

Chapter 18

Science or Superstition? Unpacking the Onto- Epistemological Barriers of Legitimizing Ifá as an Alternative Scientific Knowledge in Nigerian Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

This chapter unravels the intersection of colonial legacies, epistemic injustices, and the marginalization of indigenous knowledge systems, specifically Ifá as a legitimate scientific epistemology within Nigerian higher education (HE). It appropriates Fricker's concepts of hermeneutical and testimonial injustice to explicate how Western epistemological frameworks and the influence of Abrahamic religions through colonization continue undermining Ifá's legitimacy as a scientific and epistemic system. In addition, it highlights Ifá's potential as a holistic knowledge system ringfencing cosmology, ethics, decision making, and probability and presents it as a viable alternative to Eurocentric scientific paradigms. The discussion, therefore, advocates for decolonizing science education with a sense of urgency, emphasizing the necessity of recognizing Ifá's potential to contribute to global knowledge and promote equity in epistemic representation.

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INTRODUCTION

By way of preamble, it is helpful to reflect on what science is and who defines it. Is knowledge considered science only when it aligns with Eurocentric empiricism, or should its practices be replicated? How do power dynamics and historical contexts shape what is recognized as valid scientific knowledge, and whose interests are served by these definitions? Who has the authority to frame what is deemed scientific, taboo, barbaric, or demonic? Should something be considered taboo, barbaric, or demonic if it follows a procedural approach or provides a space where the boundaries and logic of science can be reimaged? These inquiries prompt a critical engagement with the persistent erasure of Indigenous epistemologies for failing to conform to the hegemonic Western models of scientific legitimacy.

If science is the answer to all of mankind's sufferings (Maxwell, 1980), it cannot be caged nor tamed by a single worldview; it must embrace the diverse wisdom and knowledge systems that humanity has cultivated throughout history. This reflection naturally leads to the growing discourse on decolonizing knowledge systems, particularly those that have been historically marginalized. While most research has focused on advocating for decolonizing knowledge, justice for epistemicides and epistemic disobedience (Santos, 2015, 2018; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018; Mignolo, 2017; Quijano, 2007), this work contributed to this debate by specifically focusing on Ifá, a Yoruba onto-epistemology, as a lens to critique and challenge normative Eurocentric scientific epistemology in Nigerian Higher Education (HE). While "a majority of native Yoruba speakers and most people around the world regard Ifa as traditional religion... and nothing more than a religious and mythic discourse" (Oyebisi, 2019, p.21), this work will argue that Ifá, with its branches of knowledge, offers an alternative and legitimate scientific epistemology. Oyewumi (2016) describes Ifá as a system of knowledge transmitted orally and facilitates the retrieval of information on all aspects of Yoruba life. Oyebisi (2019) also considers Ifá to encompass Yoruba mythology, history, spirituality, and science and argues for its legitimacy as a comprehensive and authentic epistemology. However, it is important to note that this work does not aim to provide a comprehensive exposition of the practical workings of Ifá or its divinatory processes. Rather, its objective is to argue for Ifá's legitimacy as a valid scientific epistemology and to critically explore the colonial and religious systemic barriers that continue to obstruct its recognition and integration into formal scientific discourse within Nigerian HE.

Moreover, recent scholarly debates on decolonizing education have questioned what constitutes legitimate knowledge, advocating for the inclusion of Indigenous systems like Ifá (Oyewumi, 2016; Oyebisi, 2019; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). However, in Nigerian HE, founded on colonial structures, the decolonization of science education particularly remains a quiet whisper, often unheard. This study brings

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