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Decolonising Relational Knowing: African Feminist Epistemology and the Reclamation of Women's Knowledge

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Abstract

African feminist epistemology emerges as a decolonial response to the historical marginalisation of women's knowledge on the continent. Colonial legacies and Western epistemological traditions, centred on the autonomous, abstract subject, have systematically erased indigenous knowledge systems and imposed individualistic frameworks that distort African women's relational ontologies. Through philosophical hermeneutics and conceptual analysis of African feminist and decolonial scholarship, the paper investigates how relational knowing can be reclaimed as a decolonial epistemological alternative. This article argues that knowledge in African contexts is fundamentally situated, relational, and ethically accountable. It is produced through communal ethics, dialogical identities, and lived experiences rather than detached certainty or universal reason. African feminist epistemology resists essentialism and standpoint homogenisation while reclaiming marginalised voices through plurality, testimonial justice, and the integration of indigenous practices such as griot storytelling and oral traditions. The article contributes to African epistemology and demonstrates that relational knowing empowers African women and advances a more inclusive, decolonised model of knowledge production that integrates diverse perspectives, ethical responsibility, and collaborative inquiry into broader epistemological discourse.

Keywords: African Feminist Epistemology, Decolonial Epistemology, Philosophy, Relational Ontology, Epistemic Injustice, Indigenous Epistemologies

Introduction

In a rural farming community in Imo State, Nigeria, a group of Igbo women elders gathers under the shade of a mango tree to share indigenous knowledge of yam cultivation, seed selection, and soil conservation practices that their mothers and grandmothers have transmitted orally for generations. This practice is deeply relational, linking the fertility of the land to communal ethics of reciprocity, kinship obligations within the umunna (extended family), and spiritual custodianship of Ala, the earth goddess. When agricultural extension officers arrive with "scientifically validated" hybrid varieties and chemical fertilisers promoted by government and international development programs, the women's testimony is politely noted but dismissed as outdated, superstitious, or insufficiently "evidence-based." Their expertise is sidelined in policy briefs and development reports, which instead privilege externally generated data. The women's voices are heard but not credited; their knowledge is rendered invisible. This everyday scene exemplifies testimonial injustice, in which the credibility deficit suffered by marginalised knowers systematically undermines their epistemic authority (Fricker 2007; Mabaso 2019; Poole 2020; von Maltitz & Bahta 2024). It is not merely a failure of inclusion; it is a structural erasure of African women's ways of knowing.

Such episodes are not isolated. Across the continent, and acutely in Nigeria, colonial legacies and the enduring hegemony of Western epistemological frameworks have produced a persistent devaluation of indigenous knowledge systems, particularly those embodied and transmitted by women. Western epistemology, from Plato's ideal of abstract reason through Descartes' cogito to contemporary analytic traditions, privileges the autonomous, disembodied subject who achieves certainty through detached, universal reasoning. Knowledge is construed as individual possession, objective and context-transcendent. This model, exported through colonial education systems and reinforced by postcolonial institutions, has systematically marginalised African relational ontologies, understandings of the self as constituted through interpersonal, communal, and ancestral relations rather than as a self-contained individual (Coetzee 2018; Janack n.d. Mama 2001, 2005; Nzegwu 1996). In many Nigerian (and

broader African) contexts, identity itself is often linguistically and culturally relational; many languages lack an exact equivalent for the Western term "identity," instead locating persons within webs of kinship, motherhood, and communal ethics. When Western categories of gender, individuality, and epistemic validity are imposed without regard for these ontologies, the result is not only epistemic violence but the active distortion of African women's lived realities (Oyewùmí 1997; Tamale 2024).

African feminist epistemology arises precisely as a decolonial intervention against this distortion. Drawing on the foundational insights of Oyèrónké Oyewùmí, Nkiru Nzegwu, Sylvia Tamale, Amina Mama, and Abeba Birhane, among others, it insists that knowledge is fundamentally situated, relational, and ethically accountable. Rather than seeking certainty through abstraction, it begins from lived experience, communal dialogue, and the ethical responsibilities that attach to knowing. It rejects the colonial erasure of indigenous epistemes and instead reclaims women's knowledge as transmitted through oral traditions, griot practices, storytelling, and everyday practices of care and land stewardship. In doing so, it challenges both the individualistic assumptions of Western philosophy and the essentializing tendencies sometimes found within global feminist theory itself. African feminist epistemology, therefore, is not merely additive to existing frameworks; it offers a relational, situated, and decolonial alternative that more adequately accounts for the complexity of African women's knowledge production, particularly as lived and articulated in Nigerian contexts.

This article develops that alternative. Section 2 examines the historical and colonial context that has shaped and distorted epistemological practices in Africa, showing how colonial education, museology, and the imposition of Western gender categories have marginalised relational ontologies. Section 3 reconstructs the dominant Western epistemological tradition and its feminist critiques, demonstrating both the value and the limitations of those critiques when applied to non-Western contexts. Section 4 articulates the core tenets of African feminist epistemology, situated knowledge, relational identity, epistemic responsibility, plurality, and dialogism, drawing primarily on the work of the theorists named above. Section 5 turns to concrete case studies of African feminist knowledge production, including oral traditions, decolonis-

ing movements such as the South African Fallist initiatives, and the integration of indigenous agricultural knowledge. Section 6 addresses major challenges and critiques, particularly accusations of essentialism, the limits of standpoint epistemology, and ongoing issues of testimonial and hermeneutical injustice, offering relational and dialogical responses. The article concludes by reflecting on the broader philosophical and practical implications of adopting a genuinely decolonised, relational model of knowing. Methodologically, the article proceeds by philosophical hermeneutics and conceptual analysis: canonical and contemporary texts in African feminist epistemology, decolonial theory, and Western feminist philosophy are read interpretively to reconstruct their underlying assumptions, identify tensions, and develop the alternative framework presented in Section 4. Where case study material is introduced (Section 5), it is treated as illustrative philosophical evidence rather than empirical data, selected to demonstrate the lived expression of the theoretical tenets argued for elsewhere.

By focusing on African women's epistemic contributions, this article seeks to do more than document marginalisation. It aims to demonstrate that African feminist epistemology constitutes a distinctive and philosophically robust contribution to global epistemology, one capable of enriching not only African philosophy but the discipline as a whole. In an era when decolonial thought increasingly demands that philosophy reckon with its Eurocentric inheritance, the relational turn proposed here offers a concrete path toward more inclusive, ethically grounded, and context-sensitive knowledge practices.

African Feminist Epistemology in Historical and Colonial Context

Western epistemology, grounded in the Cartesian cogito and the autonomous rational subject, presupposes an individual self whose knowledge claims derive their authority from detachment and universality. Colonial administrators and missionaries imported this ontology into Nigerian societies, where it clashed with, and sought to supplant, indigenous understandings of the self as inherently relational. As Amina Mama observes, many African languages, including those spoken in Igbo communities, lack a direct equivalent for the Western concept of "identity" (Mama 2001, 2005). Instead of a bounded, singular ego, persons are defined through qualifiers

of kinship, clan, and communal belonging; one is not an isolated "I" but a node in a web of umunna (extended family), ancestors, and living relations. This extends this insight to Igbo and Yoruba societies, showing how relational identity is anchored in motherhood and communal ethics rather than in the individuated subject (Nzegwu 1996; Olajubu 2004). Knowledge, in this ontology, is not privately possessed but co-constituted through interpersonal obligations and shared custodianship of the land and spirits. Colonial discourse, however, rendered such relationality invisible or primitive, replacing it with a hierarchical taxonomy that privileged the self-contained individual as the proper epistemic agent.

This ontological imposition was nowhere more visible than in the colonial construction of gender. Oyèrónké Oyewùmí has demonstrated, with particular force in the Yorùbá context (a framework that resonates across Nigerian societies), that the very category of "woman" as a biologically determined, socially subordinate class was largely a colonial invention (Oyewùmí 1997, 2016). Precolonial Igbo and Yorùbá social organisations did not organise power or knowledge primarily through a rigid male/female binary; seniority, lineage, and relational roles took precedence. Colonial administrators, missionaries, and anthropologists nevertheless imposed a "gender-saturated epistemology" that essentialised biological sex as the foundation of social hierarchy (Coetzee 2018). In Nigerian mission schools and administrative records, Igbo women were recast as dependent wives or domestic subjects, their former roles as custodians of oral knowledge, priestesses of Ala (the earth goddess), and participants in communal decision-making systematically diminished. The result was not merely social reordering but an epistemic one; women's knowledge, embedded in relational practices of seed selection, healing, and spiritual mediation, was disqualified as "superstition" because it refused the detached objectivity demanded by the colonial episteme.

Nowhere was this disqualification more systematically enforced than in the colonial education system. From the early twentieth century onward, British authorities in Nigeria established schools whose curriculum was explicitly designed to produce subjects fluent in Western epistemologies. Students, predominantly boys at first, later a limited number of girls, were compelled to internalise European history, geography, science, and ethics while their own oral traditions,

proverbs, and griot-like storytelling practices were relegated to the status of folklore. In Igboland, the missionary emphasis on literacy in English and biblical exegesis further severed young people from the intergenerational transmission of relational knowledge. Women's roles as primary transmitters of indigenous epistemes, through songs, proverbs, and ceremonial narratives, were actively undermined. As one colonial report noted, African knowledge was to be "improved" by replacing it with "scientific" methods; indigenous techniques of soil conservation or yam cultivation were dismissed precisely because they were relational, spiritual, and context-bound rather than abstract and universal (see also Mabaso (2019) on the broader African pattern). The epistemic hierarchy thus instituted was clear, such that only knowledge that mirrored the Western autonomous subject could claim legitimacy. Everything else was rendered pre-modern, feminine, or communal, and therefore epistemically deficient.

Museological practices compounded this violence. Colonial museums and ethnographic collections across Africa, including those feeding into European institutions and later local replicas in Nigeria, systematically exoticised African artefacts. Masks, textiles, and ritual objects that embodied relational ontologies, linking the living, the ancestors, and the land, were stripped of their contextual meaning and reclassified as "primitive art" or "ethnographic specimens." In Nigeria, artefacts connected to women's spiritual and knowledge practices (such as those associated with Ala worship or female age-grade societies) were often displayed to illustrate "tribal" backwardness rather than sophisticated systems of relational knowing (Mabaso 2019). This museological gaze did not merely misrepresent; it actively participated in the production of epistemic marginality. By removing objects from their living relational contexts and placing them under the classificatory gaze of Western science, colonial museology reinforced the idea that African knowledge was static, exotic, and ultimately inferior, incapable of contributing to "real" epistemology.

The cumulative effect of these practices, linguistic, educational, and museological, was to install coloniality as the very grammar of knowledge production. What counted as knowledge was no longer determined by communal ethics, lived experience, or dialogical accountability but by conformity to an imported ideal of abstract, individual certainty. African women's

epistemic contributions, deeply embedded in relational ontologies, were rendered not merely invisible but unthinkable within the new epistemic order. As Sylvia Tamale argues, this colonial distortion persists in postcolonial institutions, where Eurocentric methodologies continue to marginalise indigenous ways of knowing (Tamale 2024), and Gouws analyses how postmodern and post-colonial theories challenge feminist knowledge production, particularly within the South African context (Gouws 1996). It is against this backdrop that African feminist epistemology emerges not as a supplementary perspective but as a necessary decolonial corrective.

Theoretical Foundations: Western Traditions and Feminist Critiques

The colonial reconfiguration of knowledge in Nigeria, as traced in the previous section, did not occur in a philosophical vacuum. It drew its authority from a long Western epistemological tradition that privileges the autonomous, rational subject as the ideal knower. To appreciate why African feminist epistemology constitutes a genuine decolonial alternative, it is necessary first to reconstruct this tradition and then to examine the internal feminist critiques that have sought to unsettle it. While those critiques have been indispensable in exposing gender biases within Western epistemology, they ultimately remain tethered to the very individualistic framework they contest. Only by turning to African relational ontologies can epistemology move beyond critique toward a more adequate account of women's knowledge.

The Western autonomous-subject model has its roots in classical Greek philosophy and reaches its canonical expression in early modern thought. Plato's epistemology already establishes a hierarchy in which true knowledge (episteme) belongs to the realm of eternal, abstract Forms, accessible only through pure reason detached from the body, the senses, and the material world. In the *Republic*, the philosopher-king ascends from the cave of appearances to the sunlight of rational insight; opinion (doxa) grounded in lived, embodied experience is deemed inferior. This privileging of abstraction over situatedness sets the stage for a conception of the knower as a solitary, disembodied intellect. The model is radicalised in René Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641). Through methodical doubt, Descartes strips away all that is uncertain, senses, body, even the external world, until he arrives at the indubitable foundation:

cogito ergo sum. The self is an autonomous thinking substance (res cogitans), whose epistemic authority derives precisely from its capacity to doubt and to reason in isolation. Knowledge becomes individual certainty, objective and context-transcendent. The body, emotion, community, and tradition are relegated to the realm of the res extensa, mere extended matter of secondary importance.

This Cartesian legacy persists, albeit in modified form, in contemporary analytic epistemology. From the early twentieth century onward, the dominant paradigm has treated knowledge as justified true belief, with justification typically understood in internalist terms, where the individual knower must have accessible reasons or evidence. Even externalist accounts (such as reliabilism) retain the assumption that the epistemic subject is fundamentally an autonomous agent whose cognitive processes can be evaluated independently of social or cultural context. Objectivity remains the regulative ideal, where the knower is supposed to achieve a "view from nowhere," detached from personal history, embodiment, or communal location (Poole 2020). In the human sciences and development policy, precisely the arenas that shape Nigerian agricultural extension work, this model translates into demands for "evidence-based" knowledge that is replicable, quantifiable, and independent of the knower's situated perspective. The Imo State women's relational understanding of yam cultivation, tied to kinship, spiritual custodianship of Ala, and communal ethics, fails the test of this ideal because it refuses detachment. It is therefore classified as subjective, anecdotal, or pre-scientific.

Feminist philosophers have subjected this tradition to sustained critique, revealing how its ideals of rationality and objectivity are deeply gendered. Susan Bordo and Genevieve Lloyd, working in the 1980s and 1990s, demonstrated that Western epistemology is saturated with metaphors of masculinity (Bordo 1986, 1987, 1993; Lloyd 1984). Also, Gouws theorisation of feminism in the South reflects resistance against hegemonic thinking, the invention of new concepts, as well as new theorisation and hybrid theories that draw on the Northern theories at the same time as they disrupt them (Gouws 2022). From Plato's association of reason with the masculine soul to Descartes' portrayal of the mind as a heroic conqueror of doubt and the body, rationality is constructed in opposition to qualities culturally coded as feminine: emotion,

embodiment, relationality, and the concrete particular (Janack n.d. Poole 2020). Bordo argues that Cartesian objectivity is not gender-neutral but a flight from the feminine, specifically, from the maternal body and the interdependence it symbolises (Bordo 1986, 1987). Lloyd traces how the very concept of reason has historically excluded women by aligning them with the irrational or the merely bodily (Lloyd 1984). These critiques expose epistemology as a site of power: what counts as "good" knowledge has been shaped by patriarchal social relations, rendering women's epistemic contributions systematically undervalued.

Miranda Fricker's concept of epistemic injustice extends this analysis into the domain of credibility and hermeneutical resources. Testimonial injustice occurs when prejudice causes a hearer to deflate the credibility of a speaker's testimony; hermeneutical injustice arises when collective interpretive resources are structurally prejudiced, leaving marginalised groups without the conceptual tools to make sense of their own experiences (Fricker 2007). Also, Knowles experience with resisting and transforming the problematic conventions of knowledge-making has involved intellectual, emotional and political labour that requires more than identifying what must be changed (Knowles 2024). In the Nigerian context, the Imo State elders' testimony about indigenous seed practices is not merely ignored; it is rendered incredible because it emanates from knowers who are positioned as female, rural, and "traditional", categories that colonial and postcolonial epistemic hierarchies have already marked as deficient. Fricker's framework thus provides a powerful diagnostic tool for understanding why African women's knowledge is heard but not credited.

These feminist interventions have been transformative. They have shifted epistemology from an abstract, a priori enterprise to one attentive to power, embodiment, and social location. Standpoint theory and situated knowledge have further insisted that knowledge is always produced from a particular perspective, granting epistemic advantage to those who occupy marginalised positions (Anderson 1995; Poole 2020). Yet for all their insight, these critiques remain insufficient when applied to African contexts (Benya 2025). They operate largely within the horizon of Western individualism, even as they critique it. Bordo and Lloyd, for instance, challenge the masculine metaphors of the autonomous subject but do not fundamentally dis-

place the subject-centered framework itself; their analyses remain focused on reforming or expanding the Western canon. Fricker's epistemic injustice, while invaluable, still presupposes a model of knowers as relatively autonomous agents whose credibility can be adjusted within existing hermeneutical frameworks. It does not fully engage ontologies in which the self is constituted by relationality rather than merely situated within it.

African relational ontologies, exemplified in Igbo conceptions of personhood, where identity is inseparable from umunna, motherhood, and communal ethics, demand a deeper shift. As Oyèrónké Oyewùmí, Nkiru Nzegwu and Oyeronke Olajubu have shown, the very category of the autonomous individual is a colonial import that erases pre-existing ways of knowing rooted in interdependence (Nzegwu 1996; Olajubu 2004; Oyewùmí 1997). Western feminist critiques, valuable as they are, risk replicating the individualism they contest if they fail to take these non-Western relational frameworks seriously. They offer a necessary bridge, exposing the gendered violence of the autonomous-subject model, but they stop short of the full decolonial turn. African feminist epistemology crosses that bridge by recentering relational identity, situated lived experience, and ethical accountability not as supplements to Western theory but as its philosophical alternative.

Core Tenets of African Feminist Epistemology

Having reconstructed the Western autonomous-subject model and its feminist critiques, we now turn to the positive alternative offered by African feminist epistemology. This approach is not a mere extension or correction of Western frameworks; it constitutes a decolonial reconfiguration of knowledge itself. African feminist epistemology insists that knowledge is situated, relational, ethically accountable, and dialogically plural. These tenets are interdependent, where situated lived experience is always already relational; relationality demands ethical responsibility; and ethical responsibility is realised through collaborative plurality. Together they reclaim African women's epistemic authority, particularly in Nigerian contexts such as the Igbo communities of Imo State, where women's knowledge of yam cultivation, soil stewardship, and communal well-being has been systematically disqualified.

Situated and Lived Knowledge

A foundational tenet of African feminist epistemology is that all knowledge is situated knowledge, produced from and accountable to specific social, cultural, and material locations rather than from a purported "view from nowhere" (Anderson 1995; Poole 2020). Before elaborating this tenet and those that follow, a brief clarification is necessary. This article draws on two related but distinct concepts that are often treated interchangeably in the literature: relational ontology and relational epistemology. Relational ontology is a claim about the constitution of the self — the view that persons are not bounded, self-contained individuals but nodes in webs of kinship, communal obligation, and ancestral relation. Relational epistemology, by contrast, is a claim about how such selves come to know — the view that knowledge is co-produced through dialogue, ethical accountability, and communal validation rather than achieved in solitary reflection. The two are interdependent: because the self is constituted relationally (ontology), knowing is necessarily a relational achievement (epistemology). African feminist epistemology insists on both, and the four tenets developed below move between these registers in ways that reinforce each other. Unlike Western traditions that prize abstraction and universality, African feminist thinkers locate epistemic authority in lived experience. For Oyewùmí, this situatedness is not a limitation but an epistemic advantage, where African women's knowledge arises precisely from their embeddedness in everyday practices of care, agriculture, and spiritual mediation. In Imo State, the women elders' expertise in selecting drought-resistant yam varieties is not abstract data but knowledge forged through generations of direct interaction with the land, seasonal rhythms, and community needs. This knowledge is embodied and narrated, and transmitted through proverbs, songs, and ceremonial storytelling rather than through detached scientific reports. Mabaso describes this as "endarkened feminist epistemology", a praxis that drinks from "our own wells" of indigenous experience instead of seeking validation from external, often colonial, standards (Mabaso 2019). Lived experience here functions as both source and validator of knowledge. It establishes the knower's credibility not through formal credentials but through demonstrated participation in the community's life-world. Tamale extends this insight by arguing that decolonising knowledge production requires recentering such situated

narratives, which colonial education and policy frameworks have long dismissed as anecdotal or pre-scientific (Tamale 2024). The epistemic gain is twofold: situated knowledge resists the erasure of women's contributions and generates more accurate, context-sensitive accounts of reality. When the Imo State elders speak of soil fertility in relational terms, linking it to ancestral obligations and the earth goddess Ala, their testimony is not deficient; it is epistemically richer precisely because it refuses the fiction of detachment. African feminist epistemology, therefore, inverts the Western hierarchy: lived, situated experience is the starting point of rigorous inquiry, not its embarrassing remainder.

Relational Ontology and Communal Ethics

If situated knowledge emphasises where knowing occurs, relational ontology explains how the knower is constituted. African feminist epistemology rejects the autonomous Cartesian subject in favour of a fundamentally relational self. Oyewùmí's analysis of Yorùbá social organisation, applicable by analogy to Igbo and other Nigerian contexts, demonstrates that precolonial African societies did not prioritise a rigid gender binary or an individuated ego; instead, persons were defined through relational roles of seniority, lineage, and mutual obligation. Nkiru Nzegwu deepens this for Igbo society, anchoring relational identity in motherhood and communal ethics. The self is not a self-contained "I" but a node in a web of umunna (extended family), ancestors, and living kin. Knowledge, accordingly, is co-constituted through these relations rather than privately possessed. This relational ontology carries profound epistemic implications. Knowledge is not an individual achievement of certainty but an emergent property of interpersonal and intergenerational dialogue. In the yam fields of Imo State, the women's agricultural knowledge is inseparable from their roles as daughters, mothers, and custodians of Ala. To know the land is to stand in ethical relation to it and to the community that depends upon it. Tamale insists that this communal ethics must be recentered within decolonial epistemology, in which indigenous ways of knowing are inherently ethical because they bind knowers to one another and to the non-human world (Tamale 2024). Coloniality, by contrast, imposed an individualistic ontology that severed these ties, rendering relational knowledge in-

visible or "primitive." By reclaiming relationality, African feminist epistemology restores the ethical thickness that Western frameworks thin out. It shows that the autonomous subject is not a philosophical given but a colonial artefact; genuine knowledge production begins with the recognition that we know through and with others.

Epistemic Responsibility and Accountability

Relational ontology leads directly to the third tenet, which is the epistemic responsibility and accountability. Because knowledge is co-constituted within communities, knowers bear ethical obligations to those communities for the consequences of their claims. Mabaso frames this as "endarkened feminist epistemology as praxis," arguing that knowledge production in contexts of colonial lack must be accountable to the lived realities of marginalised women rather than to abstract standards of objectivity (Mabaso 2019). Tamale similarly insists that decolonising knowledge requires ethical reorientation, in which scholars and knowers answer to the communities whose epistemes they engage and refuse the colonial habit of extracting knowledge without reciprocity (Tamale 2024). This responsibility manifests in two ways. First, knowers must attend to the power dynamics that shape whose testimony counts. In the Nigerian agricultural context, extension officers who dismiss women's relational expertise fail this test; their "evidence-based" recommendations impose harm by undermining communal food security and cultural continuity. Second, epistemic accountability demands that knowledge claims remain open to communal scrutiny and revision. Unlike the Cartesian ideal of final certainty, African feminist epistemology treats knowledge as provisional and dialogically revisable. Oyewùmí's relational thinking exemplifies this, where, by refusing to impose Western gender categories, she holds her analysis accountable to Yorùbá (and by extension African) lived realities rather than to external theoretical fashions. Epistemic responsibility thus transforms epistemology from a quest for neutral truth into an ethical practice of care, care for persons, care for land, and care for the intergenerational transmission of knowledge.

Plurality, Collaboration, and Dialogism

The final tenet integrates the preceding three through plurality, collaboration, and dialogism. African feminist epistemology rejects both Western universalism and any essentialist notion of a singular "African women's standpoint." Instead, it insists on the irreducible plurality of perspectives and the necessity of collaborative knowledge production. Abeba Birhane's Afrofeminist dialogism provides a powerful philosophical articulation: knowledge emerges not from solitary reflection but from ongoing, embodied dialogue across difference (Birhane 2017). Dialogism here is not mere conversation but a relational practice that acknowledges the fragility and interdependence of all knowledge assemblies. Tamale operationalises this in her call for inter-paradigmatic dialogue between indigenous and Western systems (Tamale 2024), while Mabaso emphasises collaborative praxis that "drinks from our own wells" without isolating them from global exchange (Mabaso 2019). In practice, this means integrating griot storytelling, proverbs, and women's ceremonial knowledge with other epistemic resources, always under conditions of accountability. Plurality prevents homogenisation: the experiences of Imo State yam farmers are not identical to those of Yorùbá market women or South African activists, yet all participate in a shared relational ontology that resists colonial flattening. Collaboration, in turn, enriches validity. When multiple situated knowledges are brought into dialogical relation, the result is not relativism but a more robust, ethically grounded epistemology.

These four tenets, situatedness, relationality, responsibility, and dialogical plurality, form a coherent philosophical system. They do not supplement Western epistemology; they displace its individualistic core and offer a decolonial alternative better suited to African women's realities.

Case Studies and Applications

Let us examine two clusters of concrete cases drawn from African feminist knowledge production. First, the oral traditions and griot practices as epistemic methods, and second, contemporary decolonising movements such as the South African Fallist initiatives and the Institute for

Pan-African Thought and Conversation. These examples, drawn primarily from West African and broader continental contexts, illustrate how African women actively produce, transmit, and legitimate knowledge in ways that directly counter colonial epistemic hierarchies. Rather than treating these as mere cultural artefacts or educational tools, the analysis foregrounds their epistemic outcomes: they generate situated, relational, and accountable knowledge that expands what counts as valid inquiry.

Oral Traditions, Storytelling, and Griot Epistemology

In many West African societies, including Igbo communities in Nigeria, women have long served as primary custodians of knowledge through storytelling, proverbs, songs, and griot-like praise singing (Beckson 2020; Okeke 1996). These practices are not ancillary to "real" epistemology; they constitute a sophisticated epistemic system grounded in the tenets outlined above. Consider the role of Igbo women in Imo State who transmit agricultural knowledge through proverbs and folktales during communal gatherings. A traditional aphorism such as "The yam does not grow in isolation; it thrives in the embrace of the soil and the hands that tend it" encodes situated knowledge of soil ecology, seasonal cycles, and spiritual reciprocity with Ala. This is not abstract information but knowledge forged in lived, embodied practice, transmitted orally across generations and validated by its demonstrable success in sustaining communities (Okeke 1996). Nkiru Nzegwu's analysis of Igbo relational identity reveals the deeper epistemic structure at work. Griot-style praise singers and storytellers, often women in female age-grade societies or as mothers within the Umunna, do not merely recount history; they co-constitute communal memory through dialogical performance. The audience participates actively, correcting, elaborating, or affirming the narrative, thereby enacting relational ontology and epistemic responsibility. Knowledge emerges not from a solitary knower but from the ethical interplay of speaker and community. This process embodies accountability, in which a storyteller whose account distorts ancestral obligations or communal ethics faces immediate communal correction, ensuring that knowledge remains tethered to lived realities rather than detached certainty (Coetzee 2018; Olajubu 2004).

Philomina Steady and Bolanle Awe further emphasise that these oral forms preserve moral teachings and historical consciousness while simultaneously addressing gender imbalances within tradition (Falola & Aderinto 2011; of Ibadan 2023; Okeke 1996; Steady 1981). In Yorùbá and Igbo contexts, women's ceremonial beads and songs, analysed by Beckson as transformative feminist narratives, function as epistemic tools that recenter marginalised women's perspectives (Beckson 2020). By weaving personal testimony into collective storytelling, these practices resist testimonial injustice. They confer credibility precisely through relational embeddedness rather than through colonial credentials. Epistemically, the outcome is a plural, collaborative form of knowing that generates more robust accounts of social reality than individualistic Western models. Colonial education systems dismissed these as "folklore," yet they continue to produce knowledge that sustains food security, ethical governance, and cultural continuity in Imo State and beyond, demonstrating the superiority of situated, relational methods for context-specific problems.

Decolonising Movements and Inter-Paradigmatic Dialogue

Contemporary activist movements translate these traditional epistemic practices into institutional and political arenas, explicitly challenging colonial legacies. Sylvia Tamale highlights the South African "Fallist" movements (#RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall) as paradigmatic examples of decolonial knowledge production (Tamale 2024). Students and feminist activists occupied university spaces, demanding the removal of colonial symbols and the integration of indigenous epistemologies into curricula. These movements were not merely political; they were epistemic interventions. By insisting that African relational ontologies and lived experiences form legitimate starting points for inquiry, Fallists enacted Mabaso's "endarkened feminist epistemology" in praxis: they drank from their own wells, refusing to subordinate local knowledge to Eurocentric standards (Mabaso 2019; Tamale 2024).

A parallel initiative is the Institute for Pan-African Thought and Conversation at the University of Johannesburg, which facilitates structured dialogues between indigenous African knowledge systems and Western paradigms (Randriamaro 2024; Tamale 2024). Here, African

feminist scholars and community knowledge-holders, drawing on griot traditions of oral testimony, engage in dialogism to produce hybrid yet accountable knowledge. For instance, sessions on eco-feminism integrate women's relational understandings of land stewardship (echoing Imo State yam practices) with academic analysis, generating new concepts that neither essentialise "African tradition" nor replicate Western individualism. The epistemic outcome is inter-paradigmatic: knowledge is validated not by conformity to a single universal standard but through plural, collaborative scrutiny that honours ethical accountability to affected communities. These movements demonstrate the practical power of African feminist epistemology's tenets. Situated knowledge is elevated from the margins to the centre of curriculum reform; relational ontology underpins coalition-building across differences; epistemic responsibility ensures that decolonisation does not become another extractive project; and dialogism prevents homogenization by keeping multiple voices in tension.

Niger Delta Women's Epistemic Traditions

Feminist epistemology in Africa is further illuminated through the epistemic practices of women in the Niger Delta communities, particularly among the Ijaw, Ogoni, and Urhobo peoples. In these contexts, knowledge is deeply embedded in ecological interaction, communal labour, and resistance practices. Women in fishing and mangrove environments possess highly specialised, experience-based knowledge of tidal patterns, fish migration, and the sustainable use of wetland resources. This knowledge is not abstract but relational and adaptive, transmitted through intergenerational practices and collective engagement with the environment. Among Ijaw women, for example, the practice of communal fish preservation and distribution — governed by unwritten protocols of reciprocity and seasonal stewardship passed from mothers to daughters — constitutes a sophisticated relational epistemology of ecological care. Such knowledge encodes not only practical information about wetland ecology but also ethical obligations to kin, community, and the natural world: knowing what to take from the creeks is inseparable from knowing one's obligations to those who share them. This parallels the Imo State case in structure: just as the Igbo women elders' agricultural expertise is rendered incredible by colonial

extension frameworks, Ijaw women's ecological knowledge is routinely marginalised by state fisheries management regimes that privilege "scientific" data over relational, practice-based expertise (Darah 2005; Ojakorotu 2010).

Moreover, women's participation in oil-resistance movements, especially in Ogoni and Urhobo communities, represents a form of political and ethical knowledge production grounded in lived experience (Strutton 2015). The Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) and allied women's groups have long articulated a relational critique of extractivism: their testimonies about environmental destruction connect personal bereavement, communal memory, and land-based spiritual obligation in ways that no purely technical environmental impact assessment can capture. Urhobo women's organisations similarly deploy communal storytelling, market networks, and age-grade solidarity as epistemic resources through which alternative narratives of land rights and ecological integrity are preserved and transmitted (Ikelegbe 2001). Through protest, storytelling, and community mobilisation, these women articulate alternative epistemic frameworks that challenge dominant, extractivist narratives imposed by state and corporate actors. Their knowledge practices exemplify what feminist epistemology identifies as situated knowing and epistemic resistance, where marginalised actors not only generate knowledge but also contest the structures that delegitimise their voices. Incorporating Niger Delta women's epistemic traditions thus reinforces the argument that African feminist epistemology is inherently plural, context-sensitive, and grounded in lived realities. It demonstrates that knowledge production in Africa cannot be fully understood without recognising the ecological, political, and communal dimensions through which women actively shape and sustain their worlds.

In Nigeria, analogous efforts, such as feminist reclamation of Igbo oral archives and community-based agricultural knowledge projects, mirror these dynamics, showing that the relational turn is continent-wide rather than regionally confined (Salami forthcoming). Briefly, these epistemic practices also carry educational implications: by validating women's oral expertise and decolonial activism, they foster environments where girls and young women see their lived realities as legitimate sources of knowledge, contributing to broader empowerment cycles (Fo-

bellah forthcoming). Yet the primary philosophical yield is epistemic transformation. Oral traditions and decolonising movements do not merely preserve culture; they actively produce knowledge that is more accurate, just, and context-responsive than colonial alternatives. They reclaim epistemic authority for African women, demonstrating that relational, situated, and dialogical knowing is not a deficit but a strength. However, while these cases affirm the philosophical robustness of African feminist epistemology, they also invite scrutiny, where critics raise concerns about essentialism, the limits of standpoint theory, and persistent testimonial injustice.

Challenges, Critiques, and Responses

African feminist epistemology does not claim immunity from critique. On the contrary, its commitment to situatedness, relationality, and dialogism requires it to confront internal and external objections directly. Four persistent challenges drawn from the literature include the charge of essentialism and the attendant risk of homogenization; the limitations of standpoint epistemology; and the problem of testimonial injustice. Rather than defending the framework defensively, the responses developed here demonstrate that relational ontology and Birhane's Afrofeminist dialogism furnish the very resources needed to meet these objections, turning potential weaknesses into sites of philosophical refinement.

Essentialism and the Risk of Homogenisation

A recurrent criticism is that African feminist epistemology risks essentialising "African women's experience," thereby flattening the enormous diversity of cultural, ethnic, class, and regional realities across the continent (Mabaso 2019; Tamale 2024). Critics argue that invoking a shared relational ontology or communal ethics may inadvertently impose a singular narrative, much like the colonial frameworks it seeks to displace, overlooking, for instance, differences between Igbo yam farmers in Imo State, Yorùbá market women, or urban feminist activists in Johannesburg. The relational and dialogical response is straightforward: African feminist epistemology

explicitly rejects any fixed essence of womanhood. Oyèrónké Oyewùmí and Nkiru Nzegwu have long insisted that relational identity is not a uniform category but a dynamic, context-specific web of roles defined by seniority, lineage, and mutual obligation rather than biology or a universal "woman" (Nzegwu 1996; Oyewùmí 1997). Tamale reinforces this by calling for decolonisation that "re-centres Indigenous ways of knowing" without romanticising them as static or monolithic (Tamale 2024). Homogenization is avoided precisely because knowledge claims remain accountable to the concrete, plural lived experiences from which they arise. Mabaso's "endarkened feminist epistemology" further operationalises this by demanding that theory "drink from our own wells", local, specific wells, rather than from a generalised African reservoir (Mabaso 2019). Relationality, in short, is anti-essentialist by design; it treats identity as emergent in dialogue, not pregiven.

Limitations of Standpoint Epistemology

A second critique targets the apparent reliance on standpoint theory. Traditional standpoint epistemology, critics contend, presupposes a shared marginal position that grants automatic epistemic privilege, thereby oversimplifying identity and potentially silencing dissenting voices within marginalised groups (Mabaso 2019). In the African context, this could mean privileging certain rural or "traditional" women's perspectives while marginalising urban or diasporic ones, reproducing the very exclusions the framework seeks to overcome. African feminist epistemology sidesteps this pitfall by refusing a singular, static standpoint. Instead, it advances what Mabaso terms a praxis-oriented epistemology that is situated yet fluid. Standpoints here are multiple and relational: they emerge from specific locations (the yam field in Imo State, the griot performance, the Fallist occupation) and are held provisionally, subject to communal scrutiny. Nzegwu's Igbo relational ontology illustrates the point: there is no monolithic "Igbo woman's standpoint"; knowledge arises through the ongoing negotiation of roles within the umunna and across differences (Coetzee 2018). Dialogism, as Birhane articulates it, supplies the corrective mechanism. Knowledge assemblies are acknowledged as fragile and interdependent; they gain validity not through unassailable privilege but through sustained, embodied

dialogue that invites correction from the very margins they claim to represent (Birhane 2017). Thus, the framework does not inherit the homogenization problem of classical standpoint theory; it transforms standpoint into a relational practice of accountability.

Persistent Testimonial Injustice

Even within an explicitly decolonial framework, testimonial injustice remains a live danger. Dominant African feminist voices, often those with academic credentials or urban platforms, may still discredit the testimony of rural, non-literate, or differently positioned women, replicating the credibility deficits that colonial education and policy imposed (Mabaso 2019; Poole 2020). Critics rightly ask: if power relations persist, how does African feminist epistemology ensure that the most marginalised knowers are not once again sidelined? The response lies in the interdependence of relational ontology and epistemic responsibility. Because the self is constituted through relations, no knower stands outside the web of obligation. Tamale insists that decolonising knowledge production demands explicit accountability to the communities whose epistemes are engaged; scholars and activists must answer for the consequences of their claims (Tamale 2024). This accountability is enacted through dialogical practices: griot performances, community storytelling sessions, and inter-paradigmatic forums such as the Institute for Pan-African Thought and Conversation, all institutionalise mechanisms of correction. Birhane's dialogism further equips the framework to detect and remedy hermeneutical gaps in real time (Birhane 2017). When testimonial injustice appears when, for instance, extension officers dismiss Imo State elders' knowledge, the relational response is not to assert authority but to reopen dialogue under conditions of mutual vulnerability. Credibility is therefore conferred not by external credentials but by demonstrated participation in the ethical community of knowers. Testimonial injustice is not eradicated by fiat; it is continually diagnosed and repaired through the very relational practices that define the epistemology.

Relationality and Dialogism as Self-Corrective Resources

These responses are not ad hoc defences but flow directly from the framework's core tenets. Relational ontology dissolves essentialism by making identity emergent rather than given. Dialogism transforms standpoint into a plural, revisable practice and supplies the hermeneutical resources needed to combat testimonial injustice. Far from being vulnerable to the critiques levelled against it, African feminist epistemology contains within itself the philosophical tools for ongoing self-correction. It treats knowledge not as a finished product but as a living, ethically accountable process, one that remains open to the very plurality it celebrates. By addressing these challenges through relationality and dialogism, the framework demonstrates its philosophical maturity. It does not claim to have solved every epistemic injustice overnight; instead, it offers a method for continually confronting them. This self-reflexive capacity prepares the ground for the broader implications explored in the conclusion: a genuinely decolonised epistemology capable of enriching global philosophy while empowering the women whose knowledge has too long been rendered invisible.

Conclusion and Recommendation

African feminist epistemology, as developed in this article, offers a philosophically distinctive and decolonial alternative to the Western autonomous-subject model that has long dominated epistemology. By recentering situated lived experience, relational ontology, epistemic responsibility, and dialogical plurality, it displaces the fiction of the detached, universal knower with a framework that is ethically accountable to communities and responsive to context. It demonstrates that knowledge in African contexts, exemplified by Igbo women's relational stewardship of yam cultivation in Imo State, is not a deficient version of Western certainty but a richer, more adequate mode of knowing. It emerges through communal ethics, oral traditions, griot practices, and inter-paradigmatic dialogue rather than in isolation. The preceding sections have shown how colonial education, museology, and linguistic imposition erased these relational ontologies, how Western feminist critiques exposed gender biases yet remained tethered to

individualism, and how the core tenets, tested in case studies and refined through critique, generate situated, just, and transformative knowledge. African feminist epistemology is therefore not additive; it is reconstructive. It reclaims women's epistemic authority while furnishing philosophy with a more robust account of what knowing can be.

The philosophical implications are far-reaching. First, the framework dissolves the Cartesian hierarchy that privileges abstraction over embodiment and universality over situatedness. In its place, it installs relationality as the ground of epistemic validity: because the self is constituted through umunna, kinship, and communal obligations, knowledge claims are inherently dialogical and revisable. This shift addresses testimonial and hermeneutical injustice not by adjusting credibility within existing frameworks but by transforming the conditions under which credibility is conferred. Second, it enriches standpoint theory by rendering standpoints multiple, emergent, and accountable rather than singular or static, thereby avoiding essentialism and homogenization. Third, it expands the very concept of objectivity: genuine epistemic rigour arises not from detachment but from ethical accountability to affected communities. Global epistemology, long shaped by Eurocentric inheritance, gains from this a model capable of integrating diverse ontologies without reducing them to exotic data. In an era when decolonial thought demands that philosophy confront its colonial complicity, African feminist epistemology provides concrete philosophical resources for that reckoning.

On the practical level, these tenets translate directly into decolonising strategies across education, policy, and activism. In Nigerian contexts, validating women's oral epistemologies, through community storytelling sessions, griot performances, and the integration of indigenous agricultural knowledge into extension services, strengthens food security and cultural continuity while countering the testimonial injustice faced by Imo State elders. Educational initiatives that recenter relational pedagogies (drawing on Tamale's call for inter-paradigmatic dialogue) empower girls and young women by treating their lived realities as legitimate sources of knowledge rather than obstacles to "modern" learning. The ripple effects are well-documented: educated women who draw on relational ontologies become agents of intergenerational transmission, fostering healthier communities and more inclusive decision-making (Fobellah forthcom-

ing). Beyond education, the framework informs institutional reform, university curricula that incorporate Fallist-style decolonisation, museums that restore artefacts to living relational contexts, and policy processes that mandate dialogical accountability. These applications demonstrate that African feminist epistemology is not confined to theory; it equips practitioners to dismantle colonial epistemic hierarchies while building sustainable, community-rooted alternatives.

A genuinely decolonial, relational epistemology therefore offers global philosophy more than critique or inclusion. It offers a path toward epistemic humility and ethical maturity in an interconnected yet deeply unequal world. By insisting that knowledge is always co-constituted, always accountable, and always plural, it invites philosophers everywhere, regardless of location, to relinquish the fantasy of the solitary knower and embrace the harder, richer work of dialogue across difference. In doing so, it does not dilute philosophy's rigour; it deepens it. The women elders of Imo State, the griots of West Africa, and the Fallist activists of South Africa have already shown what such knowing looks like in practice. The task for philosophy now is to listen, to respond relationally, and to co-create a future in which no knowledge is rendered invisible. Only then can epistemology truly claim to have decolonised itself.

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