



FOOD AS AN ONTOLOGICAL INFRASTRUCTURE IN IGBO PHILOSOPHY: A GASTRO-EPISTEMOLOGICAL THEORY

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Abstract

This paper develops Gastro-Epistemology as a systematic philosophical framework rooted in Igbo cosmology and thought. It argues that food, understood through the Igbo concept of nri and its attendant ritual, cosmogonic, and social structures, functions as an ontological infrastructure: a foundational stratum upon which Igbo categories of being, knowledge, identity, and relational obligation are erected and sustained. The paper contends that the alimentary domain is not incidental to Igbo metaphysics but constitutive of it; food is simultaneously an ontological event, an epistemic mechanism, and a relational performance. Gastro-Epistemology is proposed as a theoretical framework that excavates the conditions under which food mediates knowing, structures reality, and regulates communal life in African philosophical thought. In advancing this framework, the paper challenges the systematic exclusion of the alimentary from the Western philosophical canon, exposes the epistemic violence embedded in that exclusion, and repositions Igbo food philosophy as a self-sufficient epistemological system with its own categories of truth, personhood, and communal obligation. The paper draws on Igbo primary categories including nri (Igbo knowledge of food), mmiri (water-life force), and omenala di na nri (food festivals, rites and rituals) and engages critically with Western food philosophy, African epistemology, and decolonial theory.

Keywords: Gastro-Epistemology, ontological infrastructure, Igbo philosophy, African epistemology, nri, philosophy of food, decolonisation of knowledge, relational ontology

Introduction: The Philosophical Neglect of the Alimentary

Western philosophy has, with remarkable consistency, treated food as philosophically trivial. From Plato's suspicion of bodily appetite in *Phaedo* to Kant's formalist ethics, which cleaves the moral from the sensuous, and through to analytic philosophy's preoccupation with propositional knowledge and abstract reasoning, the alimentary domain has been systematically excluded from serious philosophical inquiry (Osuji, 2022: 2; Korsmeyer, 1999; Curtin & Heldke, 1992). When food has appeared at all, it has done so as a dehumanizing symbol for irrationality (Kant, Karl Marx) (Plato, Pythagoras), metaphors such as the bread of communion, the apple of Eden (Osuji and Olurundipe, 2024), rather than as a subject of ontological and epistemological analysis in its own right. This exclusion is not accidental. It is, as this paper will argue, a symptom of a deeper epistemic ordering in which the sensory, the bodily, and the domestic are assigned to the domain of the merely empirical and thus beneath philosophical attention.

African philosophy, and Igbo thought in particular, offers a profoundly different ordering. In Igbo cosmology, food is not a concession to bodily necessity but an ontological event — an occurrence in which being is constituted, knowledge is generated, and relational obligation is enacted. The act of eating is simultaneously metaphysical, social, and epistemic. It is in this radical difference that the



theoretical possibility of Gastro-Epistemology resides: not as a curiosity of cultural variation, but as a genuine philosophical alternative to the alimentary blindness of Western thought.

This paper develops Gastro-Epistemology as a systematic philosophical framework in four movements. First, it establishes the ontological status of food in Igbo thought through an analysis of *nri*, the foundational Igbo concept of sustenance-as-being. Second, it articulates the epistemic architecture of the framework — specifying how food functions as a mechanism for generating, transmitting, and validating knowledge within the Igbo epistemic community. Third, it develops the relational ontology embedded in Igbo food practice, demonstrating how food constitutes personhood, community, and moral obligation. Fourth, it positions Gastro-Epistemology within the broader project of decolonising philosophical knowledge production, showing what the framework can do that existing food philosophies — Western and African alike — cannot.

Ontological Infrastructure: Conceptual Foundations

The concept of infrastructure, drawn from social theory and philosophy of technology, designates those foundational systems whose operation is largely invisible yet upon whose functioning all other activities depend (Star & Ruhleder, 1996). Infrastructure is ontologically prior: it does not merely support activity but constitutes the conditions under which activity is possible at all. Berlant (2016) extends this notion to affective and social life, arguing that infrastructure designates not only pipes and roads but the relational substrata — the affective, economic, and material arrangements — through which social life becomes livable or unlivable.

This paper appropriates and philosophically refines the concept of ontological infrastructure to designate those foundational structures within a thought-system that constitute the conditions of possibility for being, knowing, and relating. An ontological infrastructure is not merely instrumental; it is generative. It does not simply support life but produces the categories through which life is intelligible, the relations through which persons are constituted, and the norms through which conduct is regulated. It is, in the language of Heidegger (1962), not merely present-at-hand but ready-to-hand in the deepest sense — so woven into the fabric of being that its withdrawal would not simply inconvenience life but dissolve it.

The argument of this paper is that food functions as precisely such an ontological infrastructure in Igbo philosophy. Food is not one element among others in the Igbo lifeworld; it is the medium through which the Igbo lifeworld is constituted, reproduced, and transmitted across generations. To understand Igbo ontology, one must begin with food. To understand Igbo epistemology, one must understand what food knows — or rather, what comes to be known through food. This is the foundational claim of Gastro-Epistemology.

3. *Nri* and the Igbo Cosmogony of Sustenance

The concept of *nri* occupies a position of irreducible centrality in Igbo cosmology. Literally translated as "food" or "sustenance," *nri* carries a weight far exceeding its nutritional denotation. In Igbo cosmogonic narratives, particularly those associated with the *Nri* kingdom — widely regarded as the cradle of Igbo civilisation — food is not a product of the earth but a gift of Chukwu (the Supreme Being) through *Eri*, the founding ancestor, who descended from the sky bearing the first yam and cocoyam (Afigbo, 1981; Isichei, 1976). Food, in this narrative, is the original medium of divine-human communication, the substance through which the sacred enters the material world. This cosmogonic function of food has profound ontological implications. If food is the medium of original divine communication, then eating is not merely a biological act but a participation in the ontological order established at creation. Each meal re-enacts, at the level of everyday life, the foundational



cosmogonic event in which being was first made available to human habitation. *Nri* is thus not simply what sustains the body; it is what sustains being itself (Onwuejeogwu, 1981); the thread that connects the living to the dead, the human to the divine, the individual to the community.

This reading is supported by the ritual structure of Igbo food practice. The presentation of *oji* (the kola nut) at the commencement of any gathering of persons carries this ontological freight most visibly. *Oji* is not offered merely as a sign of hospitality; it is a ritual enactment of the ontological claim that persons exist in relational webs constituted and maintained by shared substance. The prayer that accompanies the breaking of kola, *onye wetara oji wetara ndu* (he who brings kola brings life) articulates a philosophical proposition: life is not a private biological fact but a shared ontological condition sustained through the act of offering food (Achebe, 1958; Metuh, 1981). The kola nut is not a symbol of life; it *is* life, in the philosophically precise sense that it constitutes the relational conditions under which persons are recognised as living members of a community.

This ontological thickness of food in Igbo thought stands in sharp contrast to the Western philosophical tendency to treat food as an instrumental good; something consumed to sustain life rather than something that constitutes it. For Plato, food belonged to the domain of appetite (*epithumia*), the lowest part of the tripartite soul, whose governance by reason was a condition of philosophical life (Plato, *Republic*, 439d–441c). For Kant, the pleasures of eating were "merely agreeable," incapable of generating genuine aesthetic or moral judgment (Kant, 1790/2000, §3). Even Feuerbach's (1850/2012) famous inversion "*der Mensch ist was er isst*" ("man is what he eats") is similar to Igbo "*Onye wetara oji, wetara ndu*" (one who brings food brought life) (Osuji: 2021: 46). While gesturing toward the ontological significance of food, it remained at the level of materialism rather than developing a full philosophical architecture. Igbo philosophy requires no such inversion because it never committed the original reduction.

Gastro-Epistemology: The Framework

Gastro-Epistemology, as developed in this paper, is a philosophical framework that investigates the conditions under which food mediates the generation, transmission, validation, and organisation of knowledge within a given thought-community. It is not a sociology of food knowledge, nor an anthropology of dietary practices; it is a properly epistemological inquiry into the alimentary as a site and mechanism of knowing. Three core propositions constitute its architecture.

4.1. Food as Epistemic Condition

The first proposition of Gastro-Epistemology is that food functions as an epistemic condition; that is, as one of the conditions under which knowledge becomes possible within Igbo thought. This is a Kantian-inflected claim, but one that inverts Kant's own epistemology by grounding the conditions of knowledge not in the transcendental structures of a disembodied subject but in the material, relational, and alimentary structures of an embodied community.

In Igbo epistemology, knowledge is not primarily propositional but participatory. To know is not first and foremost to represent the world accurately in the mind but to be appropriately positioned within the web of relations that constitutes the world (Wiredu, 1996; Gyekye, 1997). And positioning within that web is accomplished, in significant measure, through alimentary practice. Who eats with whom, what is eaten, how it is prepared, who prepares it, and in what ritual context — these are not incidental features of Igbo social life but the very mechanisms through which epistemic positions are assigned, maintained, and contested.



This is most evident in the practice of *izi oji* — the formal presentation and sharing of kola. The order in which kola is presented encodes an entire epistemic hierarchy: who has the right to speak, whose knowledge counts as authoritative, who is in a position to pray on behalf of the community. To be excluded from the kola ceremony is not merely a social slight; it is an epistemic disqualification, a removal from the community of knowers whose testimony and judgment carry weight. Food, here, is not a reward for epistemic achievement but its condition.

4.2. Food as Epistemic Act

The second proposition is that food functions as an epistemic act — that eating is itself a form of knowing. This claim departs most sharply from the Western philosophical tradition, which has largely treated knowing as a cognitive relation between a subject and an object, mediated by perception, inference, or testimony, but rarely if ever by ingestion. In Igbo thought, the consumption of certain foods in specific ritual contexts constitutes a form of knowledge acquisition that is irreducible to cognitive representation. The consumption of *ofe onugbu* (bitter leaf soup) at funeral rites, for example, is not merely a cultural observance but an epistemic act: the eater comes to know, through the experience of bitterness, the existential reality of loss, mortality, and the passage of life from one state to another. This knowing is not propositional; it cannot be fully captured in the statement "death is bitter" but is phenomenological: it is a knowing-through-the-body that reorganises the eater's relation to the world (Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Osuji, 2023).

This phenomenological dimension of alimentary knowing has been insufficiently theorised even within the Western philosophy of food. Korsmeyer (1999), in her groundbreaking work on taste, acknowledges the cognitive dimensions of gustatory experience but ultimately subordinates them to aesthetic judgment. Telfer (1996) treats food primarily as a source of pleasure. Gastro-Epistemology moves beyond both by arguing that, in Igbo thought, alimentary knowing is not a species of aesthetic experience or gustatory pleasure but a mode of ontological disclosure; a way in which the nature of reality (including its moral, social, and spiritual dimensions) becomes available to the knower through the act of eating.

4.3. Food as Epistemic Boundary

The third proposition is that food functions as an epistemic boundary that alimentary practices define and enforce the limits of the Igbo epistemic community. This proposition engages directly with contemporary epistemological debates about testimony, epistemic injustice, and the social dimensions of knowledge (Fricker, 2007; Coady, 1992). In Igbo thought, the epistemic community (the community of those whose knowledge claims are taken seriously, whose testimony is credible, and whose judgments carry authority) is partly constituted through alimentary inclusion and exclusion. Food taboos (*nso nri*) function not only as moral prohibitions but as epistemic markers: they identify who belongs to which category of knower. The *osu* (cult slave) was barred from sharing food with freeborn Igbo; this alimentary exclusion simultaneously enacted epistemic exclusion including the *osu's* knowledge, testimony, and judgment were systematically discredited. This is, in Miranda Fricker's (2007) terms, a form of testimonial injustice but one that operates through the alimentary rather than through the purely discursive mechanisms her framework centres.

Gastro-Epistemology thus reveals that epistemic injustice is not only a matter of who is heard but of who eats, with whom, and what. The alimentary dimensions of epistemic exclusion have been almost entirely overlooked in the philosophical literature on social epistemology, and their recovery from within Igbo thought represents a significant contribution to that literature.

Relational Ontology and the Communal Constitution of Personhood through Food



Igbo philosophy is fundamentally a philosophy of relations. *Mmadu* (Personhood) is not a property of the isolated individual but an achievement of relational life; it is constituted through one's participation in the web of mutual obligations, reciprocities, and recognitions that characterise Igbo communal existence (Gyekye, 1997; Menkiti, 1984). Food is the primary medium through which this relational constitution of personhood is enacted. The Igbo funeral practice of *ikwa ozu* — the elaborate mortuary feast that accompanies and follows the burial of a community member — illustrates this point with particular force. The feast is not a peripheral observance; it is the principal mechanism through which the community processes the ontological disruption of death and reconstitutes itself as a living community in the wake of loss. The preparation, sharing, and consumption of food at *ikwa ozu* performs multiple ontological functions simultaneously: it feeds the spirit of the deceased (who is understood to remain present and in need of sustenance during the transitional period), it consolidates the social bonds among the living through shared commensality, and it publicly re-establishes the relational obligations that bind the deceased's family to the broader community (Uchendu, 1965).

This analysis reveals that, in Igbo thought, food does not merely reflect social structure but actively constitutes it. The sociological tradition, from Simmel's (1910) essay on the sociology of the meal to more recent work on commensality (Fischler, 2011), has recognised the social significance of eating together. But Gastro-Epistemology makes a stronger claim: in Igbo philosophy, commensality is not a social practice that expresses pre-existing relations but an ontological practice that constitutes the relations themselves. The shared meal does not merely symbolise community; it creates and sustains it. This relational ontology of food has direct implications for the understanding of *chi* — the Igbo personal spirit or divine double — and its relationship to sustenance. The *chi* is nourished not only through prayer and ritual but through the quality of the moral and relational life its human counterpart sustains, of which alimentary practice is an integral part. To eat well in the Igbo moral sense, which includes eating with generosity, eating in right relation, refusing food obtained through injustice, is to nourish one's *chi* and thus to maintain one's ontological integrity (Achebe, 1975; Ogbalu, 1974).

Gastro-Epistemology and the Decolonisation of Philosophical Knowledge

The project of decolonising philosophy has generated a substantial and growing literature that interrogates the Eurocentrism of the Western philosophical canon, the suppression of non-Western intellectual traditions, and the epistemic violence perpetrated by colonial and neocolonial knowledge systems (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013; Mignolo, 2009; Wiredu, 1980). Gastro-Epistemology makes a specific and substantive contribution to this project by demonstrating that the exclusion of the alimentary from Western philosophical inquiry is not a universal philosophical insight but a culturally specific and philosophically contestable prejudice.

When Kant (1790/2000) dismisses gustatory pleasure as merely agreeable, he is not reporting a universal truth about the epistemological status of food; he is articulating a specifically bourgeois European sensibility in which the mind-body distinction maps onto the distinction between philosophical seriousness and sensuous triviality. This mapping has consequences far beyond the philosophy of taste: it generates a framework in which entire intellectual traditions — traditions that take the body, the meal, the kitchen, and the field seriously as philosophical sites — are disqualified in advance from the status of philosophy.

Gastro-Epistemology refuses this disqualification. It does not argue that Igbo food philosophy should be taken seriously because it resembles Western philosophy in some respects. It argues that Igbo food philosophy constitutes an independent and internally coherent epistemological system that generates its own categories of truth, its own criteria of justified belief, and its own account of the conditions



under which knowledge is possible. Thus, this system is philosophically richer, in certain respects, than the Western alternatives, precisely because it does not abstract the knowing subject from the body, the community, and the alimentary practices through which knowing is accomplished. This argument aligns with and extends Oyewumi's (1997) critique of the ocularcentric bias of Western thought that is the privileging of sight over other senses as the primary medium of knowledge. If Oyewumi is right that Western epistemology is fundamentally shaped by its privileging of vision, then Gastro-Epistemology proposes that Igbo epistemology is partly shaped by its privileging of the gustatory and the alimentary and that this privileging generates genuinely different and philosophically significant categories of knowing that cannot be reduced to the visual-propositional model.

Furthermore, the decolonial significance of Gastro-Epistemology extends to questions of food sovereignty and food justice. When the ontological significance of *nri* is recognised, the destruction of Igbo food systems through colonialism, cash-crop economies, and structural adjustment appears not merely as an economic or nutritional harm but as an ontological assault; an attack on the infrastructure of being itself. Gastro-Epistemology thus provides philosophical resources for understanding and resisting food imperialism in terms that go beyond the utilitarian calculus of nutritional science (Patel, 2007; Shiva, 1997).

Gastro-Epistemology in Dialogue: Strengths, Limitations, and Prospects

Any philosophical framework that aspires to theoretical rigour must acknowledge its limitations as well as its strengths. Gastro-Epistemology, as developed in this paper, faces at least three significant challenges. The first is the risk of essentialism. In developing a specifically Igbo Gastro-Epistemology, the paper inevitably risks treating "Igbo thought" as more homogeneous than it is. Igbo philosophical traditions are diverse, contested, and historically dynamic; the cosmological narratives and food practices analysed here represent tendencies within that tradition rather than universal features of it. The response to this challenge is not to abandon the project of systematic theorisation but to hold it in tension with historical and anthropological specificity — to theorise from within the tradition while acknowledging the tradition's internal plurality (Kanu, 2017).

The second challenge is the relationship between Gastro-Epistemology and existing food philosophy. The Western philosophy of food — from Brillat-Savarin's (1825/1994) physiological aesthetics to the feminist food philosophy of Curtin and Heldke (1992) and the more recent work of Montanari (2006) on food as culture — has produced genuinely important insights. Gastro-Epistemology does not dismiss this literature but positions itself as its critical interlocutor: it takes from the Western tradition what is philosophically useful (particularly Korsmeyer's recovery of taste as a legitimate aesthetic category) while arguing that the Igbo framework surpasses it by grounding the alimentary in ontology rather than aesthetics and by making the communal rather than the individual the primary epistemic unit. The third challenge concerns the translation of Gastro-Epistemology into contemporary contexts. Igbo food practices have been substantially transformed by Christianity, urbanisation, globalisation, and the penetration of industrial food systems. Does Gastro-Epistemology apply to the Igbo person who eats instant noodles in Lagos? The answer requires distinguishing between the framework as a historical-philosophical reconstruction and as a living epistemological resource. Even in transformed contexts, the vestiges of alimentary ontology persist — in the insistence on bringing food to bereaved families, in the centrality of the shared meal at every significant occasion, in the continued practice of *oji* at formal gatherings. Gastro-Epistemology must be attentive to both the continuities and the ruptures.

Conclusion: Towards an African Philosophy of Food as First Philosophy



This paper has argued that food functions as an ontological infrastructure in Igbo philosophy — not as metaphor, symbol, or instrumental necessity, but as the foundational medium through which being is constituted, knowledge is generated, and persons are relationally formed. The Gastro-Epistemological framework developed here makes three core claims: that food is an epistemic condition, an epistemic act, and an epistemic boundary within Igbo thought, and that the recognition of these functions requires a fundamental rethinking of what counts as a site of philosophical inquiry. The implications of this framework reach beyond Igbo studies and beyond the philosophy of food. They extend to fundamental questions about the nature of knowledge — whether knowing is primarily propositional or participatory, individual or communal, cognitive or embodied — and to the political question of whose epistemologies count and why. In proposing Gastro-Epistemology as a philosophical framework grounded in African thought, this paper contributes to the ongoing decolonisation of philosophy while simultaneously enriching the global conversation about food, knowledge, and the conditions of human life.

Aristotle famously defined first philosophy, metaphysics, as the inquiry into being as being: the investigation of what it is for anything to be at all. Igbo philosophy, as illuminated by Gastro-Epistemology, suggests a different starting point: being is sustained, transmitted, and constituted through food. If this is so, then the philosophy of food is not a marginal subfield but a candidate for first philosophy; the inquiry through which all other philosophical questions must pass. *Onye wetara oji wetara ndu*: he who brings kola brings life. In Igbo thought, this is not a proverb. It is a metaphysical proposition.

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