



A Philosophical Rethinking On Hunting Occupation in the Wilderness of Dearth of Animals in Traditional Yoruba Society: From Physical Hunting to Epistemic Hunting

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Abstract

Original Research Article

Hunting has, for centuries, occupied a central place in traditional Yoruba society, serving simultaneously as an economic occupation, a religious vocation under the patronage of Ogun, and a rich source of oral literature and communal wisdom. The background to this study lies in the steady ecological transformation of Yoruba forests, a transformation marked by widespread deforestation, over-hunting, and a consequent dearth of wild animals that has rendered the traditional hunter's occupation increasingly untenable in its original physical form. The problem this study addresses is that existing scholarship on Yoruba hunting culture has concentrated almost exclusively on its ecological, economic, and literary dimensions, while neglecting the deeper epistemological transformation that this ecological crisis makes both possible and necessary. The thesis advanced is that the traditional Yoruba hunter's occupation, confronted by a wilderness increasingly emptied of animals, can be philosophically re-conceived not as a vanishing vocation but as a transforming one, moving from physical hunting for game to epistemic hunting for knowledge, wisdom, and cultural meaning. The study adopts the method of critical philosophical analysis and conceptual reconstruction, drawing on Yoruba cultural materials alongside African and Western philosophical resources to construct this transition. The finding is that the intellectual and spiritual disciplines historically cultivated by the physical hunter, namely patience, observation, tracking, and communal narration, translate coherently into an epistemic vocation of inquiry, preservation, and transmission of indigenous knowledge. The study concludes that Yoruba society can honourably re-purpose its hunting heritage as a philosophy of epistemic pursuit, thereby preserving the hunter's dignity even where game itself has grown scarce.

Keywords: Yoruba Philosophy, Hunting Occupation, Epistemic Hunting, Indigenous Knowledge, Wilderness, Ogun.

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Introduction

Few occupations in traditional African society carry as much symbolic, economic, and spiritual weight as hunting does among the Yoruba people

of southwestern Nigeria. The hunter, traditionally known as *ode*, was not merely a provider of meat but a custodian of forest lore, a devotee of Ogun, the deity of iron and the hunt,



and a repository of the observational and narrative skills by which the Yoruba understood their natural environment. Hunting, in this traditional context, was at once a livelihood, a religious calling, and an epistemic practice, since the successful hunter had, of necessity, to know the forest, its creatures, its seasons, and its concealed dangers with a precision that amounted to a distinctive form of knowledge.

This paper is occasioned by a specific and increasingly undeniable crisis: the dearth of animals in the forests and savannahs that once sustained Yoruba hunting as a viable occupation. Deforestation, habitat degradation, unregulated bushmeat extraction, and the steady conversion of forest land to agricultural and residential use have combined to deplete the wildlife populations upon which the traditional hunter's occupation depended. The problem this depletion poses is not merely economic or ecological; it is also, and more fundamentally, a philosophical problem concerning the fate of an entire occupational and epistemic tradition once its material object, the animal quarry, becomes scarce.

The thesis of this paper is that the traditional Yoruba hunting occupation need not be regarded as simply doomed by this ecological dearth. Properly reconceived, the occupation can undergo a philosophical transformation from physical hunting, the pursuit of game in the forest, to epistemic hunting, the pursuit of knowledge, wisdom, and cultural meaning by means of the same disciplines, patience, observation, tracking, and communal narration, that physical hunting historically cultivated. This transformation preserves what is philosophically and culturally valuable in the hunting vocation even as its original material conditions disappear.

The paper proceeds in six sections. The first clarifies the central concepts of hunting, occupation, wilderness, and epistemic hunting. The second examines traditional Yoruba hunting as both occupation and epistemology. The third documents the ecological crisis of dearth confronting this occupation. The fourth constructs the central philosophical argument of the paper, the reconstruction of physical hunting

as epistemic hunting. The fifth explores what epistemic hunting looks like in practice, with indigenous knowledge itself as the new object of the hunt. The sixth draws out implications for occupational philosophy and cultural continuity in Yorubaland, after which the paper concludes. The method throughout is critical philosophical analysis, combining conceptual clarification, cultural exposition, and constructive argumentation.

Conceptual Clarification: Hunting, Occupation, Wilderness, and Epistemic Hunting

Four concepts require preliminary clarification: hunting, occupation, wilderness, and epistemic hunting.

Hunting, in its ordinary sense, refers to the pursuit and capture of wild animals for food, trade, ritual, or sport. Among the Yoruba, hunting was never merely a technical activity of tracking and killing; it was embedded within a wider complex of ritual observance, oral performance, and communal recognition. Adeduntan's detailed study of Yoruba hunters' culture and narrative performance demonstrates that the hunter's forest exploits were preserved and transmitted through *Ìjálá*, a genre of chanted oral poetry performed in honour of Ogun, such that the act of hunting was inseparable from the act of narrating and knowing the forest world.¹

Occupation, for the purposes of this paper, denotes a socially recognised vocation through which a person derives livelihood, identity, and communal standing, typically through the sustained exercise of a specific set of skills. Hunting, on this definition, qualifies as an occupation in the fullest sense, since it conferred upon the traditional *oḍe* not merely income but also religious status as a devotee of Ogun and social authority as a custodian of forest knowledge.

Wilderness, in the context of this paper, refers to the uncultivated forest and savannah environment that historically constituted both the hunter's workplace and the primary reservoir of the animal life upon which the occupation

depended. The phrase wilderness of dearth, central to the title of this paper, names a wilderness that persists spatially while having been emptied, through ecological degradation, of the very animal populations that once made it a site of productive occupation.

Epistemic hunting, the central constructive concept of this paper, denotes a reconceived form of the hunting vocation in which the object pursued is no longer physical game but knowledge, wisdom, and cultural meaning, pursued through disciplines structurally analogous to those of physical hunting, namely patient observation, careful tracking, and communal narration of what has been found. It is this concept, and its philosophical justification, that occupies the remainder of this paper.

Traditional Yoruba Hunting as Occupation and Epistemology

Traditional Yoruba hunting occupied a position at the intersection of livelihood, religion, and knowledge production, a position that becomes clearer once the occupation is examined through the lens of Yoruba metaphysics and epistemology rather than through economic categories alone.

The hunter's patron deity, Ogun, god of iron, war, and the hunt, occupies a central place in Yoruba religious cosmology, and the hunter's occupation was understood as a sacred vocation carried out under Ogun's protection and demanding, in turn, ritual devotion and moral discipline. Adeduntan's account of Yoruba hunters' narrative culture shows that the hunter's cosmology denied any strict boundary between the human, animal, and spirit worlds, treating the forest as a domain in which the hunter was an equal actor among animal and nature spirits, rather than a mere exploiter of a passive resource.¹ This cosmological understanding meant that successful hunting required not only physical skill but also a form of relational, participatory knowledge of the forest, its inhabitants, and its unseen forces.

This participatory knowledge finds a close philosophical parallel in Balogun and Oyelakin's

account of Yoruba contextual dualism, which describes the Yoruba person as constituted by a composite of physical and non-physical elements standing in complex interactive relation with the wider cosmos.⁷ On this understanding, the hunter's forest knowledge was never purely empirical in the narrow Western sense; it was simultaneously physical and metaphysical, requiring attentiveness to destiny, spiritual forces, and moral order alongside purely practical tracking skill.

The epistemic character of traditional hunting is further evident in the communal, dialogical manner in which hunting knowledge was preserved and transmitted, through oral narrative, chanted verse, and public performance before an audience of fellow hunters and community members, rather than through private, silent accumulation. Chimakonam and Ogbonnaya's account of African conversational epistemology, though not developed with hunting specifically in view, captures precisely this dynamic, describing African knowledge production as a fundamentally social and dialogical process in which claims are established, tested, and preserved through communal exchange rather than solitary discovery.⁶ Traditional Yoruba hunting, understood in this light, was already, long before any ecological crisis, an epistemic occupation as much as a physical one.

The Wilderness of Dearth: The Ecological Crisis Confronting Traditional Hunting

The philosophical reconstruction proposed in this paper responds to a concrete and well-documented ecological crisis, namely the increasing scarcity of wild animals in the forests and savannahs of southwestern Nigeria, a scarcity that has rendered the traditional hunting occupation progressively less viable in its original physical form.

Olunusi's recent study of the bushmeat trade in Ibadan metropolis documents the extent of this crisis, showing that unregulated hunting pressure, driven by rural and urban demand for bushmeat, has contributed to a measurable decline in wildlife populations across

southwestern Nigeria, even as hunting itself remains a significant, if increasingly precarious, economic activity.² The study further notes that conservation authorities have found it necessary to educate hunters directly, in the Yoruba language, on the risks of species extinction and the possibilities of sustainable resource use, an intervention that testifies to how urgently the depletion of wildlife has come to be felt at the level of ordinary hunting communities.²

This ecological dearth does not merely inconvenience the traditional hunter; it threatens the very foundation of an occupation whose meaning, status, and livelihood were historically tied to a forest teeming with game. Where the forest once yielded a reliable supply of animals to sustain both physical subsistence and the narrative material of Ìjálá performance, it increasingly yields silence, emptiness, and diminishing returns for the hunter's traditional labour.

Alarape, Obadiora, and Omoba, in their study of the acquisition, preservation, and transmission of Yoruba indigenous knowledge, similarly observe that indigenous occupational knowledge across various domains, hunting included, faces mounting pressure from changing ecological, economic, and generational circumstances, circumstances that threaten to sever the transmission of such knowledge from one generation of custodians to the next.³

The wilderness, in this sense, persists as a physical space while ceasing to function as the abundant reservoir of game that once defined it; it has become, in the phrase adopted for this paper's title, a wilderness of dearth. It is precisely this dearth that necessitates the philosophical reconstruction of the hunting occupation undertaken in the sections that follow.

From Physical Hunting to Epistemic Hunting: A Philosophical Reconstruction

The central philosophical task of this paper is to demonstrate that the traditional hunting occupation, confronted by the wilderness of dearth described above, can be coherently reconceived as epistemic hunting, a transformed

vocation in which the disciplines of the physical hunter are redirected toward the pursuit of knowledge rather than game.

This reconstruction finds unexpected support in the history of Western philosophy itself, where hunting has long served as a governing metaphor for the pursuit of truth. In Plato's dialogue the Sophist, the interlocutors set out to define the elusive figure of the sophist by explicitly adopting the method of the hunter, tracking their quarry through successive divisions of a conceptual terrain until the sophist is finally cornered and defined, much as a hunter tracks and corners an animal in the forest.⁵ Plato's deliberate use of hunting as a model for philosophical inquiry suggests that the analogy between physical and epistemic pursuit is neither arbitrary nor merely poetic; it reflects a structural similarity between the disciplines required for successful hunting and those required for successful inquiry, namely patience, attentiveness to subtle signs, persistence through failure, and a willingness to follow a trail wherever it leads.

This structural similarity receives further support from Ingold's anthropological account of hunting as a mode of environmental perception. Ingold argues that hunting is best understood not as the application of a fixed body of prior knowledge to a passive environment but as an ongoing, skilled engagement with the environment, in which the hunter's perception is continuously refined through direct, embodied practice within a living landscape.⁴ On this account, the hunter does not merely apply knowledge already possessed; the hunter generates knowledge through the very act of hunting, reading tracks, interpreting sounds, and anticipating the movements of unseen animals. It is precisely this generative, perceptual mode of knowing, rather than any particular species of prey, that constitutes the deepest continuity between physical and epistemic hunting.

Epistemic hunting, as proposed in this paper, transposes these same disciplines from the forest to the domain of indigenous knowledge itself. Where the physical hunter once tracked game through forest terrain, the epistemic hunter tracks fading fragments of proverb, ritual, song, and

communal memory through the terrain of a rapidly changing culture, exercising the same patience, the same attentiveness to subtle signs, and the same persistence through initial failure that physical hunting historically demanded. Chimakonam and Ogbonnaya's conversational model of African epistemology provides the appropriate communal setting for this pursuit, since the epistemic hunter, like the physical hunter narrating a successful expedition through Ìjálá, must ultimately bring the knowledge tracked down back into the community, to be tested, refined, and preserved through dialogue rather than hoarded in private possession.⁶

The transformation proposed here is, therefore, neither a mere metaphor nor an arbitrary reassignment of an old name to a new activity; it is a philosophically grounded reconstruction that identifies the disciplines constitutive of the hunting vocation and demonstrates their continued applicability once the original object of pursuit, physical game, has become scarce. What survives the ecological dearth is not the animal quarry but the epistemic character of the pursuit itself, and it is this survival that makes epistemic hunting a genuine successor to, rather than a mere replacement for, traditional physical hunting.

Epistemic Hunting in Practice: Indigenous Knowledge as the New Game

If epistemic hunting is to be more than an elegant philosophical abstraction, it must be shown to have concrete practical application within contemporary Yoruba society, application in which indigenous knowledge itself becomes the game pursued by the transformed hunter.

Consider, first, the Ìjálá tradition itself. Where the physical hunter once composed Ìjálá chants to narrate actual forest exploits, the epistemic hunter today may pursue and record the surviving repertoire of Ìjálá verses still held in the memory of ageing custodians, tracking these fragments of oral literature with the same patience and persistence that the physical hunter once brought to tracking game through the forest, before such fragments disappear entirely with the passing of the last generation of custodians.

Alarape, Obadiora, and Omoba's study of the acquisition and transmission of Yoruba indigenous knowledge confirms the urgency of this pursuit, documenting that much indigenous knowledge, transmitted historically through oral means alone, faces a serious risk of loss once its remaining custodians pass away without adequate mechanisms for its preservation and transfer to younger generations.³

Consider, second, the herbal and ecological knowledge historically associated with hunting itself. Adeduntan's study documents that Yoruba hunters were also foragers and informal botanists, possessing detailed knowledge of forest plants, their uses, and their efficacies, knowledge acquired through the same immersive, embodied engagement with the forest that produced their hunting skill.¹ This botanical and ecological knowledge, no less than the animals themselves, constitutes a form of game that can be pursued, documented, and preserved by an epistemic hunter operating in the same spirit of patient, attentive engagement with the forest world, even where the animal population that once justified regular expeditions into that world has grown scarce.

Consider, finally, the broader project of African epistemic decolonisation, understood as itself a form of hunting undertaken at the level of an entire intellectual tradition. Mbiti's classical account of African religions and philosophy insists that African traditional thought constitutes a coherent and internally rich system of knowledge, one that requires patient, careful study rather than dismissal, if its wisdom is to be properly understood and preserved for future generations.⁸ The epistemic hunter, pursuing this wisdom through careful scholarly tracking rather than casual assumption, performs, at the level of an entire civilisation's thought, precisely the disciplined pursuit that this paper identifies as the successor to the individual hunter's forest expedition.

Implications for Occupational Philosophy and Cultural Continuity in Yorubaland

The philosophical reconstruction proposed in this paper carries definite implications for how

occupational identity and cultural continuity might be understood and sustained in contemporary Yorubaland.

For occupational philosophy, the reconstruction suggests that vocations threatened by material or ecological obsolescence need not be regarded as simply disappearing; rather, the underlying disciplines and virtues that constituted the vocation's excellence may, in suitable cases, be identified, abstracted, and redirected toward a new object without loss of dignity or meaning for the practitioner. Wiredu's insistence that African philosophers ought to test received formulations against the intuitions available within their own language and cultural experience supports precisely this kind of reconstruction, since it is only by attending closely to what traditional Yoruba hunting actually demanded, patience, observation, tracking, and communal narration, rather than to a superficial definition confined to the killing of animals, that its epistemic successor can be properly identified.⁹

For cultural continuity, the reconstruction implies that institutions historically associated with hunting, festivals honouring Ogun, Ìjálá performance traditions, and hunters' guilds, need not vanish along with the wildlife that originally sustained them; these institutions may instead be consciously redirected toward the pursuit, celebration, and transmission of indigenous knowledge, thereby preserving communal structures of recognition and belonging that would otherwise be lost entirely to ecological circumstance. Freire's account of critical consciousness, the capacity of a people to recognise their circumstances as historically produced and therefore alterable through collective reflection and action, offers a fitting orientation for this redirection, since it is only through such conscious, collective reflection that a threatened occupational tradition can be deliberately transformed rather than passively abandoned.¹⁰

Taken together, these implications suggest that the wilderness of dearth confronting traditional Yoruba hunting, though a genuine ecological and economic crisis, need not also become a crisis of cultural and occupational extinction, provided the philosophical distinction between the object

of a vocation and its constitutive discipline is properly grasped and acted upon.

Conclusion

This paper has undertaken a philosophical rethinking of the hunting occupation in traditional Yoruba society in light of the growing dearth of animals confronting the forests and savannahs of southwestern Nigeria. It has argued that this ecological dearth, though a serious threat to hunting in its original physical form, need not spell the end of the hunting vocation altogether, provided the occupation is properly understood in terms of the disciplines it has always demanded rather than merely the game it has traditionally pursued.

The thesis defended throughout has been that physical hunting can be coherently and philosophically transformed into epistemic hunting, a vocation in which patience, observation, tracking, and communal narration, the very disciplines cultivated by generations of Yoruba hunters, are redirected toward the pursuit, preservation, and transmission of indigenous knowledge rather than the pursuit of animal game. This transformation draws support from sources as historically distant as Plato's use of hunting as a model of philosophical inquiry and as contemporary as recent anthropological accounts of hunting as a mode of environmental perception, together with Yoruba cultural materials documenting the deeply epistemic character that traditional hunting always possessed.

The practical applications explored in this paper, the pursuit of surviving Ìjálá verses, the documentation of hunters' botanical and ecological knowledge, and the broader scholarly recovery of African indigenous thought, demonstrate that epistemic hunting is not a merely speculative proposal but a philosophically grounded and practically available response to a genuine cultural crisis. The implications drawn for occupational philosophy and cultural continuity suggest, further, that this manner of reconstruction, identifying and redirecting the constitutive discipline of a threatened vocation, may hold

relevance well beyond the specific case of Yoruba hunting.

What began as a reflection on an ecological crisis affecting one occupational tradition closes, therefore, as a broader philosophical proposal: that a wilderness emptied of animals need not also become a wilderness emptied of meaning, provided the hunter's ancient disciplines are redirected, with patience and communal purpose, toward the equally demanding and equally rewarding pursuit of knowledge itself.

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