ACADEMIC SCIENCE PRESS

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF SOCIETY, CULTURE AND HUMAN SCIENCES
ISSN: 3143-6463

Skepticism in Igbo Epistemology: Insights and Perspectives

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Igbo epistemology,
skepticism,
African philosophy,
Igwebuike,
communal knowledge.

Vol.01, **No**.04, 2026

https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.22788004

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines skepticism within Igbo epistemology, highlighting its indigenous roots, cultural significance, and philosophical contribution. While colonialism and modernity have shaped aspects of contemporary Igbo thought, skepticism is not their by-product; it is a strand inherent in Igbo philosophy that long predates these encounters. The central concern of this study is to clarify the distinct orientation of Igbo skepticism and to evaluate its place in global philosophical discourse. Methodologically, the paper employs a conceptual and comparative approach, drawing on Igbo oral traditions, proverbs, and the communitarian philosophy of *Igwebuike*, while engaging critically with Western skeptical traditions such as Pyrrhonism, Cartesian methodic doubt, and Humean empiricism. The analysis demonstrates that Igbo skepticism does not pursue abstract doubt or solitary certainty. Rather, it functions as a pragmatic and communal strategy for refining truth claims, ensuring social harmony, and preserving moral responsibility. The findings suggest that Igbo skepticism contributes to contemporary debates on knowledge, justification, and truth by offering a relational and constructive alternative to radical Western doubt. In bringing Igbo epistemology into dialogue with global thought, the paper asserts African philosophy's rightful place in shaping universal conversations on epistemology without need for external validation.

Introduction

Epistemology, as a branch of philosophy, concerns itself with the study of knowledge, its sources, scope, and justification. It asks what it means to know, how beliefs can be validated, and whether certainty is attainable. Within this inquiry, skepticism occupies a pivotal role. Broadly defined, skepticism is the disposition to question, doubt, or suspend judgment concerning truth-claims. Its function is twofold: it destabilises dogmatic certainties while simultaneously compelling the search for more rigorous justifications of knowledge.

In the Western tradition, skepticism has assumed diverse forms. The ancient Pyrrhonists, exemplified by Sextus Empiricus, cultivated the practice of *epoché*, the suspension of judgment, arguing that for every claim, an equally compelling counterclaim can be raised. This form of skepticism aimed less at discovering truth than at attaining tranquillity (*ataraxia*). In the modern era, René Descartes transformed skepticism into a methodological tool by systematically doubting all that could be called into question, from sensory experience to mathematics, until he discovered an indubitable foundation in the *cogito*. Later, David Hume radicalised the problem by showing that causal inference and inductive reasoning, central to science and common life, lack rational necessity and rest merely on habit. These Western variations reflect a common preoccupation with certainty, justification, and the limits of human reason.

While Igbo philosophy also engages with these epistemological concerns, skepticism within it emerges in distinctive ways. Unlike the solitary doubt of Descartes or the radical suspension of the Pyrrhonists, Igbo skepticism is rooted in communal life, oral tradition, and pragmatic verification. Its primary aim is not individual certainty but communal survival and moral order. Igbo proverbs and practices capture this disposition: *onye ajụjụ adịghị efu ụzọ* ("the one who asks questions does not miss the way") reveals a recognition that questioning is not destructive but constructive, it is an avenue to

clarity, wisdom, and guidance. Doubt here functions as a pathway to truth validated by communal consensus, lived experience, and cultural continuity.

It is important to clarify, as some misunderstandings persist, that skeptical tendencies in Igbo thought are not inventions of colonial encounters or modern dislocations. They are deeply embedded within the historical consciousness of the people. Colonialism and modernity may have enriched or sharpened Igbo skepticism in response to cultural alienation, but the roots of doubt, critical reflection, and inquiry existed long before such external forces. This recognition challenges any narrative that frames African philosophy as merely reactive or derivative. Rather, Igbo epistemology demonstrates an indigenous tradition of questioning and testing knowledge, one that has always been integral to its cultural and intellectual life.

By situating Igbo skepticism in dialogue with Western skepticism, this paper highlights both convergences and divergences. Like their Western counterparts, the Igbo recognise the fallibility of human knowledge and the necessity of critical inquiry. Yet, unlike Western traditions that often isolate the individual knower, Igbo thought embeds skepticism within communal dialogue and practical wisdom. This contrast opens new philosophical possibilities for rethinking universal assumptions about knowledge, doubt, and truth.

The discussion that follows begins by examining the conceptual foundations of Igbo epistemology, with attention to its communal orientation and oral sources. It then turns to the nature of skepticism in Igbo thought, before proceeding to a comparative analysis with Western forms. The paper concludes by reflecting on the broader implications of skepticism for contemporary epistemological debates and for the preservation of indigenous knowledge systems.

Historical Roots of Igbo Skepticism

The origins of Igbo skepticism cannot be properly understood without first engaging with the wider foundations of Igbo epistemology. Knowledge in the Igbo world is not an abstract or detached enterprise but is deeply enmeshed in lived experience, cultural practices, and social relations (Iroegbu, 1995). Epistemology, in this context, is concerned with the processes through which truth is validated within community life and how human beings navigate uncertainty in order to preserve harmony. Unlike Western traditions that often present epistemology in strictly theoretical terms (Stroud, 1984), Igbo thought treats it as practical and life-oriented, woven into the dynamics of survival, morality, and spirituality. The skeptical impulse in this system arises not as a denial of knowledge but as an inbuilt mechanism of testing, questioning, and verifying claims before they are accepted (Asouzu, 2004).

One of the primary sources of Igbo epistemology is oral tradition. Proverbs, folktales, riddles, and songs carry the accumulated wisdom of generations, and they encode both affirmations of knowledge and cautions against credulity. Many Igbo proverbs carry skeptical undertones, urging listeners to question appearances and probe deeper into reality. For instance, the saying *ihe di n'iru ka e ji ama onye ga-eso mmadụ* ("one must look at what lies ahead before deciding whom to follow") underscores the need for critical judgment rather than blind acceptance. Oral traditions thus foster a culture of reflection and interrogation, ensuring that knowledge is not received uncritically but subjected to collective evaluation (Achebe, 1975; Edeh, 1985).

Communal deliberation constitutes another foundational source of Igbo epistemology, and it also provides a fertile ground for skepticism. In traditional settings, questions of truth and justice are seldom resolved by solitary individuals but by councils of elders, titled men, or village assemblies (Nwoga, 1984). Such gatherings embody the principle of *Igwebuike*, that unity and strength arise from collective reasoning (Asouzu, 2007). Doubt in this setting is not a destructive force but a socially sanctioned stage in the process of validation. Disagreements are expected, and skepticism toward one person's claim is balanced by counterclaims until consensus is achieved. This emphasis on communal reasoning contrasts

with the Cartesian model of solitary doubt (Descartes, 1996), but it illustrates a robust skeptical disposition that resists premature closure and demands public accountability.

Religion and spirituality also inform the epistemic practices of the Igbo. The recognition of *Chukwu* (the Supreme Being), alongside the veneration of ancestors and deities, places human knowledge within a larger metaphysical order (Mbiti, 1990). Yet, even within this spiritual context, skepticism is evident. Divinatory practices such as consultation with the *dibịa* (diviner-healer) are not accepted at face value but are often cross-checked by multiple sources (Onwubiko, 1991). A diviner's pronouncement may be subjected to further inquiry, and outcomes are interpreted communally rather than privately. This dynamic reveals a profound awareness of the fallibility of human mediators of the divine and a consequent reliance on corroborative processes. Far from encouraging uncritical submission, religion in the Igbo context functions as another sphere where questioning and discernment play vital roles (Uchegbue, 2019).

Another dimension of Igbo epistemology that nurtures skepticism is the place of experience as a guide to truth. Observation of natural events, patterns of seasons, agricultural cycles, and human behaviour forms a strong basis for empirical knowledge (Gyekye, 1997). However, the Igbo are aware that appearances can mislead, and this awareness generates a cautious attitude toward generalisation. Proverbs such as *a hụ anụmanụ n'egwuregwu anaghị atụ ya egwu* ("seeing an animal playing does not mean it is harmless") express this epistemic caution. Experience must be interpreted carefully, often with reference to communal wisdom and precedent. In this way, the Igbo harmonise empirical knowledge with skeptical vigilance, ensuring that conclusions are grounded yet always open to further examination (Iroegbu, 1995; Okere, 1983).

The political organisation of Igbo society also reflects skeptical tendencies. Being largely acephalous and decentralised, the Igbo operated through systems of checks and balances where authority was diffused rather than concentrated (Isichei, 1976). This social arrangement cultivated habits of questioning leadership and preventing the absolute dominance of any one individual. Within the village assembly, for instance, no decision was considered binding until it had undergone rigorous debate. Skepticism thus became institutionalised in political life as a safeguard against authoritarianism and a guarantor of fairness (Afigbo, 1981). It also reinforced the view that truth and justice are best approached through open deliberation rather than imposed by decree.

Historical encounters further sharpened Igbo skepticism, especially in relation to external influences. The coming of colonialism, Christian missions, and modern education introduced new truth-claims that were not automatically embraced. Instead, they were filtered through indigenous critical lenses (Edeh, 1985; Nwala, 1985). Colonial epistemologies often dismissed Igbo ways of knowing as "primitive" or "superstitious" (Wiredu, 1996), but Igbo thinkers and communities responded by interrogating both their own traditions and the imposed Western paradigms. This dual critique enriched Igbo skepticism, giving it a renewed role in negotiating identity and preserving cultural integrity amid pressures of modernity. Nevertheless, it is crucial to affirm, against reductionist narratives, that such skepticism did not originate in colonial encounters; it predates them, embedded in the indigenous structures of oral reasoning, communal deliberation, and practical life (Asouzu, 2004; Gyekye, 1997). Colonialism merely provided new arenas for its expression and development.

Taken together, these sources: oral tradition, communal deliberation, spirituality, experiential knowledge, political structures, and historical encounters demonstrate that skepticism has always been integral to Igbo epistemology. Its historical roots are not external impositions but internal dispositions toward questioning, testing, and verifying knowledge in order to ensure harmony and survival. In this sense, Igbo skepticism should not be seen as an anomaly within African thought but as an essential intellectual strategy that aligns with the broader human quest for truth. It preserves a balance between

openness to new insights and caution against error, thereby sustaining the dynamic and adaptive character of Igbo philosophy (Iroegbu, 1995; Asouzu, 2004).

In summary, the historical roots of Igbo epistemology reveal that skepticism is not identical with epistemology but constitutes one of its core dimensions. Epistemology, broadly understood, is the inquiry into the nature, sources, and limits of knowledge, while skepticism is the methodological practice of questioning or doubting knowledge claims in order to authenticate them. In the Igbo context, skepticism did not manifest as radical, universal doubt in the Cartesian sense, but rather as a pragmatic and culturally embedded mode of inquiry. Igbo thought consistently displays a methodical disposition to suspend judgment until knowledge claims are confirmed, whether through communal corroboration, empirical observation, or divinatory procedures.

This is evident in everyday practices and proverbs: the saying *agwo o fu onye huru na-awo eke* ("the snake seen by one person turns out to be a python") stresses the need for corroboration before accepting a claim; and *Ndi Igbo si na a huru n'anya ka a nuru n'anti* ("seeing is better than hearing") highlights the primacy of empirical confirmation over hearsay. Such instances illustrate that the Igbo entertain doubt not gratuitously but for the sake of authenticating truth.

Colonial disruption further sharpened this epistemic disposition, transforming skepticism into a tool of survival and cultural resistance. Thus, while Igbo epistemology cannot be reduced to skepticism, skepticism remains one of its defining orientations anchored in cosmology, oral tradition, communal reasoning, and pragmatic verification. This approach underscores an enduring Igbo awareness of both the limits of individual knowledge and the necessity of communal validation in the pursuit of truth.

Theoretical Structures: Hermeneutics, Complementarity and Ezumezu Logic

To situate skepticism in Igbo epistemology within a broader philosophical discourse, it is necessary to employ theoretical structures that can adequately interpret indigenous thought without reducing it to Western categories. Three frameworks prove particularly illuminating: hermeneutics, the principle of complementarity, and Ezumezu logic. These provide interpretive, ontological, and logical tools for understanding how skepticism functions in Igbo philosophy and how it contributes to global epistemology.

First, hermeneutics, the art of interpretation, has been central to modern philosophy since the works of Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer. Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, in particular, emphasises that understanding is always historically situated and mediated by cultural horizons (Gadamer, 2004). Applied to Igbo epistemology, hermeneutics highlights the importance of interpreting oral traditions, proverbs, and rituals not as mere folklore but as bearers of philosophical meaning.

For example, Igbo proverbs such as *eziokwu bụ ndụ* ("truth is life") are not merely moral aphorisms but embody epistemic claims about the relationship between truth, existence, and community. A hermeneutical approach insists on listening to such expressions within their cultural horizon while also engaging them in dialogue with broader philosophical traditions. This allows skepticism in Igbo thought to be understood not as radical doubt but as interpretive vigilance, an openness to questioning and reinterpreting knowledge claims within communal discourse.

Beyond proverbs, other cultural forms also function as loci of epistemic and skeptical reflection. Dreams, for instance, can elicit a skeptical response: a person who experiences a troubling or revelatory dream may withhold full assent to an already accepted claim until further confirmation is sought. Here, dreams act both as sources of knowledge (epistemology) and as invitations to suspend judgment (skepticism) until clarity emerges. Similarly, laughter is not merely a social gesture but a knowledge-genre; in many contexts, laughter signals disbelief, irony, or the demand for deeper inquiry into the matter at hand.

Silence, too, plays an important role. In Igbo settings, silence does not always indicate agreement; it may instead express doubt, hesitation, or the need for further evidence. A hermeneutical reading of silence reveals its skeptical dimension: it creates space for reconsideration and for communal dialogue to test the truth of a claim. Likewise, body language, gestures of incredulity, raised brows, avoidance of eye contact can signal the withholding of assent and a desire for further verification.

This pragmatic skepticism is further illuminated by Igbo sayings. *Anaghị ebu amụma ọnụ* ("prophecy is not carried in the mouth alone") underscores the principle that claims must be substantiated rather than accepted at face value. In the same vein, *Onye ma eziokwu ga-asị ya* ("the one who knows the truth should say it") emphasizes the communal duty to clarify doubtful situations and correct misleading claims. Equally, *Ihe a hụ na anya ka na-edu mmadụ* ("what one sees with the eyes guides him") privileges direct experience and observation over hearsay, reflecting an epistemic posture that withholds assent until empirical confirmation is attained.

Taken together, these proverbs and practices demonstrate that Igbo skepticism is not an abstract philosophical posture but a lived, embodied hermeneutic. It is encoded in language, gestures, dreams, and silences, all of which function as checks against premature closure of inquiry. Within this framework, skepticism is not destructive doubt but a communal ethic of interpretive vigilance that safeguards truth as life-giving and socially binding.

Second, Innocent Asouzu's principle of complementarity (*Ibuanyidanda*) offers another lens for situating Igbo skepticism. Complementarity posits that reality is constituted by interdependent parts whose meaning emerges only in relation to the whole (Asouzu, 2007). This ontology challenges exclusivist or absolutist epistemologies, insisting instead on dialogue, interconnection, and mutual enrichment.

Skepticism in Igbo epistemology resonates with this structure, as doubt is not aimed at destroying claims but at situating them within communal affirmation. A claim made by a diviner, elder, or sage only acquires legitimacy when complemented by communal validation and experiential coherence. In this sense, Igbo skepticism is constructive: it calls for the complementarity of voices, experiences, and traditions in the production of truth.

This principle also informs global epistemology. Just as Western skepticism emphasises methodological doubt and scientific rigor, Igbo skepticism insists on communal verification and pragmatic utility. When brought together, they complement rather than negate each other, offering a pluralistic model of knowledge that resists epistemic hegemony.

Third, Jonathan Chimakonam's Ezumezu logic further expands the theoretical resources for interpreting Igbo skepticism. Unlike Aristotelian bivalent logic, which operates on the law of the excluded middle, Ezumezu logic is a three-valued system that accommodates complementarity, contextuality, and the possibility of truth being both-and rather than either-or (Chimakonam, 2019).

In Igbo epistemology, this logic is implicitly at work in the communal handling of knowledge claims. A statement may be "true" within a ritual or symbolic framework and yet "false" in a purely empirical sense. Ezumezu logic captures this complexity by recognising that truth is often relational and context-dependent. For instance, the diviner's claim may be considered valid within spiritual practice while requiring further validation in pragmatic communal life.

This logical framework also helps to reinterpret skepticism in Igbo thought. Instead of viewing skepticism as absolute negation, Ezumezu logic positions it as a mediating function a space where claims are interrogated, refined, and re-situated between affirmation and negation. In this way, skepticism becomes a dynamic process rather than a fixed stance, enabling Igbo epistemology to navigate uncertainty without collapsing into relativism.

Taken together, hermeneutics, complementarity, and Ezumezu logic demonstrate the depth and sophistication of African philosophical resources. Hermeneutics offers interpretive sensitivity, complementarity ensures ontological interconnectedness, and Ezumezu logic provides a formal model for contextual truth. These platforms enable a richer appreciation of skepticism in Igbo epistemology, showing that it is not merely derivative of Western traditions but a distinctive mode of inquiry rooted in African cultural and philosophical contexts.

Moreover, the integration of these principles has global significance. Hermeneutics resists cultural reductionism, complementarity fosters cross-epistemic dialogue, and Ezumezu logic challenges rigid binaries in logic and truth. Together, they position Igbo skepticism as a critical resource for global philosophy, contributing fresh perspectives to debates on truth, justification, and knowledge.

Social Analysis of the Practical Implications of Skepticism

Skepticism in Igbo epistemology is not confined to abstract theorisation; it is woven into the lived realities of community life. Its constructive orientation manifests in practical domains such as public health, moral reasoning, and governance. By interrogating knowledge claims and demanding communal validation, Igbo skepticism becomes a tool for ensuring accountability, preventing dogmatism, and sustaining collective well-being.

In the realm of public health, skepticism plays a vital role in mediating between African Traditional Medicine (ATM) and biomedical systems. Within Igbo society, knowledge about health is plural, deriving from herbalists, diviners, elders, and biomedical practitioners. Skepticism ensures that no single source of medical authority is accepted uncritically. Patients and communities often test the efficacy of herbal remedies, cross-check divinatory insights with communal wisdom, and weigh biomedical prescriptions against cultural experience.

For example, before a herbal preparation gains wider acceptance, its effectiveness is often confirmed through repeated communal usage and pragmatic outcomes. Proverbs such as *onyeruruogwu, o gaamaọgwụọma* ("he who has tried a medicine knows if it is good") reflect this cautious yet pragmatic epistemology. In contemporary contexts, this skeptical attitude can be harnessed to foster dialogue between biomedical practitioners and traditional healers, creating integrative healthcare systems that combine empirical validation with cultural trust (Agwu, 2020). Skepticism, therefore, becomes a safeguard against harmful practices while also affirming the epistemic legitimacy of indigenous health knowledge.

More so, skepticism also informs Igbo moral philosophy. Moral norms are not assumed as immutable absolutes but are open to deliberation and contextual interpretation. When faced with moral dilemmas such as conflicts between loyalty to kin and fairness to strangers, skeptical questioning helps prevent rigid dogmatism. It ensures that moral claims are evaluated in light of communal well-being (*mmammadụnile*) and situational appropriateness.

This approach aligns with Kwame Gyekye's (1997) emphasis on moderate communitarianism, where individual rights are balanced with communal obligations. Skepticism safeguards against authoritarian moral impositions by demanding justification, dialogue, and consensus. It also resonates with contemporary African bioethics, where scholars like Caesar Atuire (2022) advocate for "bottom-up" ethical frameworks rooted in community dialogue. In this sense, skepticism is not moral relativism but a structured humility that preserves moral accountability while adapting to contextual realities.

Again, in governance, Igbo skepticism functions as a mechanism of accountability. Traditional Igbo society is often described as acephalous (without centralised kingship), relying instead on councils of elders, age grades, and village assemblies. Decision-making was characteristically dialogical, and claims to authority were subjected to communal scrutiny (Afigbo, 1981). This political culture embodied a skeptical stance toward unchecked power.

Even where titled leaders (*ndiichie*) existed, their authority was continually tested by communal participation and resistance to autocracy. The proverb *igwebuike* ("the people are strength") underscores this epistemic humility in politics: no single authority can monopolise truth or decision-making. In contemporary governance, this ethos has implications for democratic accountability. Skepticism encourages citizens to question political rhetoric, demand transparency, and verify policy claims. It fosters resilience against authoritarianism, corruption, and misinformation.

Moreover, when applied to modern governance, Igbo skepticism suggests that policies must undergo rigorous communal dialogue before being accepted. Just as herbal remedies are validated through repeated pragmatic success, policies must be tested against the lived experiences of communities. This skeptical orientation thus becomes a democratic resource, ensuring that governance remains participatory, accountable, and responsive.

The practical implications of Igbo skepticism highlight its enduring relevance. In public health, it fosters culturally sensitive yet empirically rigorous medical pluralism. In ethics, it safeguards moral reflection against absolutism while promoting communal responsibility. In governance, it underpins traditions of accountability and participatory democracy. Far from being destructive, Igbo skepticism emerges as a positive cultural resource, an epistemic disposition that sustains critical vigilance, nurtures trust, and grounds truth in lived communal experience.

By applying skepticism constructively, Igbo philosophy demonstrates that epistemic doubt need not paralyse action. Instead, it sharpens discernment, enriches dialogue, and ensures that health, morality, and governance remain rooted in the realities and aspirations of the people.

Understanding Igbo Epistemology

At the heart of Igbo philosophy is Igwebuike, a concept that literally means "there is strength in unity." In epistemological terms, Igwebuike posits that knowledge is not produced in isolation but emerges from the relationality of persons within their community (Asouzu, 2007). Unlike the Cartesian image of the solitary thinker, Igwebuike underscores that truth is accessible only within a communal and contextual framework. This orientation decolonizes epistemology by resisting the imposition of universalist Western categories and affirming African modes of thought as legitimate systems of knowledge (Chimakonam, 2018).

The Igbo adage otuonyeanaghiazuama ("one person does not make a community") illustrates how knowledge validation is inherently communal. Truth claims are tested not by solitary introspection but by their coherence with communal experience, ancestral wisdom, and intersubjective verification (Wiredu, 1998). In this sense, Igbo epistemology embodies what Oruka (1990) called "philosophic sagacity" which is the wisdom of the elders that is refined and validated through communal reasoning.

Igbo epistemology is transmitted primarily through oral tradition, including proverbs, myths, folktales, songs, and ritual practices. These media are not merely cultural expressions but repositories of epistemic authority that carry with them the weight of communal reflection and validation (Oluwole, 1999). Proverbs, in particular, condense centuries of collective experience into concise, metaphorical wisdom. For example, the proverb *ihe onye metara, o ga-erì ya* ("whatever one does, one shall reap") conveys not only moral instruction but also epistemic lessons about causality, accountability, and the relational fabric of existence. Oral tradition therefore anchors Igbo epistemology in memory, performance, and lived context, while simultaneously serving as a vehicle for the transmission of knowledge across generations.

However, it would be reductive to suggest that Igbo epistemology was wholly oral. Historical evidence indicates that the Igbo and their neighbours possessed a form of written symbolic communication prior to contact with the West. One striking example is **Nsibidi**, a system of ideographic and pictorial writing that, much like Egyptian hieroglyphics, conveyed meaning through signs and

symbols (MacEachern, 1994). Nsibidi was widely used in Eastern Nigeria not only for record-keeping and communication but also for embedding moral, social, and legal codes within cultural practice. The existence of Nsibidi demonstrates that Igbo epistemology combined both oral and written modalities, challenging the assumption that literacy and abstraction were exclusively Western achievements.

Beyond Nsibidi, cultic and esoteric traditions developed highly specialised forms of communication. Masquerade societies, for instance, employed symbolic signs, gestures, and ritual performances as forms of encoded communication accessible only to initiates (Onwuejeogwu, 1981). Such practices reveal an additional dimension of Igbo epistemology: knowledge was not only preserved in open communal sayings but also safeguarded in secret, esoteric systems of signification. These systems ensured that certain forms of knowledge particularly those tied to spirituality, morality, and social order were restricted, contextual, and protected.

For the Igbo, then, knowledge is inseparable from morality, spirituality, and cosmology. Truth (*eziokwu*) is not simply correspondence between proposition and fact but also coherence with lived reality, communal well-being, and cosmic order (Okere, 1983). This holistic integration ensures that epistemology is not detached from life but embedded in the practical, moral, and spiritual fabric of existence. By recognising both the oral and symbolic/written forms of transmission, Igbo epistemology emerges as a complex system that unites communal wisdom, symbolic literacy, and esoteric codes of meaning.

Skepticism in Igbo Epistemology

One of the primary sources of skepticism in Igbo epistemology is colonial disruption. Colonial authorities and missionaries dismissed indigenous knowledge systems as irrational, replacing them with Western education and religion (Hallen, 2009). This created a tension between traditional Igbo epistemology and modern Western frameworks, generating skepticism both within and outside Igbo communities. For example, the introduction of Christianity challenged the epistemic legitimacy of ancestral revelations, divination, and ritual practices. Igbo skepticism thus emerges as a defense against cultural alienation, resisting epistemic marginalization.

Skepticism also arises internally, as Igbo philosophy acknowledges human finitude. Proverbs such as onyeamaghiama, amaghionyega-amataya ("he who knows not, knows not who will know") illustrate epistemic humility. Ultimate knowledge is often attributed to Chukwu (God) or the ancestors, while humans are seen as grasping only partial truths (Edeh, 1985). This recognition of epistemic limitation prevents arrogance and encourages continuous inquiry.

Within Igbo communities, skepticism is evident in the contestation of sources and claims of knowledge. Oral testimonies, ancestral wisdom, and divinatory pronouncements are rarely accepted uncritically; rather, they are subjected to communal interrogation and empirical verification through lived experience. This epistemic skepticism does not reject the possibility of knowledge altogether but recognizes its fallibility and contextual nature. Knowledge claims, therefore, must undergo a process of validation that involves communal consensus, moral discernment, and pragmatic efficacy (Ijiomah, 2005).

However, Igbo epistemic caution extends beyond the verification of knowledge claims to the very question of whether certain kinds of knowledge ought to be pursued at all. This prudential aspect of skepticism is captured in proverbs such as *ihe mmadu amaghi, a maghi ya* ("what one does not know does not know one") and *mmiri anaghi eri onye o na-ahughi ukwu ya* ("the river does not drown the one who never steps into it"). These expressions do not glorify ignorance but rather underscore the ethical and existential awareness that not all knowledge is necessary or beneficial. Some forms of inquiry may expose individuals or the community to danger, moral corruption, or spiritual imbalance. Thus, epistemic

restraint functions as a protective mechanism, suggesting that wisdom sometimes lies in deliberate unknowing or in the decision to suspend inquiry when potential harm outweighs potential benefit.

This dimension of Igbo epistemic skepticism introduces a moral ecology of knowledge, one that contrasts sharply with the Western Enlightenment pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. In Igbo thought, knowing is relational and consequential; it must serve the wellbeing of the knower and the community. Hence, skepticism in this context becomes a virtue of discernment rather than an obstacle to truth. It functions as an epistemic safeguard that ensures knowledge remains ethically grounded and socially constructive.

Igbo philosophy also accommodates a distinctive form of moral skepticism rooted in its flexible, dialogical approach to ethics. Moral truths in Igbo thought are seldom regarded as fixed or absolute; rather, they are contextual, situational, and continually negotiated through communal deliberation. This moral flexibility reflects an understanding that ethical judgments often arise from the complex interplay of competing obligations and social realities (Gyekye, 1997).

The Igbo moral universe is one in which relationships define moral responsibility, yet these relationships can occasionally produce tension. A common moral dilemma emerges, for instance, when loyalty to kin intersects with duties owed to strangers. However, contrary to assumptions of insularity, Igbo custom is remarkably sympathetic to the stranger (*onye ọbịa*). The host is traditionally obliged to ensure the safety and dignity of the visitor, sometimes even at great personal risk. This moral posture reveals that conflict does not always arise from hostility toward the outsider; rather, it may occur when the legitimate needs of the visitor inadvertently contradict the well-being or resources of the host.

In such contexts, moral skepticism functions as a reflective pause, a moment of critical examination of what justice demands in each unique circumstance. Ethical deliberation involves the weighing of communal harmony, personal integrity, and situational fairness. The epistemological implication of this moral skepticism is that knowledge of the good is not static but dynamic, deepening through lived experience and dialogue. Hence, skepticism here does not erode moral commitment; it refines it, ensuring that moral understanding remains sensitive to context, proportionate to circumstance, and open to communal reasoning.

Comparative Analysis: Igbo Skepticism and Western Skepticism

Ancient Pyrrhonian scepticism, as articulated by Sextus Empiricus, advocated the suspension of judgment (*epoché*) as a way of achieving tranquillity. The Pyrrhonists argued that since equally persuasive arguments could be made for and against any proposition, it was impossible to claim certainty about knowledge. The consequence was the cultivation of detachment and peace of mind through the refusal to commit to dogmatic positions (Stroud, 1984).

By contrast, Igbo skepticism does not suspend judgment indefinitely but treats doubt as a provisional stage within inquiry. Rather than undermining certainty as such, it employs doubt constructively to refine knowledge through communal verification and experiential testing. The skeptic in Igbo thought does not aim to withdraw from dogma for tranquillity but seeks harmony by ensuring that truth claims align with cultural values and communal wisdom. Hence, while Pyrrhonism privileges intellectual suspension to avoid conflict, Igbo skepticism deploys doubt dynamically as a tool for strengthening social cohesion and practical knowledge.

René Descartes' methodic doubt represents another form of radical skepticism. By questioning the reliability of the senses, the existence of the external world, and even the possibility of deception by an evil demon, Descartes sought an indubitable foundation for knowledge. His solitary reflection summed up in the cogito, *"I think, therefore I am"*, established the individual subject as the centre of epistemology (Descartes, 1996).

Igbo skepticism diverges sharply from this model. It does not begin with solitary doubt but with communal discourse. Doubt in Igbo reasoning is not pursued for radical foundations but for the purpose of engaging others in collective validation. Asouzu (2004) underscores this point in his theory of *ibuanyidanda* (complementarity), which asserts that no claim to knowledge is sufficient by itself, but must be integrated with the contributions of others. Where Cartesian skepticism isolates the knower, Igbo skepticism situates the knower within community. The aim is not to achieve private certainty but to secure communal coherence.

David Hume exemplifies a form of skepticism rooted in empiricism. His critique of causality and induction led him to argue that humans cannot rationally justify expectations about the future such as the rising of the sun except by habit and custom (Hume, 2007). Hume's skepticism thus revealed the limits of empirical reasoning while acknowledging the inevitability of practical reliance on experience.

The Igbo tradition also grounds knowledge in experience but differs in orientation. Igbo epistemology is not individualistic but communal and pragmatic. Proverbs often capture empirical truths in ways that are tested and verified by shared practice. For example, the proverb *agwọ gburu mmadụ, n'alaka esi agbaya* ("a snake that kills a man is tracked from the ground") highlights not only empirical observation but also collective verification of evidence. In this sense, while Hume problematises induction as a rational justification, Igbo skepticism resolves doubt by embedding experience in communal wisdom, ensuring that knowledge serves the wellbeing of the group rather than the intellectual perplexities of the individual.

Hume's moral skepticism questioned whether moral judgements are grounded in reason or sentiment. He concluded that morality derives primarily from human feelings of approval and disapproval rather than rational deduction (Hume, 1751). This perspective highlights the subjective and emotional dimension of ethics.

Igbo thought resonates with Hume to the extent that moral judgements are contextual and often pragmatic. However, it departs from Hume's individualism by embedding morality in communal consensus, ancestral wisdom, and spiritual order. As Gyekye (1997) notes of African moral philosophy, morality is never purely individualistic but emerges from the shared values and expectations of the community. Doubt about moral claims does not destabilise ethical life but ensures that actions remain consistent with communal welfare and cosmological balance. Thus, where Hume's skepticism risks relativism, Igbo skepticism reinforces moral accountability within a relational horizon.

A comparative reading reveals that Western and Igbo skeptical traditions share the use of doubt but diverge sharply in their orientations and purposes. Western skepticism, whether Pyrrhonian, Cartesian, or Humean, privileges the individual thinker and often seeks either tranquillity, certainty, or humility about reason's limits. Igbo skepticism, by contrast, is pragmatic, communal, and integrative. Doubt is not paralysing but constructive used as a tool for refining truth, fostering social harmony, and ensuring survival.

The epistemological goals of both traditions differ accordingly. Pyrrhonian skepticism sought tranquillity, Cartesian skepticism pursued indubitable foundations, and Humean skepticism cultivated intellectual modesty. Igbo skepticism, however, aims at harmony and practical survival. It is less concerned with universal certainty than with the usefulness and reliability of knowledge for community life. Its epistemic orientation is therefore relational rather than foundationalist.

The social dimension of doubt is another crucial point of departure. In the West, skepticism is often an individual endeavour: Descartes alone in his chamber, or Hume reflecting privately on the limits of induction. In Igbo thought, doubt operates in dialogue. Knowledge is confirmed or rejected through communal discourse, proverbs, and ancestral traditions. This social embedding of skepticism transforms it from an abstract exercise into a living, practical activity that sustains cultural identity.

Finally, the moral implications of skepticism diverge significantly. Western traditions risk reducing morality to subjective sentiment or rational abstraction. Igbo skepticism, however, places moral evaluation within the shared authority of community and cosmology. Doubt about moral claims thus serves to reinforce collective responsibility rather than undermine it. As such, Igbo skepticism emerges as a distinct and constructive philosophical orientation that enriches global debates on the nature of doubt and knowledge.

Insights and Perspectives

Igbo skepticism highlights the limits of Western epistemology's claims to universality. By demonstrating that knowledge is culturally situated, communal, and pragmatic, Igbo philosophy critiques the abstract rationalism and individualism of Western traditions (Chimakonam, 2018). Skepticism in Igbo thought challenges the assumption that Western categories such as justification, certainty, and foundationalism are exhaustive or universally applicable.

Asouzu (2007) argues for complementary reflection, which acknowledges the interdependence of diverse epistemologies. Igbo skepticism complements rather than opposes Western skepticism. For instance, while Cartesian doubt emphasizes radical questioning, Igbo doubt emphasizes communal validation. Together, they illustrate the plurality of epistemic approaches and the possibility of global philosophical dialogue.

Globalization threatens the survival of indigenous knowledge systems. Skepticism in Igbo epistemology underscores the importance of critical preservation retaining oral traditions, proverbs, and Igwebuike philosophy while resisting uncritical assimilation of foreign categories (Hallen&Sodipo, 1986). By preserving indigenous epistemologies, African philosophy contributes to the decolonization of knowledge and the enrichment of global intellectual heritage.

Conclusion

Skepticism in Igbo epistemology demonstrates the richness and resilience of African thought. Unlike radical Western skepticism, Igbo skepticism is constructive, communal, and pragmatic. It arises both as a response to cultural alienation and as an internal recognition of the limitations of human knowledge. By comparing Igbo skepticism with Pyrrhonian, Cartesian, and Humean traditions, we see both convergences such as epistemic humility and divergences such as the communal versus individual focus. Future research should deepen comparative analysis between African and Western epistemologies, explore the practical applications of Igbo skepticism in ethics and politics, and examine how indigenous knowledge systems can contribute to global debates on truth, science, and morality. By situating skepticism in Igbo epistemology within the broader philosophical canon, we affirm the indispensable role of African thought in shaping a pluralistic and inclusive global philosophy.

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