

Odeshi And the Epistemology of Indigenous Security in Igbo Thought

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Doi <https://doi.org/10.55640/ijssll-05-12-09>

ABSTRACT

The question of what constitutes valid knowledge has remained a central concern in philosophy, particularly in the tension between Western epistemology and indigenous systems of knowing. Within Igbo thought, *Odeshi* represents an indigenous security practice through which knowledge of protection, vulnerability, and survival is generated and sustained. The problem addressed by this study is the persistent marginalization of *Odeshi* as superstition or irrational belief due to the dominance of Western scientific and epistemological standards that fail to account for indigenous modes of knowledge validation. Adopting a philosophical and analytical method grounded in Igbo epistemology, this study examines *Odeshi* through the lenses of experiential knowledge, communal testimony, embodied practice, and the performative power of *nommo*. The method involves a critical analysis of Igbo concepts of knowledge, force interaction, pragmatic rationality, and epistemic authority as articulated within indigenous philosophical discourse. The findings reveal that *Odeshi* functions as a coherent system of indigenous security knowledge whose validity is established through lived experience, communal regulation, and practical effectiveness rather than laboratory experimentation. The study further finds that *Odeshi* challenges scientific reductionism by demonstrating an alternative rationality oriented toward survival and communal well-being. The study concludes that recognizing *Odeshi* as a legitimate epistemic framework promotes epistemic justice and pluralism, and it recommends the inclusion of indigenous Igbo knowledge systems as meaningful contributors to global philosophical inquiry.

Keywords: *Odeshi*, Igbo Epistemology, *Nommo*, Indigenous Knowledge, Epistemic Justice.

INTRODUCTION

The question of what counts as knowledge remains one of the most contested issues in philosophy. While Western epistemology has historically privileged empiricism, rationalism, and scientific verification, such criteria have often been universalized in ways that exclude non-Western systems of knowing. Indigenous African knowledge traditions, in particular, have been persistently relegated to the margins under labels such as superstition, belief, or folklore.

Within Igbo thought, *Odeshi*- a metaphysical protective practice believed to render the body impervious to physical and spiritual harm- has been one of the most mischaracterized indigenous concepts. Critics frequently dismiss it for lacking laboratory verification or experimental repeatability (Igwe, 2024). However, such critiques fail to recognize that they are not neutral assessments but epistemic judgments rooted in a specific tradition of knowing.

This research argues that *Odeshi* should be approached not as a failed science but as an alternative epistemic system with its own sources of knowledge, standards of justification, and

modes of verification. When examined within Igbo epistemology, *Odeshi* emerges as a form of indigenous security knowledge grounded in lived experience, communal validation, and the epistemic power of *nommo*. The aim of this study is therefore to articulate the epistemological foundations of *Odeshi* and to challenge the assumption that Western science exhausts the meaning of knowledge.

Sources and Criteria of Knowledge in Igbo Epistemology

Igbo epistemology does not restrict knowledge to sensory perception or abstract reasoning alone. Rather, it recognizes multiple sources of knowing, including experience, revelation, intuition, ritual participation, and communal testimony. Knowledge (*amamihe* or *imara*) is understood as that which has proven reliable in sustaining life and maintaining cosmic balance.

Experience occupies a central place in this epistemology. What is known is what has been lived, tested, and affirmed

over time. Knowledge is therefore pragmatic and existential rather than purely theoretical. In matters of security and survival, epistemic validity is measured by effectiveness within concrete life situations.

Communal validation further strengthens epistemic authority. Knowledge is not private but shared, transmitted, and regulated by the community. Practices that consistently fail are abandoned, while those that endure gain epistemic legitimacy. *Odeshi* derives its authority from this communal epistemic process, rather than from isolated individual belief.

Knowledge and the Pragmatic Criterion of Truth in Igbo Epistemology

In Igbo thought, truth is inseparable from survival. Knowledge that does not sustain life lacks epistemic value. This pragmatic orientation contrasts with Western epistemology, which often prioritizes theoretical coherence or experimental abstraction. *Odeshi* fits squarely within this pragmatic framework. Its epistemic value lies not in explanatory theory but in its capacity to protect life. Testimonies of survival in warfare, vigilantism, and communal defence function as epistemic evidence within this system (Okeke & Anjorin, 2021). To dismiss such evidence as anecdotal is to misunderstand the epistemic criteria at work.

Nommo as Epistemic Agency and Performative Knowledge

A central pillar of Igbo epistemology- and of African epistemology more broadly- is the recognition that knowledge is not merely representational but performative. This performative dimension of knowledge is captured in the concept of *nommo*, understood as the power of the spoken word to bring about reality. In this context, *nommo* functions not only as an ontological force, but also as an epistemic agency through which knowledge is generated, transmitted, and validated.

Within Igbo thought, words are not neutral signs pointing to external realities; they are active participants in the constitution of meaning and truth. Speech, especially when ritually structured, produces effects that are epistemically significant. To speak correctly is to know correctly; to mis-speak is to mis-know. Knowledge is therefore inseparable from linguistic competence and ritual precision (Asante, 2011).

In the practice of *Odeshi*, *nommo* operates as a form of epistemic activation. The spoken invocations, prayers, and ritual utterances do not merely accompany the practice; they are integral to its epistemic status. Without *nommo*, *Odeshi* lacks intelligibility within Igbo knowledge systems. The spoken word articulates intention, aligns the knower with relevant forces, and establishes the conditions under which

protection becomes knowable as effective.

This challenges dominant Western epistemologies that treat language as descriptive rather than causal. In Igbo epistemology, language is a mode of knowing because it participates in the causal structure of reality. *Nommo* thus functions as an epistemic bridge between belief and verification, between intention and outcome.

Odeshi as Embodied and Experiential Knowledge

Another defining feature of Igbo epistemology is its emphasis on embodiment. Knowledge is not confined to abstract cognition but is lived through the body. What is known is what is enacted, endured, and experienced. This epistemic orientation stands in contrast to disembodied models of knowledge that prioritize detached observation. *Odeshi* exemplifies embodied knowledge. It is not known by theoretical description but by bodily participation. The initiate undergoes rituals, observes prohibitions, and experiences a transformed relation to vulnerability and danger. Knowledge of *Odeshi* is therefore inseparable from bodily awareness and existential transformation.

This embodiment does not weaken epistemic credibility; rather, it strengthens it within Igbo thought. The body is a site of verification. When the body resists harm, protection is not inferred but experienced. Such experiential confirmation constitutes epistemic justification within this framework. The demand for external measurement misunderstands the epistemic location of verification.

Moreover, embodied knowledge is cumulative. Repeated experiences across time and across individuals contribute to a shared epistemic reservoir. *Odeshi* persists as knowledge precisely because it is continually re-embodied and re-affirmed in lived contexts.

Testimony, Community and Epistemic Authority

Testimony occupies a central place in Igbo epistemology. Knowledge is rarely the possession of isolated individuals; it is communally generated, preserved, and transmitted. Elders, ritual specialists, and experienced practitioners function as epistemic authorities, not by virtue of formal certification but through demonstrated reliability over time.

Odeshi is sustained epistemically through testimonial networks. Accounts of protection, survival, and resilience circulate within the community, forming a collective epistemic memory. Such testimony is not accepted uncritically; it is evaluated against communal standards of plausibility, moral integrity, and consistency. Practices that fail to deliver expected outcomes are questioned, modified, or abandoned.

This communal regulation challenges the assumption that

testimony is inherently weak evidence. In many domains of human knowledge- including history, law, and medicine- testimony plays a crucial epistemic role. Igbo epistemology recognizes this and incorporates testimonial validation into its standards of justification.

Thus, *Odeshi's* epistemic authority does not rest on individual belief but on communal endorsement shaped by long-term experiential evaluation. This mode of justification, though different from scientific experimentation, is no less rigorous within its epistemic context.

Epistemic Rationality Beyond Scientific Reductionism

A persistent critique of *Odeshi* is that it fails to meet scientific standards of evidence. While this observation may be accurate within a narrow conception of science, it does not entail epistemic irrationality. Rationality itself is not monolithic; it is shaped by the goals, contexts, and presuppositions of different knowledge systems.

Igbo epistemology operates with a pragmatic rationality oriented toward survival, stability, and communal well-being. Knowledge is rational insofar as it reliably achieves these ends. *Odeshi* satisfies this criterion by functioning as a trusted means of protection within specific existential contexts.

Scientific rationality, by contrast, prioritizes generalizability, quantification, and repeatability. These criteria are valuable within their domain but are not exhaustive of all rational inquiry. The attempt to judge *Odeshi* exclusively by scientific standards therefore constitutes a category mistake. It conflates one epistemic framework with universal rationality. Recognizing this plurality of rationalities allows for a more inclusive philosophy of knowledge- one that acknowledges *Odeshi* as epistemically meaningful without forcing it into an alien methodological mold.

Phenomenon, Noumenon, and Epistemic Access in Igbo Philosophy

A recurrent objection to *Odeshi* arises from the claim that its alleged effects cannot be empirically observed or scientifically isolated. This objection presupposes an epistemology that equates knowledge exclusively with phenomena accessible to sensory observation. However, Igbo epistemology does not confine epistemic access to the phenomenal realm alone.

Drawing on a distinction analogous to the phenomenon-noumenon divide, Igbo thought recognizes that certain realities are not directly observable yet remain epistemically meaningful. The forces that animate reality are not always accessible to the senses, but their effects are discernible in experience. Knowledge, therefore, is often inferential and participatory rather than observational.

Odeshi exemplifies this epistemic structure. While the protective force itself is noumenal, its manifestations

(resistance to injury, survival in violent contexts, and transformation of vulnerability) are phenomenal. Epistemic access is thus indirect but not illusory. The inability to observe the force directly does not negate its knowability; it merely situates it within a different mode of epistemic engagement.

This approach aligns with broader human epistemic practices. Moral values, intentions, and consciousness itself are not empirically observable, yet they are widely accepted as objects of knowledge. *Odeshi* belongs to this class of realities that are known through their effects rather than their immediate appearance.

Odeshi and the Question of Science

The relationship between *Odeshi* and science is frequently framed as antagonistic, with science positioned as rational and *Odeshi* as unscientific. Such framing rests on a narrow conception of science as the sole arbiter of truth. While scientific knowledge is undeniably powerful within its domain, it does not exhaust the range of epistemically legitimate inquiries.

Science is characterized by specific methodological commitments: controlled experimentation, quantification, and predictive modelling. These commitments are suited to certain kinds of objects but are ill-equipped to address knowledge systems rooted in ritual, embodiment, and communal experience. The demand that *Odeshi* conform to scientific protocols therefore misconstrues its epistemic nature (Saturday Punch, 2018). Importantly, *Odeshi* is not anti-scientific. Rather, it occupies a different epistemic register. It addresses existential security within contexts where scientific infrastructure may be absent or insufficient. Its knowledge claims are local, situational, and pragmatic rather than universal and abstract. To judge *Odeshi* by scientific standards alone is to misunderstand both science and indigenous knowledge.

Colonialism and Epistemic Violence

The contemporary delegitimation of *Odeshi* cannot be divorced from the history of colonialism. Colonial rule did not merely restructure political and economic systems; it also imposed epistemic hierarchies that privileged Western knowledge while devaluing indigenous ways of knowing. This process constituted a form of epistemic violence.

Missionary activity and colonial education systems systematically portrayed indigenous practices as irrational, fetishistic, or demonic. *Odeshi*, along with other Igbo protective systems, was reinterpreted through foreign theological and scientific lenses that failed to grasp its epistemic foundations. The result was not epistemic

refutation but epistemic erasure.

This colonial legacy persists in contemporary critiques that dismiss *Odeshi* without engaging its epistemological logic. Such critiques reproduce colonial assumptions under the guise of modern rationality. Recognizing this history is essential for a fair assessment of *Odeshi* as a knowledge system.

Epistemic Limits, Fallibility, and Knowledge Revision

Another source of skepticism toward *Odeshi* concerns its perceived fallibility. Instances in which it appears to fail are often cited as evidence of epistemic unreliability. However, Igbo epistemology does not equate fallibility with falsehood. All human knowledge systems, including science, operate within limits and are subject to revision.

In Igbo thought, knowledge is dynamic rather than static. Practices are continually reassessed in light of experience. Failure prompts inquiry, modification, or abandonment. This openness to revision reflects epistemic maturity rather than irrationality. *Odeshi's* persistence across generations suggests that, despite limitations, it has demonstrated sufficient reliability within its intended contexts.

Moreover, epistemic fallibility is not unique to indigenous knowledge. Scientific theories are routinely revised or discarded in light of new evidence. The expectation that *Odeshi* be infallible imposes an unrealistic standard not applied elsewhere. Epistemic humility demands recognition that all knowledge claims are provisional.

Indigenous Security Knowledge in Igbo Worldview

Odeshi can be more accurately described as a form of indigenous security knowledge—knowledge developed to address concrete threats to life within specific cultural and environmental contexts. Such knowledge prioritizes effectiveness, adaptability, and communal coherence over universal abstraction.

Having examined the epistemological foundations of *Odeshi* (its reliance on *nommo*, embodied experience, communal testimony, and pragmatic rationality) it is now possible to characterize *Odeshi* more precisely as a form of *indigenous security knowledge*. Such knowledge emerges in response to concrete threats to life and is evaluated primarily by its capacity to sustain survival within specific contexts.

Indigenous security knowledge differs from modern security science in scope and method. While modern security systems aim at universal applicability and standardization, indigenous systems are context-sensitive, adaptive, and relational. *Odeshi* reflects this orientation by addressing threats that are simultaneously physical, spiritual, and social. Its epistemic legitimacy derives from effectiveness within these multidimensional contexts rather than from abstraction

(Ibrahim, 2023).

Importantly, indigenous security knowledge is not static. *Odeshi* practices exhibit internal mechanisms of refinement through experience, failure, and communal deliberation. This capacity for revision demonstrates epistemic rationality rather than blind traditionalism. The continued relevance of *Odeshi* across generations indicates that it functions as a living epistemic system rather than a relic of the past.

Epistemic Justice and the Recognition of Indigenous Knowledge

The marginalization of *Odeshi* illustrates a broader problem of epistemic injustice, wherein certain knowers and knowledge systems are systematically discredited due to cultural bias. Indigenous African epistemologies are often denied legitimacy not because they lack coherence, but because they do not conform to dominant Western standards of evidence.

Epistemic justice requires recognizing the plurality of knowledge systems and evaluating them according to their internal criteria and practical success. In the case of *Odeshi*, this means acknowledging experiential validation, communal testimony, and pragmatic efficacy as legitimate epistemic warrants. To insist exclusively on scientific verification is to impose an epistemic hierarchy that excludes alternative ways of knowing.

Affirming epistemic justice does not entail rejecting science. Rather, it calls for a dialogical approach in which different epistemologies coexist and inform one another. *Odeshi* contributes to this dialogue by offering insights into security, vulnerability, and survival that are grounded in lived experience and cultural continuity.

Toward Epistemic Pluralism in African Philosophy

Epistemic pluralism recognizes that different knowledge systems may coexist without being reducible to one another. Within this pluralistic framework, *Odeshi* does not compete with science but complements it by addressing dimensions of human security that science alone may not adequately capture. Affirming epistemic pluralism requires abandoning the assumption that Western epistemology represents a universal norm. Instead, it calls for dialogue among knowledge traditions, each evaluated according to its own criteria of success and coherence.

African philosophy stands to benefit significantly from embracing epistemic pluralism. Rather than positioning indigenous knowledge systems as inferior precursors to modern science, epistemic pluralism recognizes them as parallel and complementary traditions. *Odeshi* exemplifies

how indigenous epistemologies address existential questions that remain inadequately resolved by scientific approaches alone.

By articulating the epistemological logic of *Odeshi*, this research contributes to the broader project of recovering African intellectual traditions from epistemic marginalization. Such recovery enriches global philosophy by expanding the range of epistemic models through which human beings understand and secure their existence.

CONCLUSION

This research has argued that *Odeshi* constitutes a legitimate indigenous epistemic system within Igbo thought rather than a superstition or failed science. Grounded in *nommo*, embodied experience, communal testimony, and pragmatic rationality, *Odeshi* represents an alternative framework for knowing and securing human existence.

By situating *Odeshi* within Igbo epistemology, the research has demonstrated that critiques based solely on scientific verification overlook the epistemic diversity inherent in human knowledge. The persistence of *Odeshi* across generations attests to its epistemic viability within its cultural context.

In a global intellectual climate increasingly attentive to epistemic justice and pluralism, the philosophical rehabilitation of *Odeshi* affirms the value of indigenous African knowledge systems. Recognizing *Odeshi* as epistemically legitimate not only restores dignity to Igbo epistemology but also broadens the horizons of contemporary philosophy.

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