



# A Philosophical Appraisal of Igbo Epistemic Metaphysical Notion of Truth

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**Conceptual Paper**

**Volume 5 Issue 4**

**Received Date:** December 08, 2022

**Published Date:** December 26, 2022

**DOI:** 10.23880/abca-16000249

## Abstract

The concept of truth has been a relative notion in different eras and in varied philosophical and historical context. On that very day Pilate directed to Jesus the question, what is truth?; truth has become a preponderant problem in philosophical discourses though not preposterous in the sense that it is not over and above human comprehensibility. Undoubtedly, the conception of truth is relative to different societies of the world just as philosophy varies geographically. This is certainly as a result of the geographical setting of the society in question, coupled with the cultural inclination and social interaction among members of the society. To this end, truth has been one of the most important, if not the most important issue in the history of Man. Philosophy in itself is built on the excavation of truth in its changing nature. With critical and reflective approach, therefore, this study is geared towards excavating the Igbo epistemic and metaphysical notion of truth.

**Keywords:** Concept of truth; Coherence theory; Correspondence theory; Epistemic; metaphysical

## Introduction

Truth, throughout the ages has always been held and viewed with utmost importance. Truth has always been a motivating factor in acquiring knowledge. As long as man continues his quest for knowledge, the concept of truth continues to be a matter of utmost interest and concern. Since the birth of philosophy, the quest for truth has always been the driving force of philosophical enquiry, starting from the early periods of traditional philosophy. Since all men by nature desire to know, the Igbo people are not left out. The Igbo equivalent of the English word for truth is known as 'eziokwu.' Its value in Igbo thought is such that it encroaches into every aspect of the lives of the Igbo people. For instance, the Igbo maxim "Eziokwu bu ndu" (truth is life), shows the level of importance which the Igbo people place on truth, to

the extent of equating truth with life.

From the origin of the Igbo tribe up onto the development of Igbo scholarship, the western conception of truth has been dominant. This could be justified based on the colonialization of the Igbo and in a broader sense, other non-western peoples. Given this development, it became a fortiori on the Igbo as a people to begin to reflect critically on truth as a concept which exists independently of western conception or understanding. It is also to be known that scholars interested in the Igbo worldview have not extensively studied the articulation of truth, how and where it has to be told and the ultimate value of truth-telling from the perspective of the Igbo people. This is due to the paucity of research done on the Igbo worldview in general and on the Igbo concept of truth in particular, which may also be

attributed to the complexity of the concept among the Igbo.

Based on the foregoing, this article tends to enunciate the clear understanding of the Igbo notion of truth following the maxim “eziokwu bu ndu” (truth is life), thus reclaiming the pre-colonial Igbo notion of truth by divesting it of Western influence through a comparative analysis. This, it is hoped, would redirect attention to the practical significance of the Igbo notion of truth as “eziokwu bu ndu”.

### The Igbo Concept of Truth

As earlier mentioned, the Igbo equivalent of the English word for truth is eziokwu. Thus, ezi-okwu is actually a combination of two words: Ezi which translates to mean--- ‘correct, genuine, right or good;’ and Okwu which translates to either--- ‘word or speech.’ Following this understanding, one can rightly say that the word eziokwu can literally signify--- ‘good talk, correct sentence, right word, or even the appropriate statement.’ In other words, eziokwu means the correct response to a question or, that which is used to represent utterances that are true (that is the lack of inner contradictions) among the Igbo people [1].

From the above illustration, we can summarize that among the Igbo, truth means Eziokwu, which literally translates as ‘appropriate statement.’ For the Igbo, to be is to be true to what one really is. The Igbo put this ontological principle in the maxim: Eziokwu bu Ndu (Truth is life). Thus in the Igbo ethical and ontological order, not only in the moral sense is the utterance of truth an affirmation, it is also in the living. In other words, truth is authenticity (Ugwu ndu). To this end, Ejeh affirms that “Not to be in the truth is not to be in life, in dynamism, self-manifestation and the vital energy. It is to die. Only the true lives. The untrue disappears into the false-hood of non-being. The false falls in the fake cap of non-being” [2].

Going forward, Obughi eziokwu (not the appropriate or true statement) and asi (lie) are some of the other phrases associated with the concept of truth in the Igbo thought system; but from this point of consideration, as contraries to eziokwu [(truth) (i.e. if we take the contrary of truth in English to be falsity)]. To say of a statement that obughi eziokwu (ie that a statement is not true and appropriate), is not the same as saying that a statement is asi (ie that a statement is a lie). This is because to say that a statement is asi is to cast a doubt on a person’s moral standard, but to say that obughi eziokwu is taking it away from the plains of both. In other words, obughi eziokwu explicates the fact that a statement is not true and also questions the sincerity of the individual involved. Consequently, it is more like a bridge between eziokwu and asi. It usually has a cognitive sense, unless it is suspected that a person’s statement is a

deliberate falsehood. This of course brings on the issue of intention on the part of the person making the statement. But since there is no way of knowing the intentions of a person making a particular statement, it is necessary to assume that the person is using a statement in an innocent sense until proven wrong; in which case, obughi eziokwu is applied to a person with a moral connotation [2].

The Igbo describe the truth of a statement with two major expressions. These are ‘Eziokwu’ and ‘The mere eme’. Having understood eziokwu as---good talk, well made speech, genuine talk or speech; ‘ihe mere eme’ on the other hand simply means--- ‘what really happened.’ This expression ‘ihe mere eme’ makes truth in Igbo thought and life to be understood as--- ‘what is the case, what agrees with reality, or as testimony.’ It has historical and non-historical dimensions. In its specific historicity, it refers to an event or action, which has been accomplished or perfected. In this sense, it helps a person by providing him with some empirical data or concrete evidence that leads to some type of analytic insight or intuition into a problematic situation which had hitherto presented itself as a puzzle to the person [2].

From the foregoing, it is clear that the expression, ‘ihe mere eme’ makes truth an empirical fact, something that can be investigated and verified empirically rather than something that is intuitional. Since what is the case is asserted of a proposition which agrees with what happened in reality, it is safe to posit that it represents for the Igbo, the Western equivalent of truth as correspondence, for as J. L. Austin has argued,

... a statement is said to be true when the historic state of affairs to which it is correlated by the demonstrative conventions (the one to which it refers) is of a type with which the sentences used in making it is correlated by the descriptive conventions [3].

In addition, the Igbo also understand truth in the Aristotelian sense, for in Aristotle’s view, according to Opata, “to say of what is that it is not, or what is not that it is, is false. While to say of what is that it is, or what is not that it is not, is true” [4]. Thus, we shall look into the theories of truth to investigate the correlation or difference between their traditional understanding and the Igbo notion of them.

### Theories of Truth Viz-a-viz the Igbo Concept of Truth

The knowledge of truth will always be there, but how do we determine when truth has been said? The theories of truth form a code for identifying the presence of truth in any given knowledge. Unlike the western philosophy whose scholars classified truth in a number of theories, the Igbo

thought system only recognizes the correspondence and coherence theories. We shall now explicitly analyze below these two theories of truth in Igbo thought system.

### The Correspondence Theory of Truth

The correspondence theory of truth is the oldest, best known, and perhaps most natural theory of truth. It states that truth is a correspondence of the mind to fact. This theory is said to have originated from Aristotle who had maintained that to say of what is not that it is and what is that it is not, is false; and to say of what is that it is and what is not that it is not, is true. Hence the correspondence theory holds that truth is the correspondence of the mind with reality [5].

In Igbo thought system, the value of truth does not lie specifically on the word but must correspond with the identity of the speaker. By way of illustration, the two phrases in Igbo, 'Onye Eziokwu' (A Truthful person) and 'Onye Okwu Eziokwu' (The Person who speaks the truth) seem to vary. 'Onye Eziokwu' (a truthful person) is regarded as someone who says the truth and stands by it. For instance, a person who says the truth and does not compromise the truth is one with truth and, therefore, is regarded as a truthful person. Such a person in the Igbo society is well respected and might be given a respected title too. This is because, Onwuatuegwu elucidates thus, "They are those who have achieved to a remarkable degree the aspirations and values of their communities [6]. But "Onye Okwu Eziokwu" (the person who speaks the truth) is someone who only says what is true but does not depict the truth or stand by it. Of course, he says what is true but does not correspond with truth. Such a person is seen as irrelevant in the Igbo society. So, for truth to be ascertained in Igbo thought system, it must correspond with the speaker's disposition and sincerity.

### The Coherence Theory of Truth

The coherence theory of truth goes more with the linguistic conception of truth. It holds that a statement is true if it coheres with a systematic body of statement already known to be true. This means that what makes a theory true is not inherent in it but is the external conformity with already established body of statements. Therefore, if the statement is in conflict with these established bodies of statement then it is false.

The determination of truth in a proposition in Igbo thought requires the agreement of truthful propositions. It is believed that the elders in Igbo society are enlightened and are filled with wisdom. So, when truthful elders regarded as "The council of elders" come together and decide on the affairs of the people, that judgment is held as sacrosanct and valid. Thus, in Igbo thought system, for a judgment to

be valid, it must cohere with the integrity of the subjects or judges. Little wonder the traditional Igbo people most often garnish their sayings with proverbs and idioms of the sages in an effort to make their statements coherent with the already accepted sayings of the society.

### The Philosophical Significance of Truth Among the Igbo

Philosophy, covering a wide range of knowledge with a continuous approach and man's quest for truth, has been of great significance to the lifestyle, tradition, custom and culture of different peoples across the globe, especially the Igbo people. Approaching the Igbo notion of truth in a philosophical manner and recognizing its philosophical significance can never be realized without the recognition of the Igbo epistemology which manifests in Igbo proverbs; Igbo logic which manifests in Igbo judgment system; Igbo metaphysics which manifests in the Igbo concept of God and reality, and Igbo ethics which manifest in the Igbo notion of value and respect for elders.

Thus, epistemology, which is the branch of philosophy that deals with the origin and the structure of knowledge as well as the methods and validity of knowledge acquisition has been an institute of truth [7]. The Igbo epistemology has in the history of the Igbo people been seen in the words of wisdom of the Igbo, that is *Ilu* (proverb). The Igbo definition of *Ilu* (proverb) as "mmanu ndi Igbo ji eri okwu" (the oil the Igbo use to eat word or the oil with which the Igbo garnish statements), gives a more ostensive and philosophical approach to the Igbo Epistemology. According to the Igbo, oil is seen as what helps food to digest or what gives a food its essence [8]. And so, if proverb can be defined as oil for eating word, then it means that it is a tool for obtaining true knowledge, and through it, we can have access to valid knowledge.

Metaphysically, truth in Igbo thought has been of great significance in Igbo society because of its relation with reality. This is seen in the Igbo phrase "eziokwu bu ndu" (truth is life) which moves from a mere understanding to a metaphysical understanding. Eziokwu (truth), for an Igbo man, is an entity possessed by Man and God because God, for an Igbo, is a pure example of a truthful Being without any taint of untruthfulness. So, any man who is truthful ascends to the gods after death in order to be called an ancestor who prays for his relatives to God for quick answers [8]. In other words, truth for an Igbo, transcends from being just epistemic to being metaphysical.

Eziokwu (truth) for the Igbo, derives its logicity from the systematicness of okwu (word). Okwu, as the Igbo view it, has less meaning outside the Igbo linguistic circle. To this

end, Chimakonam opines that, Okwu as an Igbo concept, has no cognates among English words. It is not “word”, rather it is the raw material from which words are formed. Its meaning is definite. It does not imply or connote anything else. It carries no further figurative interpretations. If there be other languages that have meaning for okwu, it can easily be translated without a loss or an addition of meaning. This, I think, makes the Igbo concept okwu the more definite and stable than its near equivalents to other languages [9].

What is more, Onwuatuegwu while accentuating the power of okwu argues that, “In the Western culture, word flies but what is written remain. On the contrary, the Igbo held that the effect of a spoken word can last a life time [6]. To this end, the Igbo notion of truth also forms a basis for the Igbo morality or moral codes. The Igbo society establishes its laws and traditions on the basis of truth because the absence of truth for the Igbo, brings about disorder and vice in the society. That is why on noticing any disorder or bad omen in the Igbo society, the community unites for a lasting solution to be applied. And of course, the disorder must be traced to the compromise of truth.

## Conclusion

It is not always easy for the Igbo to correctly establish who is telling the truth and who is lying. For there are situations where the facts are clear and evident to all, in which case a statement of truth about them does not raise problems. However, in many situations, it is not obvious how the facts could be ascertained. Suppose there are conflicting reports about a certain event, the contradictory statements made by different persons cannot all correspond to the facts, just as interpretations of the same event widely differ. Where then is the truth? In cases like this, the Igbo notice that the correspondence theory is unable to provide a test to know the truth; it has no criteria of truth to offer. Moreover, the coherence theory as well does not in any way answer the question of where the truth is. Therefore, being left in this hopeless situation, the traditional Igbo understand that certain truths are above his know-ability, and to find this truth, he has to seek the help of the supernatural. This he does by resorting to swearing to an oath. Then, it has to be understood that resort to swearing by deities to establish the truth of a case is recourse to fear and appeal to conscience [2]. This resort to swearing to an oath is seen as the last resort. For they believe that any truth that is beyond human rationality and common sense can only be revealed to man through the oracles, divinities or elders who are inspired by the gods.

Though the Igbo, like the rest of men, are still searching for the truth, looking at the Igbo epistemology, one can say that they have realized certain facts about truth. The first is that truth is an enigmatic concept, with strings of controversy. This is so because what is true in one situation may be false in another situation. Secondly, those truths that are beyond human rationality can be seen or should be sort for in the Divine (God). Therefore, philosophy should allow the sleeping dog to lie by making do with the humanly possible within its domain without necessarily discountenancing the fact that absolute truth has its relevance in other appropriate realms [2]. If we expect the human cognizer to attain absolute knowledge in all things (except those revealed to us by God), it would lead to a backlash, which would frustrate our philosophic endeavours. This is why the conception of truth among the Igbo has a broader outlook; it is integrative and analytic, circumstantial and absolute. Everything depends on the matrix of discourse.

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