'fact' corresponding to it. By this conception, truth is defined in terms of a relationship between 'what is said or thought' on the one hand, and the 'things which are talked or thought about', that is, facts or state of affairs in the world, on the other hand.

For instance, in a series of lectures given by G.E. Moore, 'truth' and 'falsehood' first appeared as properties of what he called 'propositions'. Moore uses the term proposition, to mean, not an indicative sentence, but what such a sentence refers to. As he puts it: "There certainly are in the universe such things as 'propositions', and [that] it is 'propositions' rather than 'sentences' or acts of beliefs which are true or false".(Moore,1967:225) Truth therefore according to Moore, consists in the relation of 'sentences' to 'propositions', that is, facts or States of affairs, in the world.

Although, J. L. Austin explicated his own version of the correspondence theory "not in terms of a structural isomorphism between 'proposition' and 'fact', but in terms of purely conventional relation between the 'word' and the 'world',(Austin,1978:93) yet his definition of truth shares the same features with those of the other correspondence theorists. According to Austin, a statement is 'true', when the state of affairs that it asserts, is of the type that the word used, purports to describe. In other words, truth depends on the 'correlation' between a sentence and the fact or state of affair to which it refers.(Austin,1978:93)

So in whatever way it is construed, the correspondence theory of truth remains the same: that truth consists in a relation between 'sentences' and some 'facts', 'state of affairs' or 'events' which comprise the world, or whatever segment of it, 'sentences' are capable of referring to. We classify the correspondence theory under the *verificationist* theories because the 'correspondence' would need verification in order to confirm the truth or otherwise of statements or propositions. And statements can indeed be verified not only empirically, but through a priori reasoning as well as other external evidence like historical documents.(Wannock,1964:5)

The Semantic Theory of Truth

The semantic theory is another theory of truth that can be classified under the *verificationist* theories because the theory requires not only the verification of each word in a sentence, but also, the systematic contribution of each word to the meaning of a sentence as a whole would need to be verified, either analytically or through some extra linguistic means. According to the semantic theory, an account of the way in which a statement or sentence is true, is determined by its composition.(Roach,2010) In other words, the truth of a sentence depends in some systematic way, on the composition and meaning of words that make up the sentence. This perhaps explains the reason Donald Davidson considers an analysis of the meaning of a sentence and that

of the notion of truth as inseparable. Explicating further on this umbilical cord between the concept of truth and the notion of meaning, Davidson explains that the definition of truth requires “giving the necessary and sufficient conditions for the truth of every sentence and to give the truth-conditions is a way of giving the meaning of a sentence”.(Davidson,1971:171) Reading Davidson from the rear, it means that “we cannot ...have an adequate general understanding of the notion of truth, unless...we have an adequate general understanding of the notion of meaning”.(Strawson,1971:180) F. P. Ramsey had earlier made a similar claim in an article titled “Facts and Propositions”, where he argued that what we ordinarily conceive as the problem of truth is a mere linguistic one, which results from our inability to correctly analyse judgements.+11 For Ramsey, “if we have analysed judgments, we have solved the problem of truth”.(Ramsey,1979:16) The semantic theory therefore has as its goal, an account of the way in which a sentence is determined as true, when it is true, in accordance with its composition.

Our second classification of epistemic conception is the *perspectivalist* or *relativist* theories. According to perspectivalism and *relativism*, a *proposition* is only true relative to a particular perspective, whether that of the individual or a collective. Put differently, perspectivalism is an epistemic position which holds that a proposition is true if and only if it is accepted, endorsed, *legitimated* by a particular perspective. This conception of truth exemplified in the philosophy of *Nietzsche* and the *Sophists*. Theories of truth in this category include the coherence theory of truth.

The Coherence Theory of Truth The contention which forms the core of the coherence theory is that, truth is a certain relation which holds amongst judgments. In other words, to say that a statement is 'true' of 'false' is to say that it 'coheres' or fails to 'cohere' with a system of other statements, Unlike the correspondence theory which provides the anchor for truth in 'facts', what the coherence theory takes and uses in place of 'fact' is another judgment or set of judgments, and what provides the substantiation is the coherence between the initial judgment and these other set of judgments. In other words, no statement can be known to be true until it is known to cohere with every other statement of the system, while(Ramsey,1979:16) “...the mark of falsehood is failure to cohere in the body of our beliefs”.(White,1967:130) The conception of truth given by the Coherence theory is therefore perspectival or relative since it anchors its analysis of a true statement on its relationship to a set of maximally coherent and consistent propositions. A statement is therefore true relative to its being a member of this maximally coherent and consistent set of propositions.

The last grouping of the epistemic conception of truth identified earlier is the pragmatic theories and it is in this grouping that you have the pragmatic theory of truth.

The Pragmatic Theory of Truth The pragmatic theory of truth says that the truth of a belief is defined by its practical consequences. The basic principle of the pragmatic

theory of truth, is that, a belief is true if and only if it is 'useful', 'expedient', 'works' or solves problems. As William James puts it: ...any 'idea' that will carry us prosperously from any one part of our experience to any other part, linking things satisfactorily, working securely, simplifying, saving labour, is true for just so much....(Russell,1979:122)

For James, as well as other the pragmatic theorists, truth is to be defined in terms of some kind of effect which propositions produce. As he explains further, "...the truth of an idea is not a stagnant property inherent in it"(James,1959:155), rather, truth, he contends, "has an external character"(James, 1968:256)

Although James often adds qualification to the pragmatic view, and sometimes defines truth, not in terms of 'usefulness', but in terms of verification,(James,1959:155) but the crux of his argument is still in line with the main thesis of the pragmatic theory of truth, because 'verification' for him, signify nothing but 'certain practical consequences of the verified idea'(James,1959:155)

In a way however, the pragmatic view seems to create relativism, since there will be no real objective basis for truth, as whatever works for anyone will be true for that person. For instance, back in 1800s, slavery worked for Europe and America because it helped them with the hard labour that lubricated their economies. It was, following the pragmatic theory of truth, therefore true for them at that time, whereas the same slavery was false for the Africans then. (Offor, 2012:62)At about the same time also, human sacrifice worked and was therefore true for many of the communities in Africa, whereas the same act was abhorred and consequently false for Europe and America at that time. But now in our modern time, both slavery and human sacrifice no longer work and are obviously no longer true for any of these societies(Offor,2012:63) For reasons similar to the foregoing, the pragmatic theory could also be classified conveniently under perspectivalism.

The implication of the foregoing epistemic conceptions of truth is that 'truth' has a status that is logically independent of the moral universe of individuals and persons who make statements and assertions. This way, the epistemic conceptions of truth ignore to some extent, the teleological uses and normative functions of truth, not only in enriching the social order, but also in the development of humans as social organisms. It is these teleological and normative functions that anchor the Bini conception of truth.

Truth in Bini Thought System

From an African worldview, African conception of truth cannot be separated from her metaphysics. This is because the traditional African has a holistic view of reality. She situates her daily occurrences and phenomena within the totality of the scheme of things, which in her conception, are characterized by such factors as unity and coherence. In other words, in the African conception of reality, there is no sharp distinction between realities which are ordinarily termed to be diametrically opposed. Realities are fundamentally interconnected within the worldview of the African people.

This fundamental interconnectedness accounts for the reason why one sphere of life cannot be completely understood at the exclusion of others. This is also why a correct understanding of an African phenomenon can only be obtained by a panoramic survey of her reality; hence the necessity to at least have an insight into African cosmology. The Bini world-view is informed by a belief in a supernatural creator which they refer to as *Osanobua*, (literary means the Creator).

Bradbury holds that *Osanobua*, the name of God in Benin, means “The supplier of love, wealth, health, life and other necessities needed for sustaining creation. That is, he who supplies the needs of his creatures. (Bradbury, 1973:288) Creation appears to be the most acknowledged work of God by the people in Benin. The Benin believes that God created all things. They perceive *Osanobua* (God) as “the designer or architect who formed the universe, hence, he is also referred to as the designer (*Osa no guona*). As a causal agent, the Benin sees God as God of fertility. He is known as the 'the Giver of Children' (*Osayomore or Osayawemwen*) (*Osayamwen*). *Osanobua* is recognized as the God of procreation. Human procreation is particularly attributed to God. They believe that God causes conception to take place. God did not only create the material universe, but also established laws of nature and Benin customs. (Aigbodioh, n.d:5) For the Benin, *Osanobua* created things in an ordered fashion, and made an orderly and harmonious world where everyone could perform his / her own duties. The Benin believes that God established their customs, laws and regulations in addition to creating the world. This is why they call Him *Osanakpama* meaning, the creator of all things. (Aigbodioh, n.d:5)

Like the ancient philosophies of Plato and Aristotle, the Bini universe is categorized into two orders of existence. (Egharevba, 1968:96) identified the existence of two worlds, namely, *Agbon* and *Erinmwin*. For him *Agbon* is the sensible world created and controlled by *Osanobua* (God) through the divinities. All occurrences in *Agbon* are therefore believed to be controlled by *Osanobua* through the divinities as His agents. *Erinmwin* is the invisible supersensible world. It is populated by a variety of spirit being such as *Enikaro* (Ancestors) and *Ebo* (Divinities).

It is the general belief of the Benin people that divinities who are *Osanobua*'s agents control both *Agbon* and *Erinmwin*. Egharevba's two fold classification of Benin cosmology encompasses the five categories of African ontology as outlined by Mbiti. According to (Mbiti, 1991:288), Africans have their own ontology which is both religious and anthropocentric in the sense that everything is seen in terms of relations to man. Mbiti went further to divide this ontology into five categories as follows: **a.** God as the ultimate explanation of the genesis and substance of both man and all things. **b.** Spirit being made up of super- human beings and the spirit of men who died a long time ago. **c.** Man, including human beings who are alive and those about to be born. **d.** Animals and plants or the reminder of biological life. **e.** Phenomena and objects without biological life. (Mbiti, 1991:288) The anthropocentric ontology can be conveniently grouped into sensible thing like man, plants, animals as well as

phenomenon and objects without biological life; and supersensible entities such as God and the spirits. The second group is sustained more by belief systems than by empirical proofs. The ontological relationship between God (*Osanobua*) and other spirit beings in Intangible world (*Erinmwini*) and man amongst other beings in the *Agbon*(tangible world is clearly spelt out; with God at the apex of the ontology; plants, animals, lakes, rivers etc., occupying the bottom. The Binis believe that all creatures are immortal entities which are capable of separate and inseparable existence. It is the joining of the spiritual entity to the material body that all things are created by God. In like manner, it is by the separation of the immortal from the body that a being ceases to exist.(Okaba&Appah,1999:150) This implies that all beings are a fusion of the spiritual and the physical. The position of man in this lineage is so vital because, it is man who is at the centre and is affected directly by the activities of all others in this ontology. The Benin ontology like the broader African ontology is anthropocentric. Man is at the centre of existence and everything else is seen in relation to this central position of man. In his worldview, even if God created him, God himself, so to speak, exists for his sake, because without him, God cannot also be conceived and His influence cannot be felt. The other spirit beings are intermediaries between God and man in this ontology. The principal place of man in the Bini existence is further adumbrated thus:

He is seen as the most unique, precious and yet enigmatic of God's creatures. He is a complex unity of tripartite constituents: the *egbe*(flesh/body), *erinmwini*(spirit) and the *ehi* (guardian spirit) which together form the human personality. The last two constitute man's diving essence. At death, they forsake the disintegrating mortal bod and return to God.(Okaba&Appah, 1999:150)

Reality is conceived in holistic terms and as such the whole ontology would be affected if any of the beings is removed: from the creator to the divinities, spirits, the ancestors, man, animals, plants, rivers, lakes etc. Although the person is important as expressed in the Benin ontology, his importance can only be valued in relation to his place in the community. The Bini man can only function effectively if he relates well within the confines of his community. This account relates to Jean Jacques Rousseau's theory of the state where, the solution adduced for the chaos arising from the state of nature, men sought "... the total alienation of each associate, together with all his rights, to the whole community...." (Molema, 2007:43) This is also captured in Mbiti where he said the individual can only say "I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am" (Mbiti, 1970:108) The personality of the individual is always subsumed in the whole, they commune, even in the Bini reality. This communal existence is evident generally in the lives of the Binis, "as a result of this, we have seen how the morality (is) tribal. Injuries, misdeeds, and deceits outside the tribe were not only

connived at, but tacitly, or in some cases expressly, encouraged” (Molema, 2007:43) It is from this understanding that one can appreciate the Bini concept of truth.

Truth for the Binis can only be expressed in their conception of man, captured in their ontology. For them, truth is a relative term. They have a relative perception of truth, which may be observed to be similar to the correspondence Western model - fidelity to objective reality. This perceived co-relation is seen from their various expressions of truth, such as: Okha *Emwanta*, literary meaning “true story”, *Gelegele nor*, meaning the “real story” or *Emwen noma*, the “right story” *et cetra*. The meaning of these expressions is that truth entails a direct relationship or confirmation between a statement and an observable state of affairs. A statement, (*emwen*) can only be true, (*emwanta*), if it confirms an empirical state of affairs upon physical scrutiny. Although knowledge of truth, for the Binis is related more so in correspondence terms, as in having a statement relating to a state of affairs, usage or application of truth is tied to other categories. Truth by this becomes situational and no longer objective. For instance, certain 'truths' are not supposed to be said to superiors in the ontology earlier stated. Even in societal relationships, the expression of truth is limited to circumstances and situations. When asked if a younger sibling can express in objective terms real situations to an elder in the Bini society, Mr Stanley Omorodion argues that this is not acceptable, even if that may be the true situation of affairs. He added that it may be viewed as insulting if the truth is said in direct, blunt terms. (Omorodion, 2021) For instance, a young man seeing the rottenness of an adult's teeth is not expected to express it. Women are not also expected to utter certain truths to their male counterparts. A child, no matter how intelligent, is not expected to intrude in a discussion of adults even if they are discussing in error and the child knows the facts of the topic.

Mr Omorodion narrated that the manner of expression and the words used will elicit different meanings, whether it will be acceptable as truth or not. He also added that truth has communal connotations in its application. Even if it is an obvious fact, discernable to everyone, once a general, communal viewpoint is taken on an issue, opposition to that position is no longer tolerated. Truth in such circumstance becomes situational, *ad populum*. The individual is downplayed in the expression of truth. An action is true if it will enhance the overall well-being of the people and otherwise if it is not in the interest of the people.

Mr Martins Osazuwa also corroborated this conception. There is always a reservation, a restraint in all expressions of truth. It will be fool-hardy to be blunt with the truth because of the fear of the adverse, consequences this may bring. Certain truths are not supposed to be sought by everyone except those that are initiated, such as the activities of the chief priest of the oracles. Truth here is derived from utility, convenience, from authority, from tradition or revelation. The knowledge of the diviner or chief priest of the traditional oracle or deity is not participatory. For Benjamin Okaba, it is this secrecy in truth that informs, the Yoruba word for a diviner is *Babalawo*-the father who deals with secret. The diviner is called *Dibia* in Igbo and in

Bini is called *Ohen*. All these names suggest secret. The methods they use to unearth hidden facts are so complicated and inexplicable to the ordinary. (Okaba&Appah,1999:150)

This explains the point earlier made that some truths are not shared. It becomes a privileged fact to those concerned. What is therefore truth for the Binis? Do they have knowledge of truth?

In our analysis of the Bini conception of truth above, it is discernable that the Binis are very empirical and situational in their understanding of the concept. Their notion is only relative to their experience. A relative truth is the view that a belief or opinion cannot be said to be true simply, but to a group, specie, person or a social practice. (Maurtner, 1999:574) What this implies is that some truths have no universal application. This is true for the Bini people. Truth for them may not be too far from situational or relative. They believe that truth must be a corollary between a statement of fact and the reality it depicts. That means that if one says there is a fish in the pot, that statement must correspond to the fact of reality that there is indeed fish in the pot. It has to do with empirical verification of facts. Truth in this case is objective.

However, the arguments against the correspondence conception of truth since the days of Plato, Aristotle through contemporary times are not excusable in the Bini situation, if they think truth is correspondent. It is clear from their viewpoint that truth as a theoretical concept is different from truth in practical life situations. Theirs is thus truth in doing-a practical, existential activity. Truth is therefore not a passive, dogma but an active concept. Truth is not an idea but an act in doing. For instance, in saying the fact of a smelly mouth of an elder by a younger sibling is abhorred in a community, it is not practicable and so not true. A situation is true if the community says it is, and false if they deem it false. This implies the popular saying that, “man is the measure of all things”, according to Protagoras, the Sophist. The social implication of truth serves a utilitarian purpose. Truth is derived from utility and 'consultation of convenience.' Something is true if it serves the common good of those concerned and false if its consequences are adverse for the generality of those affected. They are not adherents of the Kantian ethical maxim that says one should 'act from a maxim at all times fit for law universal', but sought to maximize the greatest good for the greatest number, not in general, but in the *tribe*. (Molema,2007:47)The Binis therefore are not bound by any universal standards, but by values which are traditional to them. Molema seem to support this worldview when he wrote that

It is true that people of one nation measure the moral character of every other nation, not by any standard recognized by the world, and representative of all nationalities. civilized and uncivilized-not by a common measure, but by their own ethical standard. In this way, things facts, and factors, appear

distorted, being viewed from a sharp angle and without the least attempt at the historical perspective (Molema, 2007:49)

What this implies is that truth remains a relative term and its application can best be suitable to situations and perspectives, even among the Binis.

Concluding Reflections

In reflecting on the conception of truth as held by the Binis, one can be safe to argue that issues relating to truth are of content. The import of this is that truth applies only to the product of human thoughts and actions as free rational and moral agents. They are acts which proceed from the person which are within his choices and control. These are human acts because they are subject to the will of persons as free agents. (Njoku, 2006:1) The special character in the Bini notion of truth can be applied to other races and nationalities. Almost all nationalities and races have their own peculiarities relative to their environment, social influence and experiences. This affects their overall world-view and intimately their grasp on truth.

Truth therefore remains relative. What is worrisome is the implication of this relative, communal application of truth. This is so because it is hinged on other fundamental facets of the Bini life. The very 'practical', pragmatic application of truth affects the overall social development of the people. If the truth can be amended to satisfy situations, then general interpretation becomes difficult. For instance, if the embezzlement of public funds satisfies the immediate thirst of a group, then that act becomes truth, not minding the intrinsic moral content of the act as stealing.

However, it is also possible that those who embezzle public fund can also believe in some truths from the political morality that the act is bad, because truth is adjudged relative, all situations become true in as much as those involved are able to justify its practical content. This is a move back to earlier times of human existence based on the crude, animalistic instincts explained in the Darwinian evolutionary theory of species, where life remains a constant struggle to survive and might become right. This affects one's stride towards social development because objectivity remains a veritable tool in adjudging good from bad; right from wrong actions. If an action is intrinsically not wrong or right, true or false, then man shall continue to live in a troubled relativity.

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