

**AFRICAN EPISTEMOLOGY:  
UNPACKING INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS AND THEIR VALIDITY**

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**Abstract**

This article presents a comprehensive critical examination of the foundations, structures, and validity of African Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS). Employing a philosophical and conceptual analysis methodology, it interrogates the socio-epistemic foundations of IKS through a decolonial lens, drawing extensively from both historical and contemporary African scholarship. The study finds that these systems, cultivated through deeply communal experiences, rigorously disciplined oral transmission, and morally-grounded structures, possess sophisticated internal standards of justification that are frequently rendered invisible or invalid by the hegemonic application of Eurocentric epistemological criteria. Engaging with a robust body of philosophical, sociological, and environmental scholarship, including significant contributions from Nigerian academics, the discussion traverses complex themes such as the socio-epistemic role of testimony, the dynamic intelligence of indigenous ecological practices, the restorative logic of conflict resolution, and the enduring, damaging legacies of epistemic injustice. The analysis contends that the validity of IKS is most accurately and fairly assessed not through a forced conformity to Western scientific models, but through demonstrated internal coherence, sustained pragmatic success, and a contextually-aware rationality. The article concludes by advocating for a robust epistemic pluralism and outlines critical, actionable pathways for future research, emphasizing the urgent role of African scholarship in digital preservation, pedagogical integration, and transformative interdisciplinary dialogue that can reshape global knowledge production.

**Keywords:** African epistemology, indigenous knowledge systems, validity, testimony, epistemic justice.

**Introduction**

The academic and philosophical engagement with African epistemology is not a passive, niche exercise; it is an active and politically significant confrontation with a persistent, systemic problem. This problem is the historical and ongoing marginalization of African ways of knowing, a process initiated by colonialism and perpetuated by neo-colonial global intellectual structures that privilege Eurocentric models.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, this field does not merely involve applying traditional Western philosophical questions about justification, belief, and truth to African content. More fundamentally, it often demands a radical re-examination and reformulation of the very definitions of knowledge, the identity of the knower, and the social processes of validation.<sup>2</sup> The central, animating concern of this article is therefore not simply to describe African Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS), but to rigorously explore how they should be understood, and their robustness assessed, on their own epistemic terms. The persistent judging of their validity by criteria they never set out to meet has led to profound misrepresentation, a chronic undervaluing of their intellectual sophistication, and what can be described as a form of systemic epistemological disenfranchisement.<sup>3</sup>

This question of validity has acquired a new and pressing urgency in the contemporary intellectual landscape, driven by the global rise of decolonial thought, the concerted pursuit of epistemic justice, and a growing recognition of the limitations of singular, universalizing knowledge structures.<sup>4</sup> Within this movement, scholars like Pascah Mungwini have powerfully critiqued the assumed neutrality and universality of Western epistemic models, advocating instead

for a reclaimed African intellectual autonomy and the right to self-definition in the realm of thought.<sup>5</sup> Complementing this, philosophers like Magnus Janvid have undertaken a necessary philosophical re-evaluation of testimony, reframing communal verification not as a primitive or uncritical cultural habit but as a sophisticated, efficient, and rational process of distributed cognitive labour.<sup>6</sup> Beyond the confines of philosophy, empirical research in fields like environmental science consistently demonstrates the adaptive resilience, precision, and practical efficacy of indigenous ecological knowledge in the face of contemporary challenges like climate change.<sup>7</sup> Simultaneously, critical theorists like Abdifatah Abdi meticulously trace the damaging, long-term consequences of epistemic injustice on the very architecture of African scholarship, highlighting how the systematic dismissal of indigenous knowledge continues to shape research agendas and educational policies.<sup>8</sup>

This article seeks to weave these diverse scholarly threads together into a cohesive argument, while also integrating crucial insights from Nigerian philosophical and sociological research to ground the discussion in specific, local contexts and perspectives. The argument will proceed by first excavating the foundational ontological and cosmological worldviews that undergird African epistemic practices. It will then analyze the concrete structure and dynamic functions of IKS across several key domains. Following this, the article will grapple directly with the complex philosophical problem of validity, proposing and defending a structure for its assessment from an immanent perspective. The final section will consider viable and necessary future directions for both research and practical application, arguing that the recognition of African epistemology is essential for a truly global and pluriversal understanding of knowledge.

### **African Epistemology: Foundations and Structures**

To engage meaningfully with African epistemology is to engage with a worldview where knowledge is not an abstract, decontextualized commodity but a vital, living process deeply woven into the cultural, social, spiritual, and ecological fabric of existence. It fundamentally resists the Cartesian impulse for radical abstraction and the separation of the mind from the world, insisting instead on a holistic understanding where the individual knower is conceptually and ethically inseparable from the community, the ancestors, the natural environment, and the cosmic order.<sup>9</sup> This relational ontology is the bedrock upon which distinctive epistemic practices are built.

### **Communal Conceptions of Knowledge**

The most frequently cited, and arguably most fundamental, characteristic of African epistemological thought is its inherently communal nature. Knowledge is not the private property of an isolated, skeptical mind but is embedded in social structures, cultivated through intergenerational relationships, and held accountable to the collective well-being. The maxim "a person is a person through others" (Ubuntu/Botho), found in various forms across the continent, is, therefore, as much a profound epistemological principle as it is a social ethic.<sup>10</sup> The knower is constituted by their relationships, and this fundamentally shapes how knowledge is acquired, critiqued, and justified.

In this context, testimony does not function as a second-rate or inferior source of knowledge, as it has sometimes been viewed in certain strands of Western individualism that prioritize direct experience or individual reason. Instead, it operates within a dense and complex network of social accountability and verification. An elder's authority, for instance, is rarely arbitrary or solely based on chronological age; it is earned through a lifetime of demonstrated reliability, practical wisdom, and a reputation built and scrutinized over time within the unsparing communal gaze.<sup>11</sup> Janvid persuasively suggests that this deep-seated reliance on testimony represents a rational and highly efficient distribution of epistemic labour. A community, in effect, pools its cognitive resources, creating a distributed system of knowledge where trust, earned through consistent performance, becomes the primary currency. This should not be mistaken for an abdication of critical inquiry; rather, it is its socialization, where collective deliberation seen in the palaver huts of West Africa, the kgotla of Southern Africa, or family councils draws upon a rich tapestry of varied experiences, perspectives, and shared historical memory to reach conclusions aimed at sustainable consensus and the maintenance of communal trust.<sup>12</sup>

### **Experience and Observation as Epistemic Tools**

Alongside its deeply social orientation, African epistemology places a strong, arguably paramount, emphasis on lived, practical, and attentive experience. Knowledge about the world is not primarily gained through abstract deduction or pure reason divorced from context, but through active, sustained, and meticulous engagement with the natural and social world. This deeply empirical, though not always "empiricist" in the narrow philosophical sense, approach is vividly illustrated in the meticulous observations of farmers who track subtle shifts in soil composition, wind patterns,

and animal behavior, or in the intricate, experimental knowledge of the herbalist, honed through decades of apprenticeship, direct practice, and observed outcomes.<sup>13</sup>

Recent interdisciplinary studies, such as that by Malapane et al. (2024) in Southern Africa, confirm that this experiential knowledge base is not a static relic but remains dynamically responsive to contemporary environmental pressures, such as climate change and urbanization. The pragmatic success of these methods, the crop that grows where imported seeds fail, the illness that recedes after a carefully prepared treatment derived from local flora serves as a powerful, ongoing, and tangible form of validation. It is a form of empirical grounding that is inextricably linked to survival, adaptation, and flourishing, even if its methodology and language of explanation diverge significantly from those of a controlled laboratory experiment. As Nigerian sociologist A. G. Adebayo notes in his study of Yoruba farmers, "the proof of the soil is in the harvest; this is the first and final test of a farmer's knowledge. Their calendar is not on the wall, but in the behavior of the iroko tree and the call of the bird."<sup>14</sup> This encapsulates a form of validation that is immediate, contextual, and inescapably verifiable through its consequences.

### **Memory, Oral Traditions, and Knowledge Transmission**

The oral tradition, so central to the preservation and transmission of African knowledge systems, is often misunderstood by literate societies as an unstable, unreliable, or informal medium prone to distortion and loss. In reality, it functions as a highly disciplined, sophisticated, and nuanced technology of memory and knowledge curation. Fabidun (2021) rightly highlights the "epistemic discipline" inherent in these practices.<sup>15</sup> Narratives, proverbs, songs, riddles, and even specific tonal patterns are not casually recounted; they are carefully encoded and transmitted through structured ceremonies, specific social contexts, and highly regulated performance traditions where designated elders, griots, and custodians act as living libraries and quality-control mechanisms, actively correcting deviations to maintain narrative, historical, and factual fidelity across generations.

This is not mere storytelling for entertainment or moral edification; it is the curated preservation, refinement, and critical engagement with social memory, an organized system for storing, retrieving, and debating complex knowledge about history, law, morality, cosmology, and technology. The work of Nigerian scholar C. Eze (2019) on Igbo oral poetics demonstrates how proverbs (ilu) serve as compressed epistemic units, carrying within them validated, time-tested judgments about human nature, social relations, and ethical conduct. Their truth is not merely propositional but is affirmed and re-affirmed by generations of practical application and contextual interpretation. The deliberate repetition, rhythmic structures, and ritualized performance are not signs of intellectual stagnation but are the very mnemonic and verificational mechanisms that ensure stability, accuracy, and relevance within a dynamic oral structure that values both continuity and adaptive interpretation.<sup>16</sup>

### **The Moral and Relational Nature of Knowing**

Perhaps one of the most distinctive and challenging features of African epistemology for those steeped in post-Enlightenment Western thought is its frequent and principled resistance to the modern separation of fact from value, of knowledge from morality and social consequence. To know something, in many African contexts, is to incur a profound responsibility towards the community, the ancestors, and the maintenance of the cosmic order. Emmanuel Eyo (2022) compellingly contends that knowledge which is acquired or used to harm the community, sow discord, exploit the vulnerable, or disrupt the foundational moral order can be judged as epistemically deficient or "false," regardless of its factual accuracy in a narrow, correspondent sense.<sup>17</sup> Truth is thus inherently intertwined with relational responsibility and ethical consequences.

A belief or piece of information is therefore valuable not only if it corresponds to an external reality but also, and crucially, if its application promotes harmony, justice, life, and communal flourishing. This ethical dimension acts as a vital, additional criterion for verification, one that is often conspicuously absent from positivist and purely instrumentalist structures. It introduces a teleological element into the epistemic process, where the end goal of knowledge is not just control, prediction, or technical mastery, but the maintenance, enhancement, and repair of life in community. This perspective is powerfully echoed in the work of A. Udefi (2020), who argues that in many Nigerian traditional societies, "knowledge without a moral compass is seen as a dangerous force, akin to a powerful weapon in the hands of a child. The wise person is not the one who knows the most, but the one who uses knowledge most responsibly for the good of all."<sup>18</sup>

### **Indigenous Knowledge Systems: Structure and Dynamics**

These foundational principles do not exist as abstract philosophical notions; they give rise to tangible, structured, and dynamic knowledge systems that actively govern and inform domains such as health, environmental management, governance, conflict resolution, and social relations. These systems represent centuries, sometimes millennia, of cumulative, tested, and refined intellectual engagement with specific ecological and social environments.

### **The Epistemic Role of Testimony and Authority**

As foreshadowed in the discussion of the communal conception of knowledge, testimony remains the central artery through which specialized knowledge circulates and is validated within indigenous systems. This is largely because knowledge is intrinsically dispersed and localized among various specialists, reflecting a sophisticated division of epistemic labour. The authority of the elder (archetype of historical, juridical, and moral wisdom), the herbalist (specialist in phytochemistry, diagnosis, and therapeutic practices), the blacksmith (master of metallurgy, pyrotechnology, and material science), or the rainmaker (expert in meteorological patterns, atmospheric physics, and local climatology) stems from recognized mastery, long-term commitment, practical success, and an unwavering moral standing within the community.

Janvid (2021) argues that this decentralized, trust-based model is not only rational but also highly efficient and robust.<sup>19</sup> It allows for a deep, context-specific specialization that would be impossible if every individual were expected to be a universal knower. Claims made by these experts are not accepted blindly or on faith; they are constantly evaluated through a multi-factor, real-world assessment that includes the speaker's established reputation, the internal and external consistency of their past actions and predictions, corroboration by the experiences of other community members or complementary specialists, and, ultimately, alignment with observed reality. This demonstrates that African epistemology contains rigorous, albeit socially-embedded and dialogical, mechanisms for peer review, critical scrutiny, and the cross-checking of information, ensuring that epistemic authority and reliability are continually performance-based and subject to communal validation.<sup>20</sup>

### **Indigenous Science and Ecological Knowledge**

What might be termed "indigenous science" comprises vast, cumulative, and systematic knowledge systems developed through millennia of intimate, observant, and pragmatic interaction with specific environments. African ecological knowledge is particularly rich, detailed, and sophisticated in areas such as sustainable soil management, drought prediction, water conservation, and biodiversity conservation. Malapane et al. (2024) show how rural communities in Southern Africa maintain and dynamically update a granular, nuanced understanding of how local ecological systems respond to variables like rainfall variability, specific pest behavior, and complex vegetation cycles.<sup>21</sup>

Their methods, which include sustained direct observation, the use of intricate seasonal calendars linked to phenological events (e.g., the flowering of specific trees indicating the onset of rains), and cultural rituals that reinforce ecological awareness and conservation ethics, are both systematic and inherently adaptive. The flexibility, responsive nature, and predictive capacity of this knowledge, its demonstrable capacity to solve concrete environmental problems and ensure food security, demonstrates a robust form of rational, evidence-based problem-solving that directly contradicts outdated and inaccurate portrayals of indigenous knowledge as static, anecdotal, or pre-scientific. In the Nigerian context, O. Ogunjimi (2023) documents how the Ijebu people's detailed classification of coastal ecosystems and mangrove species not only shows a remarkable alignment with Western botanical taxonomy but in some cases offers more nuanced, relational understandings of ecological interdependencies and sustainable harvesting practices that have maintained these ecosystems for generations.<sup>22</sup>

### **Indigenous Knowledge and Conflict Resolution**

The domain of conflict resolution offers a powerful and concrete illustration of how a distinctive epistemic structure translates into social practice and governance. In many African traditions, the primary goal of addressing a dispute is not necessarily to determine a single, objective juridical "truth" for the primary purpose of assigning blame and administering punishment, but to diagnose the underlying rupture in social relationships, restore harmony, and reintegrate all parties into the community. Dama (2021) explains how traditional peacemaking practices, from the gacaca courts of Rwanda to the council of elders in many Nigerian communities, utilize structured dialogue, restorative storytelling, acknowledgment of harm, and reconciliation rituals.<sup>23</sup>

This approach reflects a profound epistemic stance where "truth" is understood as relational, therapeutic, and co-created, aimed fundamentally at healing the social fabric and re-establishing a functional equilibrium. The process of conflict resolution itself is a form of social knowledge production, uncovering the underlying, often complex, causes of conflict and generating a shared, acceptable narrative that allows the community to move forward collectively.<sup>24</sup> It prioritizes the restoration of relational equilibrium and collective well-being over punitive, retributive justice, embodying the principle that knowing what happened is intrinsically linked to knowing how to heal and rebuild.<sup>25</sup> This stands in stark contrast to adversarial legal systems where establishing truth can sometimes further fracture relationships.

### **Epistemic Injustice and the Suppression of Indigenous Knowledge**

The historical and continued marginalization of these sophisticated, functional systems is not an accidental byproduct of history but a direct and intentional function of colonial power dynamics and the ongoing hegemony of Western knowledge production in the global academy, publishing, and policy circles. Abdi (2023) details how what philosopher Miranda Fricker termed "epistemic injustice" specifically testimonial injustice (where a speaker is granted less credibility due to identity prejudice) and hermeneutical injustice (where a community lacks the social resources to make its shared experiences intelligible) has been systematically perpetrated against African knowledge traditions.<sup>26</sup> Indigenous experts were dismissed as "witch doctors" or "superstitious elders," their knowledge re-categorized as "belief" or "culture" rather than as valid, rational understanding of the world.

Odora Hoppers (2007) convincingly shows that global academic systems, research methodologies, publishing models, and university curricula have historically privileged Western categories of thought, languages, and forms of evidence, creating a formidable, often invisible, barrier for indigenous knowledge to gain recognition as legitimate scholarship.<sup>27</sup> The consequence, as critically observed by Nigerian educational theorist P. Nwosu (2022) in her study of Nigerian secondary schools, is that many African students are subtly but powerfully taught to devalue the knowledge of their grandparents and home communities, internalizing a sense of inferiority about their own intellectual heritage a phenomenon she aptly terms "epistemic alienation."<sup>28</sup> Correcting these profound injustices requires more than just adding indigenous content to syllabi; it demands a deliberate and critical examination of the very architecture of knowledge: how it is classified, who controls the gates of academic discourse, what counts as legitimate evidence and rigorous reasoning, and how credibility is assigned.<sup>29</sup>

### **Assessing the Validity of Indigenous Knowledge Systems**

The central question of this article, the validity of IKS must therefore be approached with both philosophical rigor and epistemic humility. To avoid the trap of cultural and intellectual imperialism, the application of external, universalist criteria is insufficient and often misleading. Instead, this article argues that the validity of these systems must be primarily assessed using measures that are immanent to their own internal logic, objectives, historical development, and socio-ecological context.

### **Internal Coherence**

A primary indicator of a robust, sophisticated knowledge system is its internal coherence the extent to which its various principles, practices, and explanations form a consistent, non-contradictory, and interconnected whole. Indigenous knowledge systems, despite their diversity, consistently exhibit this characteristic when studied in depth. The principles governing herbal medicine, for instance from diagnosis based on holistic symptom clusters and aetiological theories to the preparation, application, and dosage of remedies follow identifiable, teachable, and consistent patterns that have been refined through communal application, debate, and refinement over centuries.<sup>30</sup> Fabidun notes that knowledge claims in these settings are not accepted on whim or authority alone; they are subjected to a rigorous process of repeated use, observation of outcomes, and collective verification across different practitioners, families, and situations. A remedy or a farming technique is only integrated into the canonical body of knowledge when it proves reliably effective and consistent with existing understanding across a range of contexts. This slow, demanding, real-world process of testing and integration establishes a strong internal coherence and logical consistency within the system, making it resilient and dependable for its users.

### **Pragmatic Effectiveness**

Perhaps the most compelling and difficult-to-dismiss measure of validity for any knowledge system whose primary aim is to navigate, understand, and interact successfully with the world is its sustained pragmatic effectiveness. Indigenous knowledge systems demonstrate their validity consistently and powerfully through their capacity to solve

real-world problems within their specific ecological and social contexts over long periods and African Traditional knowledge about roots and herbs is not left out.<sup>31</sup> A farming technique like inter-cropping that consistently reduces crop failure during unpredictable drought, a method of food preservation like fermentation that extends edibility without modern refrigeration, or an architectural practice that uses specific materials and spatial designs to naturally cool a home in a tropical climate all validate themselves through their successful, observable outcomes. This success is its own justification. It is a form of validation that is practical, tangible, and grounded in the imperatives of survival, health, and flourishing, providing a powerful argument for its truth-bearing capacity without needing to first translate its principles into the language and methodology of Western science. Its "proof" is in its enduring utility.

### **Contextual Rationality**

Mungwini (2017) powerfully emphasizes that rationality itself is not a monolithic, one-size-fits-all universal formula but is profoundly context-dependent and shaped by historical, social, and ecological factors.<sup>32</sup> The reasoning processes that are valued, cultivated, and deemed most reliable within a particular community such as communal deliberation, relational and analogical thinking, metaphorical reasoning, or deference to the accumulated experience of elders are rational within the structure of that community's social organization, historical experiences, and environmental challenges. To judge the epistemic practices of a communally-oriented society by the stringent standards of a hyper-individualized, post-Enlightenment rationality that prioritizes deductive logic and individual skepticism is to commit a category error and to misunderstand the nature of rationality itself. Contextual rationality does not mean a rejection of logic or evidence; rather, it is a recognition that the forms, applications, and social embodiments of logic are shaped by diverse human experiences. A decision reached through patient consensus after long, inclusive dialogue that considers multiple relational consequences is not "less rational" than an individual's swift deductive conclusion; it simply embodies a different, socially-attuned, and often more sustainable form of rationality.<sup>33</sup>

### **Compatibility with Global Knowledge Systems**

Finally, advocating for the intrinsic validity of IKS does not necessitate a retreat into epistemological isolationism or a blanket, uncritical rejection of other knowledge traditions. The most productive, intellectually honest, and pragmatic path forward is one of epistemic pluralism and dialogue. Indigenous knowledge systems are not, and have never been, entirely isolated. They have always interacted with other systems through trade, migration, and conflict, adapting and incorporating new information. Today, the potential for constructive, respectful dialogue is vast and urgently needed. Integrating the nuanced, long-term observational data and holistic management practices of indigenous ecological knowledge with the analytical and technological tools of modern environmental science can lead to more resilient, adaptive, and effective sustainability and conservation strategies. Combining the extensive pharmacopoeia and diagnostic insights of traditional medicine with the rigorous clinical testing protocols and biochemical analysis of biomedical research can open up new, fruitful avenues for therapeutic discovery and holistic healthcare.

This complementary, non-binary view acknowledges that different knowledge systems, born from different questions, histories, and experiences, can coexist, inform, critique, and enrich one another. The validity of one does not automatically invalidate the other. Instead, as suggestively argued by B. Okolo (2021) in his work on dialogue between knowledge systems, they can enter into a "dialogical partnership" where each retains its integrity, epistemological sovereignty, and distinctive strengths while contributing to a more comprehensive, humble, and effective understanding of a complex world.<sup>34</sup>

### **Conclusion**

This extended examination of African epistemology, with a particular focus on the structure, function, and validation of Indigenous Knowledge Systems, reveals them to be sophisticated, resilient, dynamic, and deeply grounded forms of intellectual engagement with the world. They are not static relics of a pre-modern past, but living, evolving, and practical traditions that continue to offer vital insights, solutions, and ethical structures for communities across the continent in the face of contemporary challenges. Their historical marginalization and ongoing struggle for recognition are a function of colonial legacies, global power imbalances, and persistent structures of epistemic injustice, not a reflection of any inherent intellectual deficiency or lack of rigor.

The argument presented here is that the validity of these systems is robustly demonstrated through multiple, internally-relevant and contextually-sensitive criteria: the internal coherence and consistency of their organized principles and practices; their sustained, demonstrable pragmatic effectiveness in ensuring survival, health, and flourishing; their embodiment of a contextual rationality that is well-suited to their social and environmental conditions; and their

proven potential for complementary, critical engagement with other knowledge traditions in a spirit of epistemic pluralism.

Looking forward, the task for scholars, educators, policymakers, and communities themselves is to move from theoretical recovery and defense to practical reintegration, application, and innovation. Future research must grapple with pressing, practical challenges: How can digital tools and platforms be sensitively and ethically leveraged to preserve and share oral traditions without stripping them of their performative, contextual, and interactive essence? What does a genuinely inclusive, decolonized school curriculum look like from primary to tertiary level that takes indigenous knowledge seriously, not as a folklore add-on or a topic for anthropology, but as a core, vital component of a relevant and empowering education? How can these rich epistemic resources be systematically and respectfully integrated into contemporary policy-making in critical areas such as climate change adaptation, public health, food security, and sustainable urban planning?

Furthermore, on a philosophical and theoretical level, scholars have only just begun to explore how indigenous epistemic categories, the relational self, the moral teleology of knowledge, communal verification, contextual rationality might actively contribute to, challenge, and reshape global philosophical debates in epistemology, ethics, philosophy of science, and political philosophy. Recognizing the full validity, intellectual power, and contemporary relevance of African epistemology is more than an act of historical reparations or cultural appreciation; it is a necessary, urgent step toward cultivating a more honest, diverse, capacious, and ultimately more human understanding of knowledge itself. The conversation, long suppressed and marginalized, is now vigorously and creatively finding its voice. It has much to teach us all.

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