



# Decolonisation of Epistemic Injustice in Africa: Appraisal of Fricker's Testimonial and Hermeneutical Epistemic Injustices

Francis Okon Ating<sup>1</sup>, Iniobong Umotong<sup>2</sup>, Itohowo Ignatius<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1,2,3</sup>Akwa Ibom State University, Nigeria.

Email: [abasiating1@gmail.com](mailto:abasiating1@gmail.com)<sup>1</sup>

## ABSTRACT

Epistemic injustice is a term popularised by Miranda Fricker to show how individuals are wronged specifically in their capacity as knowers. Fricker's framework, comprises of testimonial and hermeneutical injustice, which profoundly shaped contemporary epistemology and largely confined within the boundaries of Western social experience. This paper interrogates Fricker's theory from a decolonial African perspective, arguing that its Eurocentric assumptions overlook the complex ways in which knowledge is produced, validated, and transmitted within African epistemic traditions. In this study, we demonstrate how epistemic injustice in Africa has been historically structured by colonialism, which systematically dismissed indigenous knowledge systems as primitive or irrational. Furthermore, we argue that gendered dimensions of epistemic exclusion reveal how Western epistemic categories distort African social realities and silence women's contributions to knowledge. Building on Kristie Dotson's notion of 'epistemic oppression, this paper therefore extends Fricker's framework to include the persistent structural conditions that disable entire communities from participating in epistemic practices. It argues for an epistemic reorientation that recognises African modes of knowing as legitimate, contextually grounded, and relationally validated. The paper contends that epistemic justice must entail both the recovery of silenced knowledges and the reconstruction of epistemic norms that privilege communal and experiential authority. Finally, there is a call for a decolonised conception of epistemic injustice that moves beyond Western paradigms toward a pluralistic and inclusive epistemology. This is because, such an approach not only redresses historical wrongs but also empowers Africa to reclaim its epistemic sovereignty in the global knowledge order.

**Keywords:** Environment; Insecurity; Security; Gulf of Guinea; Niger Delta.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the concept of epistemic injustice has become a crucial framework for understanding how social power affects knowledge practices. Coined by Miranda Fricker in her seminal work *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (2007), the term refers to wrongs done to individuals in their capacity as knowers. Fricker identifies two central forms of such injustice: testimonial injustice, where prejudice causes a hearer to give a deflated level of credibility to a speaker's word, and hermeneutical injustice, where structural gaps in collective understanding unfairly disadvantage certain groups. In her own words,

Testimonial injustice occurs when prejudice causes a hearer to give a

deflated level of credibility to a speaker's word; hermeneutical injustice occurs at a structural level, when a gap in collective interpretive resources puts someone at an unfair disadvantage when it comes to making sense of their social experiences. (Fricker, 2007, p. 1)

Fricker's framework has been revolutionary in epistemology, feminist philosophy, and social theory, providing a language for naming and challenging the moral wrongs embedded in practices of knowledge and communication. Her work represents a groundbreaking attempt to link epistemology with ethics and social justice. However, Fricker's framework is deeply rooted in Western contexts, focusing primarily on gender

and race in liberal democracies. This Eurocentric orientation limits its applicability to African experiences of knowledge exclusion. As scholars such as Kristie Dotson and José Medina have argued, Fricker's model does not fully account for the complex, systemic, and historical dimensions of epistemic oppression in colonised societies (Dotson, 2011, p.31; Medina, 2013, p. 42).

In Africa, epistemic injustice cannot be separated from the legacy of colonialism, which delegitimised indigenous knowledge systems, languages, and spiritual practices while imposing Western epistemic norms as universal. The colonisers dismissed African ways of knowing as primitive, irrational, and unscientific, thereby establishing a hierarchy that privileged Western epistemologies. As Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o observes in *Decolonising the Mind* (1986), "the domination of a people's language by the languages of the colonising nations was crucial to the domination of the mental universe of the colonised" (1986, p.16). This epistemic domination has had lasting consequences, shaping how knowledge is validated, transmitted, and institutionalised in postcolonial Africa. The result has been a profound distortion of what counts as knowledge and who qualifies as a knower.

Contemporary manifestations of epistemic injustice in Africa persist in various domains, including education, medicine, and governance. Indigenous medical practices, for example, are often marginalised as "superstitions" in favour of Western biomedical models, despite their proven efficacy and historical relevance. Similarly, local languages and oral traditions remain undervalued in academic spaces, perpetuating "epistemicide" (the killing of knowledge systems).

## 2. FRICKER'S TESTIMONIAL AND HERMENEUTICAL INJUSTICES.

Miranda Fricker's conceptualisation of epistemic injustice is grounded in her moral-epistemological concern with how power and prejudice distort practices of knowledge. In *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (2007), Fricker identifies two central forms of

epistemic injustice, namely, testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice, both of which undermine an individual's capacity to participate fully as a knower within a community.

### 2.1 Testimonial Injustice

Testimonial injustice occurs when a speaker's word is unfairly discredited because of prejudice on the part of the hearer. According to Fricker, such prejudice can stem from stereotypes or social biases relating to race, gender, class, or other identity markers. The epistemic harm lies in the wrongful deflation of credibility that the hearer attributes to the speaker. As Fricker explains,

A speaker suffers a testimonial injustice if prejudice causes a hearer to give a deflated level of credibility to a speaker's word; this wrongs her in her capacity as a giver of knowledge, and thus in a capacity essential to human value (Fricker, 2007, p. 44).

This form of injustice has both moral and epistemic dimensions. Morally, it undermines the speaker's dignity by denying her the respect due to a rational and credible agent. Epistemically, it distorts the flow of knowledge within a society by excluding or discrediting potentially valuable testimony. For instance, when women's experiences of sexual harassment are dismissed as exaggerations or fabrications, they suffer a testimonial injustice, and society as a whole loses access to critical insights about gendered violence and inequality. Fricker's notion of testimonial injustice provides a powerful analytic lens for examining credibility deficits in communicative practices. However, her examples are often centred on Western gender and racial contexts and as such, do not always capture the complexity of testimonial dynamics in non-Western societies. In African settings, credibility is not only mediated through individual prejudice but also through colonial epistemic hierarchies that have historically positioned African speakers as "less rational" or "less knowledgeable." Thus, testimonial injustice in Africa often intersects with what Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2014) calls

'epistemicide', a term used to depict the systemic devaluation and erasure of entire knowledge systems rather than merely individual testimonies, in other words, 'the killing of knowledge'.

## 2.2 Hermeneutical Injustice

Hermeneutical injustice, the second form identified by Fricker, arises from structural deficiencies in a society's shared interpretative resources, what she calls the "collective hermeneutical pool." When certain groups are excluded from participating in meaning-making processes, their social experiences become difficult or impossible to understand, both to themselves and to others. Fricker notes,

Hermeneutical injustice occurs at a structural level, when a gap in collective interpretive resources puts someone at an unfair disadvantage when it comes to making sense of their social experiences (Fricker, 2007, p.1).

This kind of injustice reflects the epistemic marginalisation of groups whose perspectives have been historically silenced or ignored. A classic example from Fricker's work is the experience of sexual harassment before the term itself entered public discourse. Before the concept was named, women who suffered such experiences lacked the interpretive tools to articulate and contest their oppression.

In African contexts, hermeneutical injustice manifests in even more complex ways. The epistemic structures of colonialism imposed Western categories of understanding that often erased indigenous modes of knowing. For example, colonial administrations reinterpreted African spiritual, medicinal, and social systems through alien categories such as "paganism," "superstition," and "tribal custom," thereby producing hermeneutical distortions that persist to this day. These interpretive gaps continue to affect how African experiences, especially those of women, rural communities, and indigenous groups are understood and viewed both within and outside the continent.

African feminist scholars have also expanded the discussion by exposing how imported epistemic categories distort local realities. Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí (1997) argues that Western gender constructs imposed during colonialism produced epistemic misunderstandings of African social structures, where identity and authority were not originally organised by gender binaries. Such impositions created hermeneutical injustices that rendered precolonial African experiences unintelligible within Western academic and cultural frameworks. Thus, while Fricker's framework offers an essential foundation for analysing epistemic wrongs, its universality is questionable. It assumes a Western epistemic subject and context that fails to account for the structural and historical roots of epistemic marginalisation in postcolonial societies. In Africa, testimonial and hermeneutical injustices are not isolated phenomena but are part of a broader system of epistemic domination rooted in colonialism, global inequality, and the continuing privileging of Western rationality.

## 3. AFRICAN EXPERIENCES OF EPISTEMIC INJUSTICE

Fricker's framework is a compelling foundation for understanding how individuals are wronged in their capacity as knowers. However, when this framework is extended to African contexts, epistemic injustice takes on broader and deeper structural dimensions. In Africa, epistemic harm is not confined to interpersonal prejudice; it is embedded within historical, political, and cultural systems of domination that have persistently devalued African ways of knowing. From colonial erasures to gendered marginalisations and the continued sidelining of indigenous knowledge, the African experience of epistemic injustice reveals the need to decolonise Fricker's framework.

### 3.1 Colonial Dismissal of African Knowledge Systems

Colonialism represents one of the most profound episodes of epistemic injustice in world history. European colonisers not only subjugated

African peoples politically and economically but also intellectually, through the systematic dismissal of African epistemologies (Umotong, 2023). Colonial education and administration privileged Western rationality as the only valid form of knowledge while branding African cosmologies, philosophies, and sciences as primitive or mythical. As Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o observes, "colonialism sought to control the people's wealth, their labour, their minds, and ultimately, their way of perceiving themselves and their relationship to the world" (1986, p.16). This epistemic domination resulted in the killing of entire knowledge systems, or simply call it 'epistemicide' (Santos, 2014, p. 92). Indigenous systems of governance, healing, and spirituality were invalidated and replaced by Western epistemic models. For example, African herbal medicine, once the mainstay of healthcare, was criminalised or reduced to superstition under colonial rule. Similarly, African cosmologies were reinterpreted through Western theological categories that obscured their philosophical depth.

This form of injustice transcends Fricker's testimonial and hermeneutical categories because it attacks the very foundation upon which a people understand reality. It is not merely that Africans were not believed (testimonial injustice) or that their experiences were misunderstood (hermeneutical injustice); rather, their entire epistemic frameworks were disqualified from legitimacy. The colonial encounter thus imposed a global hierarchy of knowledge that continues to influence education, policy, and even development discourse in postcolonial Africa.

### 3.2 Gender Epistemic Injustice

Gender adds another critical dimension to epistemic injustice in African contexts. Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí, in *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*, argues that Western gender categories were imposed on African societies through colonialism and missionary activities. Precolonial Yoruba society, she contends, did not organise itself around rigid gender binaries; rather, social identity was based

on seniority and social roles, not anatomy. She writes that "the idea that biology determines social position was foreign to Yoruba thought and practice" (Oyěwùmí, 1997, p.32). By introducing gender as a primary organising principle, colonialism produced epistemic distortions that rendered African social systems unintelligible through Western lenses. The colonial narrative portrayed African women as universally oppressed and African men as inherently patriarchal, erasing the nuances of precolonial gender relations. This imposed misinterpretation constitutes a "hermeneutical injustice", that is, it constitutes a gap in interpretive resources that prevents both Africans and outsiders from fully understanding indigenous gender systems.

Moreover, African women's voices continue to be marginalised within both global and local epistemic spaces. Within academia, women scholars and activists often face testimonial injustice when their contributions are dismissed as "subjective" or "emotional," reinforcing Fricker's observations about credibility deficits (Fricker, 2007, p.4). However, in the African context, this injustice is compounded by a colonial legacy that doubly silences women, first as Africans within global knowledge hierarchies, and second as women within patriarchal structures.

### 3.3 Marginalisation of Indigenous Medicine

The marginalisation of indigenous medicine offers a vivid example of epistemic injustice that persists in contemporary Africa. Despite centuries of effectiveness and deep cultural embeddedness, indigenous healing systems are frequently dismissed as "unscientific" or "backward." Western biomedical paradigms dominate health policy and education, often to the exclusion of indigenous epistemologies that have sustained African communities for generations. Paulin Hountondji critiques this phenomenon as the continued "extraversion" of African knowledge, the condition where African intellectual work seeks validation only through Western epistemic standards (2002, p.67). This extraversion perpetuates a modern form of testimonial

injustice, in which indigenous healers and scholars are denied credibility, not because their knowledge lacks efficacy, but because it does not conform to Western scientific methodology. An illustrative case is the response to herbal treatments during the COVID-19 pandemic. Several African countries, including Madagascar and Nigeria, reported promising local remedies based on indigenous plants. Yet, these were swiftly dismissed by international health organisations as lacking “scientific proof.” The irony, as V.Y. Mudimbe (1988, p.20) observes, is that the very concept of “science” was historically defined in ways that excluded African modes of inquiry. Such dismissal reveals how deeply entrenched epistemic hierarchies continue to shape global knowledge economies.

These examples highlight how epistemic injustice in Africa transcends the interpersonal framework outlined by Fricker. It is systemic, historical, and institutional. It operates through the continued privileging of Western epistemologies in education, research, and public policy, and through the silencing of indigenous voices in global discourses.

#### 4. DISCUSSING EPISTEMIC INJUSTICE BEYOND FRICKER

While Miranda Fricker’s conceptualisation of epistemic injustice remains foundational, it does not exhaust the spectrum of epistemic wrongs experienced in Africa. Her focus on *testimonial* and *hermeneutical injustice* primarily addresses interpersonal and structural dimensions of epistemic harm within liberal democratic contexts. Yet, African realities reveal a more entrenched, systemic, and historically continuous form of epistemic marginalisation that requires going beyond Fricker’s framework.

Kristie Dotson expands the conversation on epistemic injustice by introducing the concept of *epistemic oppression*, which she defines as “persistent and systematic exclusion that hinders a person or group from participating in the production, dissemination, and validation of knowledge” (Dotson 2011). Unlike Fricker’s focus on individual credibility or interpretive

disadvantage, Dotson’s framework captures how entire social groups are structurally excluded from epistemic spaces over time. In her essay “Tracking Epistemic Violence, Tracking Practices of Silencing,” Dotson observes that epistemic oppression often manifests as ‘epistemic violence’ (the suppression of entire modes of knowing through systemic silencing). She explains: “Epistemic violence occurs whenever dominant practices of knowledge production consistently obstruct the possibility of understanding or hearing the voices of marginalised knowers” (Dotson, 2011, p.238).

This formulation resonates profoundly with the African experience of colonialism and neocolonialism, where indigenous epistemologies have been continuously undermined by Western epistemic paradigms. The imposition of European languages, educational systems, and scientific standards not only silenced local epistemic voices but also entrenched an enduring hierarchy in which African knowledge must seek external validation to be recognised as legitimate. Dotson’s framework thus better captures the depth of epistemic injustice in Africa, it is not just miscommunication but the sustained silencing of entire traditions of thought.

Furthermore, African feminist philosophers and decolonial thinkers have been instrumental in extending the conversation beyond Fricker. They argue that epistemic injustice in Africa cannot be disentangled from histories of colonialism, patriarchy, and global capitalism. Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí, Nkiru Nzegwu, and Sylvia Tamale have each highlighted how Western feminist theories and epistemic categories often perpetuate new forms of epistemic exclusion by universalising Western gender norms and marginalising African women’s voices (Oyěwùmí, 1997; Nzegwu, 2001). Oyěwùmí, for instance, critiques the “epistemic arrogance” of Western feminism, which assumes that gender oppression operates identically across cultures. She insists that “Africa’s epistemic reconstruction must begin with our own categories of thought and experience” (1997, p. 42). Similarly, Nkiru Nzegwu calls for an “epistemic re-centring” that

values African indigenous philosophies, arguing that Western epistemologies are not universal but provincial modes of knowing (Nzegwu, 2001, p.60).

Decolonial philosophers such as Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Achille Mbembe add that epistemic injustice in Africa is rooted in the "coloniality of knowledge", which is a global structure that continues to privilege European epistemic frameworks long after the end of political colonialism (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020; Mbembe, 2001, p.29). For these thinkers, the university, the state, and even the global market remain complicit in sustaining epistemic hierarchies that marginalise African intellectual traditions. In this light, Fricker's framework which focused on moral wrongs within established epistemic systems, appears insufficiently radical. What Africa requires is not merely fairness within epistemic structures but the transformation of those structures themselves.

## 5. CALL FOR EPISTEMIC JUSTICE ROOTED IN AFRICAN REALITIES

A truly decolonised conception of epistemic justice must begin by affirming the legitimacy, plurality, and autonomy of African epistemic traditions. Such an approach acknowledges that knowledge is not universal but contextual, embedded in linguistic, spiritual, and communal practices. As Kwasi Wiredu argues, African philosophy must engage in "conceptual decolonisation," which involves critically examining imported ideas and re-articulating them in ways consistent with African thought (Wiredu, 1987, p.137). This reconstruction demands both theoretical and institutional changes. Theoretically, it requires rethinking the nature of knowledge to include oral traditions, proverbs, ritual practices, and ecological wisdom as legitimate epistemic sources. Institutionally, it necessitates reforming educational systems, research methodologies, and policy frameworks to integrate indigenous knowledge alongside Western paradigms.

Epistemic justice in Africa must also be relational and communal. As Mogobe Ramose

explains, Ubuntu philosophy posits that knowledge is not an individual possession but a shared good that sustains community life (Ramose 1999). To know, in this sense, is to participate in a web of relationships that includes not only humans but also ancestors, nature, and the spiritual realm. Such a worldview stands as a direct counterpoint to the individualist epistemology underlying Western traditions, including Fricker's. Thus, going beyond Fricker involves a paradigmatic shift, from a focus on interpersonal credibility to the reclamation of epistemic sovereignty. It is not enough to recognise African knowers; Africa must reclaim the power to define what counts as knowledge. There must be epistemic balance in knowledge production. As Eyo and Obioha (2022, p.145) argue, the "idea of 'epistemic balance' recognizes the liberalization of Africa's intellectual spaces through complementary epistemological strategies to distribute power and accommodate all genders," class and race. Only then can epistemic justice move from being a philosophical ideal to becoming a transformative social project.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The discourse on epistemic injustice, as pioneered by Miranda Fricker, marks a critical intervention in contemporary epistemology by drawing attention to the ethical dimension of knowing. Yet, as this paper has shown, Fricker's framework, though illuminating and critical, remains solely inadequate for addressing the depth and complexity of epistemic harm experienced in Africa. Her focus on testimonial and hermeneutical injustices captures interpersonal and structural biases within relatively stable epistemic communities, but it does not grapple with the historical and systemic silencing of entire cultures under colonialism. Africa's encounter with epistemic injustice is not simply a matter of whose testimony is believed, but of whose worldview has been allowed to exist within the global order of knowledge (Umotong, 2025).

From the colonial dismissal of African thought to the imposition of Western

epistemologies through education, religion, and governance, African societies have endured centuries of epistemic subjugation. The colonial project did not merely distort African history, it redefined what could count as truth, rationality, and science. Even in the postcolonial era, these epistemic hierarchies persist in universities, media, and policy discourses. The continued marginalisation of indigenous medicine, oral traditions, and non-Western metaphysics reflects the systemic exclusion of certain knowers from epistemic participation (Umotong, 2024), what Kristie Dotson calls “epistemic oppression” (Dotson, 2011, p.32). This more expansive framework captures the historical continuity of epistemic injustice that Fricker’s theory, bounded by liberal individualism overlooks.

Furthermore, African feminist and decolonial philosophers such as Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí, Nkiru Nzegwu, and Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni have shown that epistemic injustice in Africa is intersectional, shaped by the dual legacies of patriarchy and coloniality. Western epistemologies, even when well-intentioned, frequently reproduce the same hierarchies they seek to dismantle by universalising their own categories of analysis. As Oyěwùmí observes, the “epistemic arrogance” of Western feminism lies in its tendency to project its assumptions onto non-Western societies (Oyěwùmí, 1997, p. 42). Similarly, decolonial thinkers argue that true epistemic justice cannot emerge from within the same institutions that were built on epistemic domination.

In light of these critiques, it becomes evident that what Africa requires is not simply inclusion within the existing global epistemic order but a radical rethinking of that order itself. Epistemic justice in Africa must begin with the right of African peoples to define what constitutes knowledge, truth, and evidence in ways consistent with their histories, cultures, languages, and cosmologies, what we can call ‘epistemic sovereignty’. This entails decolonising the very foundations of knowledge production by acknowledging the validity of oral traditions, indigenous sciences, and spiritual epistemologies.

Such a reconstruction would not only enrich the global epistemic landscape but also restore dignity to historically marginalised forms of knowing for the sake of posterity (Ignatius & Dennis, 2024).

The study therefore recommends a threefold approach toward achieving epistemic justice in Africa:

1. **Theoretical Reconstruction:** African philosophers must continue the task of conceptual decolonisation, critically reinterpreting imported epistemic frameworks and integrating them with indigenous insights.
2. **Institutional Transformation:** African universities and research institutions should reform curricula to reflect epistemic plurality. Indigenous epistemologies should be taught alongside Western philosophy, science, and medicine, not as folklore or supplementary knowledge, but as legitimate intellectual traditions. Policies in education, health, and governance must recognise local knowers as producers of valid knowledge.
3. **Epistemic Pluralism and Dialogue:** Africa’s future depends on cultivating a dialogical model of knowledge that values interdependence rather than hierarchy. Ubuntu philosophy provides a rich framework for this, as it grounds knowledge in relationality and mutual recognition (Ramose, 1999). A decolonised epistemic space must therefore encourage cross-cultural dialogue that is non-assimilative, allowing diverse epistemologies to coexist without subordination.

In conclusion, decolonising epistemic injustice in Africa is not merely an academic project, it is an existential and ethical imperative. The struggle for epistemic justice mirrors the struggle for political and cultural freedom. As long as African ways of knowing remain marginalised, the continent’s full intellectual potential will remain unrealised. To move beyond Fricker, therefore, is to reclaim the

epistemic agency of African peoples; it is to speak, interpret, and theorise from their own ground of being. Only then can the global order of knowledge become truly just, inclusive, and reflective of the world's diverse realities.

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