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La religión indígena Yoruba (*Ìṣẹ̀ṣe*) y el derecho a la libertad religiosa: Intersecciones entre los derechos humanos y las perspectivas del epistemicidio

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Yoruba indigenous religion (*Ìṣẹ̀ṣe*) and the right to freedom of religion: Intersecting human rights and epistemicide perspectives

La religión indígena Yoruba (*Ìṣẹ̀ṣe*) y el derecho a la libertad religiosa: Intersecciones entre los derechos humanos y las perspectivas del epistemicidio

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Summary: Introduction. 1. Conceptual frameworks. 1.1. Human rights. 1.2. Indigenous knowledge. 1.3. Epistemicide. 2. *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe*: a religion and knowledge system. 3. Systemic discrimination and marginalization: evaluating human rights violations against *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* practitioners. 4. From marginalization to epistemicide: deconstructing the erasure of *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* epistemology. Conclusion. References.

Abstract: *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* is the indigenous religion and spiritual heritage of the Yoruba people in South-West Nigeria. While existing literature has examined the marginalization of indigenous faiths through a human rights lens, this paper argues that such a framework cannot fully address the systemic roots of this discrimination. This is because human rights discourse typically focuses on religious freedom, failing to account for *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe*'s broader identity as a comprehensive indigenous knowledge system. This paper contends that in post-independence Nigeria, *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* has primarily suffered from epistemicide -the systematic silencing and delegitimization of indigenous ways of knowing. By reframing the challenges confronting *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* practitioners as a matter of epistemic justice, this paper moves beyond simple legal protections. It emphasizes that public policies should be anchored in an analytical framework that recognizes *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* as a significant component of Yoruba epistemology. Such

an approach provides the essential legitimacy to indigenous practices, serving as a catalyst for federal and state governments to move beyond rhetoric while providing substantive protection for the religious and epistemic rights of *ìṣẹ̀ṣe* practitioners.

Key words: *ìṣẹ̀ṣe*, discrimination, human rights, indigenous knowledge, epistemicide, public policy, epistemic justice

Resumen: El *ìṣẹ̀ṣe* es la religión indígena y el patrimonio espiritual del pueblo yoruba en el suroeste de Nigeria. Si bien la literatura existente ha examinado la marginación de las fes indígenas a través de la lente de los derechos humanos, este artículo sostiene que tal marco no puede abordar plenamente las raíces sistémicas de esta discriminación. Esto se debe a que el discurso de los derechos humanos suele centrarse en la libertad religiosa, sin tener en cuenta la identidad más amplia del *ìṣẹ̀ṣe* como un sistema integral de conocimiento indígena. Este trabajo sostiene que, en la Nigeria posindependiente, el *ìṣẹ̀ṣe* ha sufrido principalmente de epistemicidio: el silenciamiento y la deslegitimación sistemática de las formas indígenas de conocimiento. Al replantear los desafíos que enfrentan los practicantes del *ìṣẹ̀ṣe* como una cuestión de justicia epistémica, este artículo va más allá de las simples protecciones legales. Enfatiza que las políticas públicas deben anclarse en un marco analítico que reconozca al *ìṣẹ̀ṣe* como un componente significativo de la epistemología yoruba. Tal enfoque proporciona la legitimidad esencial a las prácticas indígenas, sirviendo como catalizador para que los gobiernos federales y estatales trasciendan la retórica y brinden una protección sustantiva a los derechos religiosos y epistémicos de los practicantes del *ìṣẹ̀ṣe*.

Palabras clave: *ìṣẹ̀ṣe*, discriminación, derechos humanos, conocimiento indígena, epistemicidio, política pública, justicia epistémica.

Introduction

The Yoruba are a prominent African ethnic group with a significant presence in Nigeria, the Benin Republic, and Togo. Following the transatlantic slave trade, a substantial number of Yorubas settled in Sierra Leone as returnees (Anderson 2020, 192), while others established enduring communities in Brazil, Cuba, Haiti, Trinidad and Tobago, and throughout the Caribbean (Cohen 2002, 19; Ofuasia 2024, 165; Udo 2020, 27). This paper focuses specifically on the Yoruba within Nigeria, where they constitute one of the nation's major ethnic groups. In 1995, the military regime of General Sani Abacha divided Nigeria into six geopolitical zones for administrative convenience: North-East, North-West, North-Central, South-East, South-South, and South-West (Okeke 2017, 2). The Yoruba predominantly occupy the South-West zone, comprising Lagos, Oyo, Ogun, Osun, Ekiti, and Ondo states, though they are also found in the North-Central states of Kogi and Kwara. Religious life in South-West Nigeria is diverse, encompassing Christianity, Islam, and indigenous religion (Janson 2021, 1). *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* represents a localized manifestation of African Indigenous Religions (AIRs), embodying the multifaceted ancestral traditions and spiritual cosmologies of the Yoruba.

According to Lugira (2009, 48), AIRs are faiths that evolved within and originated from the continent. These religions are characterized by intergenerational transmission, as beliefs and practices are passed down through lineage rather than institutional conversion. Owing to the absence of specific historical founders, the precise origins of AIRs remain difficult to date (Awolalu 1976, 2; Mbiti 1975, 14). Rather, scholars suggest they evolved from the collective efforts of African ancestors to address existential questions and the mysteries of the universe (Lugira 2009, 48). The spiritual essence of AIRs is deeply rooted in the connection between African peoples, nature, and their environment. Consequently, upholding traditional norms and cultural values is essential for preserving AIRs as a spiritual heritage. Unlike religions that have specific sacred books, AIR doctrines are not traditionally codified in a single text like the Bible or Quran. However, significant documentation exists, such as the Odu Ifa (Ifa Corpus) in Yorubaland. Scholars, most notably Abimbola (1975, 1976), identify the Odu Ifa as the foundational knowledge system of *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe*, providing a comprehensive framework for ethical, historical, philosophical, and political discourse. Accordingly, the Odu Ifa constitutes an integral component of the broader indigenous knowledge system embedded within *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe*.

Research conducted by Nolte et al. (2018, 30) indicates that *ìṣẹ̀ṣe* practitioners account for a mere 1.3% of the South-West Nigerian population, while Christians and Muslims represent 66.7% and 31.7%, respectively. This statistical decline positions *ìṣẹ̀ṣe* as a minority religion, subject to significant social discrimination. The marginalization of *ìṣẹ̀ṣe* is often driven by Abrahamic perspectives that reduce the tradition to derogatory categories like barbarism and idol worship, stripping it of its cultural complexity (Aderibigbe 2022, 29; Olasupo 2013, 20). Despite the official declaration of *ìṣẹ̀ṣe* Day as a public holiday in several South-Western states, institutional marginalization persists. Government policies often ignore the cultural and spiritual significance of indigenous religions, further excluding practitioners from the socio-political sphere (Akin-Otiko 2019, 34; Olanrewaju 2024, 1). This exclusion raises critical concerns regarding human rights protection and socio-political inclusion. Beyond religious bias, the marginalization of *ìṣẹ̀ṣe* represents epistemicide -the systematic suppression or silencing of indigenous knowledge systems. In this context, *ìṣẹ̀ṣe* can be conceptualized as both a spiritual cosmology and a vital repository of indigenous knowledge, necessitating protection from both state and non-state actors.

Adewale (1993, 22) notes that *ìṣẹ̀ṣe* inherently recognizes fundamental rights, including the rights to property, existence, worship, and expression, as well as the state's obligation to provide security and education. While scholars such as Ilesanmi (2001), Nwauche (2008) and Ogbuehi (2017) have examined the marginalization of Nigeria's minority religions, their work rarely focuses on *ìṣẹ̀ṣe*. Conversely, a growing body of research explores African indigenous religions through the lens of epistemicide and African epistemologies (Falola and Griffin 2021; Mokhoathi 2017). Within this field, Eesuola and Falaiye (2021), and McElwaine (2019) specifically analyze *ìṣẹ̀ṣe*; however, they do not conceptualize the intersection between epistemicide and human rights. Thus, there remains a dearth of literature connecting epistemic deconstruction to the human rights violations faced by *ìṣẹ̀ṣe* practitioners. This paper addresses this gap by framing the socio-political marginalization of *ìṣẹ̀ṣe* as both a human rights violation and an act of epistemicide. Following this introduction, the study establishes its conceptual frameworks and examines *ìṣẹ̀ṣe* as a dual system of religion and knowledge. It then discusses specific human rights violations before analyzing how epistemicide undermines *ìṣẹ̀ṣe*. The paper concludes with a summary of the analysis.

1. Conceptual frameworks

1.1. *Human rights*

The importance of human rights as a legal and conceptual framework for upholding dignity, equity, and justice is foundational to modern governance. These are the fundamental rights and freedoms inherent to every individual by virtue of their humanity (Donnelly 2005, 2; Moyn 2018, 121; van der Rijt 2017, 1322). The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), adopted by the United Nations in 1948, remains the definitive global blueprint for these protections. Rahman (2020, 6) emphasized that the UDHR is not a legally binding treaty. However, it established the essential normative framework that has inspired numerous international laws and national constitutions. The freedom of religion and belief is a fundamental human right enshrined in various international and regional treaties, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966), and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (1981).

Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) specifically states that:

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion; this right includes freedom to change their religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others, in public or private, to manifest their religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship, and observance

Similarly, Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966) states that:

Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. This right shall include freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of their choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others, in public or private, to manifest their religion or belief in worship, observance, practice, and teaching.

According to Ekhaton (2015, 253) and Olanrewaju (2026, 13), as a signatory to international human rights treaties, Nigeria has domesticated these principles by incorporating them into its national legal framework. The primary authority for the protection and promotion of human rights is found in Chapter IV of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (as amended). Sections

33 to 46 of this chapter outline Fundamental Rights, including the rights to life, personal liberty, fair hearing, and private life, as well as the freedoms of thought, religion, expression, assembly, and movement, and the right to freedom from discrimination.

Specifically, Section 38(1) of the Constitution stipulates that:

Every person shall be entitled to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom (either alone or in community with others, and in public or in private) to manifest and propagate his religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice and observance.

The constitutional provision for religious freedom in Nigeria implies that the state recognizes this as a fundamental human right. This framework places a significant obligation on federal, state, and local governments as duty bearers to protect and promote these rights for all citizens. Given that Nigeria is both a multi-ethnic and multi-religious nation, Section 38 of the Constitution theoretically shields all faiths from discrimination and provides a legal pathway for anyone whose rights are infringed upon to seek redress in court (Tanimu and Raji 2020, 10). However, a stark gap exists between constitutional theory and lived reality. Despite these protections, indigenous religions as minority faiths suffer from persistent social discrimination and political marginalization (Olanrewaju 2024, 1). As previously noted, the discrimination against *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* is two-fold: it is triggered by the religious intolerance of Abrahamic adherents at a societal level and sustained by exclusionary government policies at an institutional level. These combined pressures result in a direct violation of the religious freedoms of *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* practitioners (Hanafi 2021). Within this context, this paper utilizes a human rights framework to critically analyze the systemic exclusion of *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe*.

1.2. *Indigenous knowledge*

Indigenous knowledge entails the study of the source, nature, and purpose of knowledge within specific historical and cultural contexts. Falola (2022, 515) explains that indigenous knowledge systems are ancient, communal systems of understanding passed down through generations. Unlike Western scientific paradigms, which often compartmentalize data into distinct disciplines, indigenous knowledge systems integrate ecological, spiritual, and

social dimensions into a holistic worldview. Preserved and shared through oral traditions such as storytelling and ritual practices (Yusuf and Olusegun 2015, 1), this intergenerational legacy constitutes a foundational knowledge system that ensures cultural values remain central to a community's identity. It therefore provides the epistemic basis for community interactions with the environment, ensuring long-term sustainability (Yusuf and Olusegun 2015, 1-2). Analyzing a group's epistemology, defined as their unique way of perceiving and constructing knowledge is fundamental to understanding their entire knowledge system. Such analysis serves to justify the validity and internal logic of their specific intellectual traditions. By extension, this scholarly approach ensures that indigenous modes of thought are evaluated on their own terms rather than through the restrictive lens of Western paradigms.

This paper constructs indigenous knowledge through a spiritual lens, asserting that indigenous religion is itself a rigorous and significant way of knowing. In this context, knowledge and spirituality are inseparable; they form a unified worldview where the sacred is woven into the fabric of everyday life (Fadipe 1970, 250; Idowu 1962, 5; Mbiti 1975, 9). Indigenous traditions typically view the natural world as a sentient entity animated by ancestral spirits or a universal life force. As Fadipe (1970, 1-19) explains, this spiritual connection provides the foundation for ecological stewardship as land, water, plants, and wildlife are regarded not as mere commodities, but as sacred resources to be protected. Hence, indigenous knowledge system transcends its philosophical foundations, encompassing vast practical applications ranging from sustainable agriculture and complex herbal medicine to advanced forest management and climate adaptation strategies (Alade et al. 2015, 217; Nyong et al. 2007, 787; Oloruntoba et al. 2020, 1). In this regard, knowledge of medicinal plants, seasonal cycles, or weather patterns is transmitted through traditional means that reinforce a community's moral and spiritual obligations to the universe. Significantly, indigenous spirituality/religion acts as the ethical compass for the application of knowledge, ensuring that human survival remains in harmony with the environment.

1.3. *Epistemicide*

Central to the social discrimination and political marginalization of *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* is the process of epistemicide, which systematically devalues indigenous knowledge. According to Santos (2014, 92) epistemicide is

the systematic destruction, silencing, or devaluation of indigenous knowledge systems, typically through the lens of colonialism or Western intellectual hegemony. This process is often facilitated by institutional mediums such as colonial education systems, where the language, history, and indigenous knowledge of the colonized are replaced by those of the colonizer. Marginalized groups are stripped of the conceptual frameworks needed to describe their own reality. Oloruntoba et al. (2020, 2) argue that, despite the end of colonial rule, most African countries, with only a few exceptions still rely on Western-style educational curricula. Nigeria is not an exception in this regard as its National Policy on Education (NPE) has historically prioritized Western-style curricula as the sole benchmark for modernity and development (Dada 2025, 20-21). By elevating Eurocentric academic standards as universal truths, dominant powers delegitimize alternative epistemologies such as oral traditions, local ecological wisdom, and communal philosophies. As a result, indigenous knowledge is often subordinated and reduced to the status of mere superstition or dismissed as primitive folklore. Santos (2014, 149) emphasizes that epistemicide creates a state of cognitive injustice where the oppressed whose knowledge system is being annihilated is forced to view itself through the distorting lens of the oppressor. This results in profound cultural alienation and the erasure of human cognitive diversity, leading to a fundamental failure to recognize the numerous ways through which diverse groups make meaning of their existence.

The intersection of epistemicide and religion is most apparent in the manner in which dominant monotheistic frameworks, primarily Christianity and Islam have historically dismantled and demonised indigenous spiritual knowledge systems. Through trans-Saharan trade and colonial missions, propagators of these faiths were able to dismiss native cosmologies, ancestral veneration, and traditional healing as barbaric, paganistic, or demonic (Aderibigbe 2022, 29; Olasupo 2013, 20; Olupona 2014, 25). By replacing local spiritual epistemologies with foreign religious conceptions, these dominant forces ensured that the sacred languages, oral liturgies, and holistic worldviews of the marginalized were either subjugated or driven underground (Falola 2022, 517). This religious hegemony forced a cognitive shift, compelling indigenous peoples to distrust their own cultural intuitions and metaphysical explanations of the world. As Aderibigbe (2022, 44) observed, the result is a state of profound spiritual alienation, where the divine is accessed almost exclusively through the conceptual lenses of Christian and Islamic doctrines. Consequently, *ìṣẹ̀ṣe* beliefs and practices are viewed as obstacles to civilization or salvation rather than

valid ways of understanding the universe. This effectively stripped these *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* traditions of their intellectual and moral validity. In this paper, epistemicide is contextualized through the specific silencing and subjugation of *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* (Yoruba indigenous religion), a theme explored in detail in the subsequent sections.

2. *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe*: A religion and knowledge system

Ìṣẹ̀ṣe is the foundational term for the indigenous religion of the Yoruba, representing a holistic way of life that predates the arrival of foreign monotheistic faiths in West Africa. While there is no scholarly consensus on its specific origins, Johnson (1921, 6) argues that the Yoruba migrated from the East (Upper Egypt), bringing ancient customs that evolved into their current indigenous belief system. *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* beliefs and practices are fundamental components of the Yoruba knowledge system, contributing significantly to the totality of Yoruba epistemology (McElwaine 2019, 44). These age-old traditions manifest in the diverse lived experiences of practitioners, expressing the unique ways of knowing embedded in their spiritual and religious inclinations. According to Idowu (1962, 202), Yoruba cosmology is a spiritual system centred on the veneration of Olodumare (the Supreme Being), Orishas (deities or divine intermediaries), spirits, and ancestors. *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* is deeply intertwined with ancestral veneration (*Egungun*) and the appeasement of deities that embody natural forces, such as the ocean, thunder, and iron. Prominent deities include Obatala, Orunmila, Sango, Ogun, Oya, Osun, and Esu. Scholarly estimates of the Yoruba pantheon vary, with some citing 201 (Elugbaju 2022, 112; Olupona 2011, 1) and others between 201 and 1,700 deities (Aderibigbe 2022, 34; Dopamu 1999, 7). A significant theological debate persists regarding the nature of *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe*. Scholars such as Adamo (2022, 5), Idowu (1962, 49), and Lucas (1948, 34) argue that its liturgical expressions reflect a form of monotheism directed toward one Supreme Being. Conversely, Bewaji (1998, 1-3), Fadipe (1970, 261) and Oguntoyinbo-Atere (2022, 414) contend that the adulation of numerous Orishas confirms that the religion is fundamentally polytheistic.

Worship and appeasement within *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* are multifaceted, encompassing praise, prayers, songs, chants, dances, sacrifices, offerings, libations, and traditional sermons (Awolalu 1973, 11; Awolalu and Dopamu 1979, 121; Idowu 1962, 110; Ilesanmi 1991, 224; Oguntoyinbo-Atere 2022, 416). Practitioners congregate in local shrines and temple-like spaces for fellowship, consult with priests and oracles, and perform rites to honour their deities. Beyond designated

shrines, *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* practitioners consecrate various elements of the natural and material world, including trees, mountains, palm fronds, and effigies (Oguntoyinbo-Atere 2022, 415). These sacred symbols serve as mediators in the spiritual relationship between the practitioner and Olodumare (the Supreme Being). While daily worship is common, large-scale communal gatherings are typically reserved for major events like *Sàngó*, *Egungun* and *Ifa* festivals (Oyedokun and Ajayi 2026, 61; Yusuf and Olusegun 2015, 4). Through these acts of appeasement and communal rituals, practitioners manifest their religious beliefs as profound symbolic expressions of their faith and heritage.

This paper conceptualizes *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* not only as a religion subject to human rights violations but as a fundamental knowledge system that must be preserved. As an epistemology, *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* serves as a profound repository of indigenous knowledge, representing the ancient spiritual and philosophical foundations of the Yoruba people (Abimbola 1975, 389; Abimbola 1976, 33). Far from being a static belief system, *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* is a dynamic system of knowing that integrates history, philosophy, ethics, natural science, and environmental wisdom into a unified worldview (Abimbola 1976, 33; Falola 2022, 517). This knowledge is primarily transmitted through the *Ifa* Corpus (*Odu Ifa*), the intellectual foundation of Yoruba civilization. Historically, this transmission has been oral. The rigorous training required of *Ifa* priests ensures the accurate preservation of the *Odu Ifá* (the *Ifá* literary corpus), providing a reliable record of the culture's historical, philosophical, and moral essence. The *Ifa* Corpus comprises 256 chapters (*Odu*) consisting of 16 major and 240 minor *Odu*s (Abimbola 1976, 26). Each *Odu* contains numerous poetic verses (*Ese*) that offer guidance on human existence and the natural world. Falola (2022, 520) observed that *Ifa* is the voice of Olodumare as interpreted by *Orunmila*, the *Orisha* of wisdom, divination, and witness to fate. The essence of *Ifa* lies in its ability to harmonize the spiritual and the material, providing a framework for problem-solving through both empirical observation and metaphysical insight (Falola 2022, 521). The *Odu Ifa* serves as a vital source of ethical guidance and spiritual instruction, directing practitioners on how to lead purposeful lives and navigate complex challenges. When individuals encounter significant existential or life challenges, they often consult a *Babalawo* (*Ifa* priest) or *Iyanifa* (*Ifa* priestess) for guidance (Abimbola 1976, 3; Eesuola and Falaiye 2021, 66). Utilizing specialized tools such as the *opon Ifa* (divination tray), *opele* (divination chain), and *ikin ifa* (sacred palm nuts), these practitioners provide spiritual solutions to their clients' problems (Abimbola 1976, 8-10). Essentially, this system functions as a sophisticated epistemological tool through which sacred knowledge is

accessed, interpreted, and applied to human affairs. Recognized by UNESCO in 2005 as a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity (Yusuf and Olusegun 2015, 8), Ifa remains a resilient tradition that challenges Western notions of literacy by proving that oral cultures possess rigorous, systematic ways of documenting the universe.

3. Systemic discrimination and marginalization: evaluating human rights violations against *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* practitioners

The recent resurgence of *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* represents a powerful cultural and intellectual pushback against decades of systemic marginalization. This shift is most evident in the formal recognition of *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* Day as a public holiday in several South-Western states (Olufemi 2025). However, while this demonstrates the resilience of the faith, it has done little to dismantle the deep-seated social discrimination confronting its practitioners. Stigmatization often stems from the perceptions of other religious groups, who frequently label *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* beliefs as archaic or barbaric, and its followers as ritualists or idol worshippers (Aderibigbe 2022, 29; Olasupo 2013, 20). These stereotypes permeate everyday life as *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* practitioners constantly encounter social prejudices that challenge their religious identity. These discriminatory practices manifest in the condemnation of traditional rites, the destruction of shrines, acts of violence during festivals, and the denial of employment opportunities (Abe 2024; Hanafi 2021; Olasupo 2013, 29; Oyekola 2023).

The struggle for recognition by *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* practitioners frequently triggers religious clashes in South-West Nigeria, particularly with adherents of Abrahamic faiths. A prominent example occurred in July 2023 in Ilorin, Kwara State, where Muslim groups threatened *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* practitioners to prevent them from holding their annual festival (Oyekola 2023). When these threats were rebuffed and the festival proceeded, a prominent *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* leader, Abdulazeez Adegbola (Tani Olohun), was arrested and detained for months before being granted bail. In addition to physical confrontation, *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* practitioners face systemic economic discrimination. Hanafi (2021) recounts a job interview where an applicant, upon identifying as an *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* practitioner, was immediately questioned if he intended to initiate students into a secret cult. Although not explicitly cited as the reason for his rejection, the correlation between his religious identity and the subsequent denial of employment is evident. By exercising their constitutional right to freedom of religion, most *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* practitioners face social

disadvantages and the loss of economic opportunities (Hanafi 2021). Such discriminatory practices not only undermine individual dignity but also incite communal violence, restrict freedom of movement, and marginalize *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* practitioners within the broader socio-economic landscape (Hanafi 2021; Olasupo 2013, 29; Oyekola 2023).

The systemic discrimination and marginalization of *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* practitioners represent a profound challenge to the protection of religious minorities in Nigeria. These practices not only erode social cohesion but also violate fundamental human rights enshrined in international treaties and Chapter IV of the 1999 Constitution of Nigeria (as amended). Fundamental to this issue is the principle of interdependence and indivisibility of human rights. A violation of religious freedom often triggers a cascade of other rights abuses. Section 33 (right to life): violated during violent communal clashes where *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* practitioners have lost their lives (Hanafi 2021). Section 34 (right to dignity): compromised by using derogatory language and the pagan branding to dehumanize *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* practitioners. Section 38 (freedom of religion) and Section 42 (freedom from discrimination): frequently breached by state and non-state actors who prioritize Abrahamic faiths over indigenous traditions. Sections 39, 40, and 41 (expression, assembly, and movement): violated when festivals or *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* Day processions are forcibly stopped or attacked by opposing religious groups (Abe 2024). When these incidents are viewed collectively, it becomes clear that the prejudice against *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* is not merely a social friction but a comprehensive human rights crisis. A contextual analysis of these occurrences, ranging from discriminatory employment practices to overt physical aggression underscores the profound legal and ethical deficiencies in safeguarding the religious liberties of *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* practitioners.

Critically, a broad contextualization of religion and human rights involves three dimensions: the freedom to express one's faith, protection from discrimination, and the state's role in safeguarding religious rights. Furthermore, a rigorous analysis must bridge individual and collective experiences, particularly for minority groups such as *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* practitioners (Dinstein 1976, 102; Olanrewaju 2020, 186). While religious discrimination is a shared collective burden, it is experienced through diverse individual circumstances. For example, the experience of a job seeker who was refused employment based on his religious identity is different from a practitioner who was prevented from performing rituals by adherents of dominant religious groups. The crux of this paper, however, lies in the government's complicity in these violations. Olanrewaju (2024, 1) notes that policy formulation is heavily

biased toward Christianity and Islam, thus, leaving *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* practitioners in a precarious position.

In 2013, the Osun State government, under Governor Rauf Aregbesola, became the first in South-West Nigeria to formally declare 20 August as *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* Day (Osun State Government 2013). By 2023, this recognition expanded as the governments of Lagos, Ogun, and Oyo also declared the date a public holiday. Currently, four of the six states in the region officially observe the day, marking a significant milestone for the visibility of the *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* faith in the public sphere (Olufemi 2025). While Ekiti and Ondo states have yet to follow suit, practitioners continue to advocate for a federal public holiday (Abe 2025). The federal government has historically resisted this, citing the fragmentation of traditional religions and the difficulty of satisfying diverse ethnic groups with a single date. Familusi (2010, 160) supports this view, noting that unlike the universally coordinated festivals of Christianity and Islam, traditional celebrations vary widely by tribe and date. However, as a sovereign authority, the government has a duty to shape policies that promote religious inclusion and eliminate bias. Even Familusi admits that the post-independence marginalization of traditional faiths fails to reflect Nigeria's true religious plurality. Thus, the persistent calls for national recognition represent a demand for equitable treatment.

Relatedly, the politics of power rotation in Nigeria is primarily designed to satisfy the dominant Abrahamic faiths (Obadare 2018, 50-55). Elective offices are systematically rotated between Muslim and Christian politicians, resulting in a profound underrepresentation of those who publicly identify with *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe*. As Ojo (2020, 141) notes, political parties consider candidates based on their alignment with Christianity or Islam, creating a significant barrier for *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* practitioners seeking elective office. This trend was evident during the 2023 presidential election, where religious identity dominated the national discourse. Debates focused exclusively on the Muslim-Muslim ticket of the All Progressives Congress (APC). While Christians opposed the ticket citing marginalization and Muslims defended it as a strategic necessity (Salaudeen and Isah 2024, 111), the concerns of indigenous religionists were entirely excluded from the conversation. This binary rotation of power is discriminatory and casts aspersions on the religious identity of *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* practitioners.

Educational curricula in Nigeria further institutionalize this marginalization by excluding indigenous religions from primary and secondary schooling. While Islamic Religious Studies and Christian Religious Studies have been core components of the Nigerian

curriculum since the 1950s (Lemu 2002), *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* is notably absent. This omission forces students who practice *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* to choose between Islamic Religious Studies or Christian Religious Studies, effectively coercing them into studying doctrines that contradict their own beliefs. Scholars suggest this exclusion is deliberate. Ihedinma (2004, 18) argues that government officials often view indigenous faiths as inferior or refuse to recognize them as religions. Similarly, Akin-Otiko (2019, 40) contends that the Christians and Muslims responsible for drafting the Basic 9-Year Education Curriculum frequently dismiss indigenous religions as paganistic. The government's failure to include *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* in schools negates its social responsibility to promote religious diversity, equality, and tolerance. In this context, the education system has been weaponized as a tool for the subjugation and silencing of indigenous heritage. Integrating indigenous religions into the curriculum is essential for allowing young Nigerians to understand their trado-religious history alongside foreign faiths (Akin-Otiko 2019, 34). In this regard, studying these religions is vital for Africans to reconstruct their past and assert their relevance within the global religious landscape.

While socio-political inclusion fosters a sense of belonging for all, human rights serve as a framework for upholding individual dignity regardless of social, economic, or religious status (Olanrewaju 2020, 185). However, it is essential to recognize that human rights are not merely individualistic; they also act as a catalyst for promoting the collective rights of groups and associations. The promotion of collective rights ensures that the individual liberties within specific communities are safeguarded against broader systemic pressures (Ilesanmi 1995, 293; Kymlicka 1995, 37-38; Taylor 1994, 59 -61). By protecting the rights of the group, the human rights framework enables minority, cultural, and indigenous populations to express their unique identities and traditions without fear of subjugation. In this sense, protecting the collective identity of a group such as *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* practitioners is a prerequisite for ensuring the individual religious freedom of its members.

4. From marginalization to epistemicide: deconstructing the erasure of *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* epistemology

Beyond the immediate violation of religious freedom, the social and political marginalization of *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* practitioners' triggers epistemicide. This implies the systematic subjugation of *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* as a legitimate knowledge system. According to Aderibigbe (2022, 32) the antagonism does not merely target a set of beliefs; it silences the

historical and philosophical foundations of the Yoruba. Therefore, any rigorous analysis of these challenges must be constructed within the framework of epistemic justice (Santos 2014, 42). The transition from social discrimination to epistemicide occurs through a process of systemic delegitimizing, where the demeaning status of *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* serves to invalidate it as a knowledge system. When practitioners face occupational discrimination or social stigma (Hanafi 2021), they are often pressured to adopt the linguistic and conceptual frameworks of dominant Abrahamic religions to achieve social mobility. This creates a knowledge hierarchy where *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* is rebranded as superstition or evil rather than a sophisticated system of ethics, philosophy, and science (Aderibigbe 2022, 29; Falola 2022, 517). By stripping *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* of its intellectual status and reducing it to archaic rituals, the state and dominant social actors effectively delegitimize the knowledge by rendering it unthinkable or shameful in modern discourse.

Government in Nigeria and dominant religious groups often dismiss *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* as a relic of the past rather than a valid way of knowing (Aderibigbe 2022, 29; Akin-Otiko 2019, 40; Olasupo 2013, 20). Marginalization is therefore institutionalized through educational exclusion, which disrupts the intergenerational transmission of Ifa-based epistemology. When public policies provide funding and curriculum space exclusively for Christianity and Islam, they signal that *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* is not a valid framework for modern citizenship (Akin-Otiko 2019, 34). This structural neglect forces a cognitive displacement; the younger generation is socialized to believe that indigenous ways of knowing are obstacles to progress. As the language, medicinal practices, and philosophical tenets of *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* are pushed out of the public sphere, the knowledge system undergoes a slow dissolution (Falola 2022, 528). This prejudice creates a knowledge hierarchy that drives epistemicide, making it difficult for policymakers to justify the protection of a system they perceive as obsolete. Public policies formulated solely on religious freedom without acknowledging *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe*'s intellectual and cultural significance are bound to fail. By relegating *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* to a subaltern status within the national religious hierarchy (Olanrewaju 2024, 1), the state and society effectively disenfranchise its practitioners, subjecting them to persistent epistemic injustice. In essence, the human rights violation of the practitioner is merely the surface of the issue. The more profound injustice is the subjugation of a unique way of understanding the world, which is the definitive act of epistemicide.

Now, it is essential to reconcile the right to religious freedom with the status of *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* as a knowledge system. The primary limitation of

current public policy is a narrow human rights approach that fails to validate *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* as a relevant and sophisticated knowledge system. When policymakers view *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* through a lens that dismisses its contemporary relevance in favor of dominant global religions (Akin-Otiko 2019, 40), the motivation to craft protective policies diminishes. This perceived lack of relevance acts as a catalyst for neglect and epistemicide. In effect, the failure to recognize *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* as a foundational component of Yoruba epistemology creates a knowledge hierarchy that institutionalizes epistemic injustice. While addressing the marginalization of minority religions such as *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* as a human rights issue is fundamental (Adewale 1993, 22; Atoi et al. 2019, 129; Babatunde et al. 2023, 56; Ilesanmi 2001, 529; Ogbuehi 2017, 162), legal frameworks alone are insufficient if the state fails to recognize *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* as a valid indigenous knowledge system. To address the root of the crisis, the government must move beyond a narrow human rights lens and adopt a framework that prioritizes epistemic justice. By promoting *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* as a vital component of Yoruba epistemology, the state can provide a more profound and sustainable basis for protecting the religious rights of its practitioners. Only by acknowledging *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* as a significant indigenous knowledge system can the government formulate policies that move beyond symbolic gestures toward the genuine preservation of Yoruba intellectual and spiritual heritage. Without this shift, achieving true religious freedom for *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* practitioners will remain a mirage.

Conclusion

Policy responses to the advocacy for the social and political inclusion of *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* practitioners remain slow and superficial. While the Nigerian Constitution guarantees the right to freedom of religion, these protections are rarely applied effectively to *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe*, leaving practitioners vulnerable to systemic discrimination and epistemicide. Moving forward, there is an urgent need for federal and state governments in South-West Nigeria to formulate policies that promote *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* as a legitimate indigenous knowledge system. Such a shift is essential for public re-education as it challenges the archaic or barbaric labels often used to justify marginalization. By achieving epistemic justice, the state can foster a society where diverse ways of knowing are respected, thereby ensuring that the religious rights of *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* practitioners are upheld as a matter of cultural and intellectual heritage. However, a significant barrier remains: the severe underrepresentation of *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* practitioners in government. This lack of political presence creates a leadership vacuum in

policymaking. The onus of transformation devolves upon non-state actors, specifically ̀ṣẹ̀ṣe practitioners and the traditional rulers who serve as the primary custodians of this heritage. Through strategic advocacy, these leaders can influence the state to adopt a framework of epistemic justice, ensuring that the protection of religious rights is anchored in a deep respect for indigenous knowledge.

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Yoruba indigenous religion (*Ìṣẹ̀ṣe*) and the right to freedom of religion: Intersecting human rights and epistemicide perspectives

La religión indígena Yoruba (*Ìṣẹ̀ṣe*) y el derecho a la libertad religiosa: Intersecciones entre los derechos humanos y las perspectivas del epistemicidio

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Summary: Introduction. 1. Conceptual frameworks. 1.1. Human rights. 1.2. Indigenous knowledge. 1.3. Epistemicide. 2. *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe*: a religion and knowledge system. 3. Systemic discrimination and marginalization: evaluating human rights violations against *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* practitioners. 4. From marginalization to epistemicide: deconstructing the erasure of *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* epistemology. Conclusion. References.

Abstract: *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* is the indigenous religion and spiritual heritage of the Yoruba people in South-West Nigeria. While existing literature has examined the marginalization of indigenous faiths through a human rights lens, this paper argues that such a framework cannot fully address the systemic roots of this discrimination. This is because human rights discourse typically focuses on religious freedom, failing to account for *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe*'s broader identity as a comprehensive indigenous knowledge system. This paper contends that in post-independence Nigeria, *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* has primarily suffered from epistemicide -the systematic silencing and delegitimization of indigenous ways of knowing. By reframing the challenges confronting *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* practitioners as a matter of epistemic justice, this paper moves beyond simple legal protections. It emphasizes that public policies should be anchored in an analytical framework that recognizes *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* as a significant component of Yoruba epistemology. Such

an approach provides the essential legitimacy to indigenous practices, serving as a catalyst for federal and state governments to move beyond rhetoric while providing substantive protection for the religious and epistemic rights of *ìṣẹ̀ṣẹ̀* practitioners.

Key words: *ìṣẹ̀ṣẹ̀*, discrimination, human rights, indigenous knowledge, epistemicide, public policy, epistemic justice

Resumen: El *ìṣẹ̀ṣẹ̀* es la religión indígena y el patrimonio espiritual del pueblo yoruba en el suroeste de Nigeria. Si bien la literatura existente ha examinado la marginación de las fes indígenas a través de la lente de los derechos humanos, este artículo sostiene que tal marco no puede abordar plenamente las raíces sistémicas de esta discriminación. Esto se debe a que el discurso de los derechos humanos suele centrarse en la libertad religiosa, sin tener en cuenta la identidad más amplia del *ìṣẹ̀ṣẹ̀* como un sistema integral de conocimiento indígena. Este trabajo sostiene que, en la Nigeria posindependiente, el *ìṣẹ̀ṣẹ̀* ha sufrido principalmente de epistemicidio: el silenciamiento y la deslegitimación sistemática de las formas indígenas de conocimiento. Al replantear los desafíos que enfrentan los practicantes del *ìṣẹ̀ṣẹ̀* como una cuestión de justicia epistémica, este artículo va más allá de las simples protecciones legales. Enfatiza que las políticas públicas deben anclarse en un marco analítico que reconozca al *ìṣẹ̀ṣẹ̀* como un componente significativo de la epistemología yoruba. Tal enfoque proporciona la legitimidad esencial a las prácticas indígenas, sirviendo como catalizador para que los gobiernos federales y estatales trasciendan la retórica y brinden una protección sustantiva a los derechos religiosos y epistémicos de los practicantes del *ìṣẹ̀ṣẹ̀*.

Palabras clave: *ìṣẹ̀ṣẹ̀*, discriminación, derechos humanos, conocimiento indígena, epistemicidio, política pública, justicia epistémica.

Introduction

The Yoruba are a prominent African ethnic group with a significant presence in Nigeria, the Benin Republic, and Togo. Following the transatlantic slave trade, a substantial number of Yorubas settled in Sierra Leone as returnees (Anderson 2020, 192), while others established enduring communities in Brazil, Cuba, Haiti, Trinidad and Tobago, and throughout the Caribbean (Cohen 2002, 19; Ofuasia 2024, 165; Udo 2020, 27). This paper focuses specifically on the Yoruba within Nigeria, where they constitute one of the nation's major ethnic groups. In 1995, the military regime of General Sani Abacha divided Nigeria into six geopolitical zones for administrative convenience: North-East, North-West, North-Central, South-East, South-South, and South-West (Okeke 2017, 2). The Yoruba predominantly occupy the South-West zone, comprising Lagos, Oyo, Ogun, Osun, Ekiti, and Ondo states, though they are also found in the North-Central states of Kogi and Kwara. Religious life in South-West Nigeria is diverse, encompassing Christianity, Islam, and indigenous religion (Janson 2021, 1). *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* represents a localized manifestation of African Indigenous Religions (AIRs), embodying the multifaceted ancestral traditions and spiritual cosmologies of the Yoruba.

According to Lugira (2009, 48), AIRs are faiths that evolved within and originated from the continent. These religions are characterized by intergenerational transmission, as beliefs and practices are passed down through lineage rather than institutional conversion. Owing to the absence of specific historical founders, the precise origins of AIRs remain difficult to date (Awolalu 1976, 2; Mbiti 1975, 14). Rather, scholars suggest they evolved from the collective efforts of African ancestors to address existential questions and the mysteries of the universe (Lugira 2009, 48). The spiritual essence of AIRs is deeply rooted in the connection between African peoples, nature, and their environment. Consequently, upholding traditional norms and cultural values is essential for preserving AIRs as a spiritual heritage. Unlike religions that have specific sacred books, AIR doctrines are not traditionally codified in a single text like the Bible or Quran. However, significant documentation exists, such as the Odu Ifa (Ifa Corpus) in Yorubaland. Scholars, most notably Abimbola (1975, 1976), identify the Odu Ifa as the foundational knowledge system of *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe*, providing a comprehensive framework for ethical, historical, philosophical, and political discourse. Accordingly, the Odu Ifa constitutes an integral component of the broader indigenous knowledge system embedded within *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe*.

Research conducted by Nolte et al. (2018, 30) indicates that *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* practitioners account for a mere 1.3% of the South-West Nigerian population, while Christians and Muslims represent 66.7% and 31.7%, respectively. This statistical decline positions *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* as a minority religion, subject to significant social discrimination. The marginalization of *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* is often driven by Abrahamic perspectives that reduce the tradition to derogatory categories like barbarism and idol worship, stripping it of its cultural complexity (Aderibigbe 2022, 29; Olasupo 2013, 20). Despite the official declaration of *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* Day as a public holiday in several South-Western states, institutional marginalization persists. Government policies often ignore the cultural and spiritual significance of indigenous religions, further excluding practitioners from the socio-political sphere (Akin-Otiko 2019, 34; Olanrewaju 2024, 1). This exclusion raises critical concerns regarding human rights protection and socio-political inclusion. Beyond religious bias, the marginalization of *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* represents epistemicide -the systematic suppression or silencing of indigenous knowledge systems. In this context, *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* can be conceptualized as both a spiritual cosmology and a vital repository of indigenous knowledge, necessitating protection from both state and non-state actors.

Adewale (1993, 22) notes that *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* inherently recognizes fundamental rights, including the rights to property, existence, worship, and expression, as well as the state's obligation to provide security and education. While scholars such as Ilesanmi (2001), Nwauche (2008) and Ogbuehi (2017) have examined the marginalization of Nigeria's minority religions, their work rarely focuses on *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe*. Conversely, a growing body of research explores African indigenous religions through the lens of epistemicide and African epistemologies (Falola and Griffin 2021; Mokhoathi 2017). Within this field, Eesuola and Falaiye (2021), and McElwaine (2019) specifically analyze *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe*; however, they do not conceptualize the intersection between epistemicide and human rights. Thus, there remains a dearth of literature connecting epistemic deconstruction to the human rights violations faced by *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* practitioners. This paper addresses this gap by framing the socio-political marginalization of *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* as both a human rights violation and an act of epistemicide. Following this introduction, the study establishes its conceptual frameworks and examines *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* as a dual system of religion and knowledge. It then discusses specific human rights violations before analyzing how epistemicide undermines *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe*. The paper concludes with a summary of the analysis.

1. Conceptual frameworks

1.1. *Human rights*

The importance of human rights as a legal and conceptual framework for upholding dignity, equity, and justice is foundational to modern governance. These are the fundamental rights and freedoms inherent to every individual by virtue of their humanity (Donnelly 2005, 2; Moyn 2018, 121; van der Rijt 2017, 1322). The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), adopted by the United Nations in 1948, remains the definitive global blueprint for these protections. Rahman (2020, 6) emphasized that the UDHR is not a legally binding treaty. However, it established the essential normative framework that has inspired numerous international laws and national constitutions. The freedom of religion and belief is a fundamental human right enshrined in various international and regional treaties, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966), and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (1981).

Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) specifically states that:

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion; this right includes freedom to change their religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others, in public or private, to manifest their religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship, and observance

Similarly, Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966) states that:

Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. This right shall include freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of their choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others, in public or private, to manifest their religion or belief in worship, observance, practice, and teaching.

According to Ekhaton (2015, 253) and Olanrewaju (2026, 13), as a signatory to international human rights treaties, Nigeria has domesticated these principles by incorporating them into its national legal framework. The primary authority for the protection and promotion of human rights is found in Chapter IV of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (as amended). Sections

33 to 46 of this chapter outline Fundamental Rights, including the rights to life, personal liberty, fair hearing, and private life, as well as the freedoms of thought, religion, expression, assembly, and movement, and the right to freedom from discrimination.

Specifically, Section 38(1) of the Constitution stipulates that:

Every person shall be entitled to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom (either alone or in community with others, and in public or in private) to manifest and propagate his religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice and observance.

The constitutional provision for religious freedom in Nigeria implies that the state recognizes this as a fundamental human right. This framework places a significant obligation on federal, state, and local governments as duty bearers to protect and promote these rights for all citizens. Given that Nigeria is both a multi-ethnic and multi-religious nation, Section 38 of the Constitution theoretically shields all faiths from discrimination and provides a legal pathway for anyone whose rights are infringed upon to seek redress in court (Tanimu and Raji 2020, 10). However, a stark gap exists between constitutional theory and lived reality. Despite these protections, indigenous religions as minority faiths suffer from persistent social discrimination and political marginalization (Olanrewaju 2024, 1). As previously noted, the discrimination against *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* is two-fold: it is triggered by the religious intolerance of Abrahamic adherents at a societal level and sustained by exclusionary government policies at an institutional level. These combined pressures result in a direct violation of the religious freedoms of *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* practitioners (Hanafi 2021). Within this context, this paper utilizes a human rights framework to critically analyze the systemic exclusion of *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe*.

1.2. *Indigenous knowledge*

Indigenous knowledge entails the study of the source, nature, and purpose of knowledge within specific historical and cultural contexts. Falola (2022, 515) explains that indigenous knowledge systems are ancient, communal systems of understanding passed down through generations. Unlike Western scientific paradigms, which often compartmentalize data into distinct disciplines, indigenous knowledge systems integrate ecological, spiritual, and

social dimensions into a holistic worldview. Preserved and shared through oral traditions such as storytelling and ritual practices (Yusuf and Olusegun 2015, 1), this intergenerational legacy constitutes a foundational knowledge system that ensures cultural values remain central to a community's identity. It therefore provides the epistemic basis for community interactions with the environment, ensuring long-term sustainability (Yusuf and Olusegun 2015, 1-2). Analyzing a group's epistemology, defined as their unique way of perceiving and constructing knowledge is fundamental to understanding their entire knowledge system. Such analysis serves to justify the validity and internal logic of their specific intellectual traditions. By extension, this scholarly approach ensures that indigenous modes of thought are evaluated on their own terms rather than through the restrictive lens of Western paradigms.

This paper constructs indigenous knowledge through a spiritual lens, asserting that indigenous religion is itself a rigorous and significant way of knowing. In this context, knowledge and spirituality are inseparable; they form a unified worldview where the sacred is woven into the fabric of everyday life (Fadipe 1970, 250; Idowu 1962, 5; Mbiti 1975, 9). Indigenous traditions typically view the natural world as a sentient entity animated by ancestral spirits or a universal life force. As Fadipe (1970, 1-19) explains, this spiritual connection provides the foundation for ecological stewardship as land, water, plants, and wildlife are regarded not as mere commodities, but as sacred resources to be protected. Hence, indigenous knowledge system transcends its philosophical foundations, encompassing vast practical applications ranging from sustainable agriculture and complex herbal medicine to advanced forest management and climate adaptation strategies (Alade et al. 2015, 217; Nyong et al. 2007, 787; Oloruntoba et al. 2020, 1). In this regard, knowledge of medicinal plants, seasonal cycles, or weather patterns is transmitted through traditional means that reinforce a community's moral and spiritual obligations to the universe. Significantly, indigenous spirituality/religion acts as the ethical compass for the application of knowledge, ensuring that human survival remains in harmony with the environment.

1.3. *Epistemicide*

Central to the social discrimination and political marginalization of *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* is the process of epistemicide, which systematically devalues indigenous knowledge. According to Santos (2014, 92) epistemicide is

the systematic destruction, silencing, or devaluation of indigenous knowledge systems, typically through the lens of colonialism or Western intellectual hegemony. This process is often facilitated by institutional mediums such as colonial education systems, where the language, history, and indigenous knowledge of the colonized are replaced by those of the colonizer. Marginalized groups are stripped of the conceptual frameworks needed to describe their own reality. Oloruntoba et al. (2020, 2) argue that, despite the end of colonial rule, most African countries, with only a few exceptions still rely on Western-style educational curricula. Nigeria is not an exception in this regard as its National Policy on Education (NPE) has historically prioritized Western-style curricula as the sole benchmark for modernity and development (Dada 2025, 20-21). By elevating Eurocentric academic standards as universal truths, dominant powers delegitimize alternative epistemologies such as oral traditions, local ecological wisdom, and communal philosophies. As a result, indigenous knowledge is often subordinated and reduced to the status of mere superstition or dismissed as primitive folklore. Santos (2014, 149) emphasizes that epistemicide creates a state of cognitive injustice where the oppressed whose knowledge system is being annihilated is forced to view itself through the distorting lens of the oppressor. This results in profound cultural alienation and the erasure of human cognitive diversity, leading to a fundamental failure to recognize the numerous ways through which diverse groups make meaning of their existence.

The intersection of epistemicide and religion is most apparent in the manner in which dominant monotheistic frameworks, primarily Christianity and Islam have historically dismantled and demonised indigenous spiritual knowledge systems. Through trans-Saharan trade and colonial missions, propagators of these faiths were able to dismiss native cosmologies, ancestral veneration, and traditional healing as barbaric, paganistic, or demonic (Aderibigbe 2022, 29; Olasupo 2013, 20; Olupona 2014, 25). By replacing local spiritual epistemologies with foreign religious conceptions, these dominant forces ensured that the sacred languages, oral liturgies, and holistic worldviews of the marginalized were either subjugated or driven underground (Falola 2022, 517). This religious hegemony forced a cognitive shift, compelling indigenous peoples to distrust their own cultural intuitions and metaphysical explanations of the world. As Aderibigbe (2022, 44) observed, the result is a state of profound spiritual alienation, where the divine is accessed almost exclusively through the conceptual lenses of Christian and Islamic doctrines. Consequently, *ìṣẹ̀ṣe* beliefs and practices are viewed as obstacles to civilization or salvation rather than

valid ways of understanding the universe. This effectively stripped these *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* traditions of their intellectual and moral validity. In this paper, epistemicide is contextualized through the specific silencing and subjugation of *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* (Yoruba indigenous religion), a theme explored in detail in the subsequent sections.

2. *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe*: A religion and knowledge system

Ìṣẹ̀ṣe is the foundational term for the indigenous religion of the Yoruba, representing a holistic way of life that predates the arrival of foreign monotheistic faiths in West Africa. While there is no scholarly consensus on its specific origins, Johnson (1921, 6) argues that the Yoruba migrated from the East (Upper Egypt), bringing ancient customs that evolved into their current indigenous belief system. *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* beliefs and practices are fundamental components of the Yoruba knowledge system, contributing significantly to the totality of Yoruba epistemology (McElwaine 2019, 44). These age-old traditions manifest in the diverse lived experiences of practitioners, expressing the unique ways of knowing embedded in their spiritual and religious inclinations. According to Idowu (1962, 202), Yoruba cosmology is a spiritual system centred on the veneration of Olodumare (the Supreme Being), Orishas (deities or divine intermediaries), spirits, and ancestors. *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* is deeply intertwined with ancestral veneration (*Egungun*) and the appeasement of deities that embody natural forces, such as the ocean, thunder, and iron. Prominent deities include Obatala, Orunmila, Sango, Ogun, Oya, Osun, and Esu. Scholarly estimates of the Yoruba pantheon vary, with some citing 201 (Elugbaju 2022, 112; Olupona 2011, 1) and others between 201 and 1,700 deities (Aderibigbe 2022, 34; Dopamu 1999, 7). A significant theological debate persists regarding the nature of *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe*. Scholars such as Adamo (2022, 5), Idowu (1962, 49), and Lucas (1948, 34) argue that its liturgical expressions reflect a form of monotheism directed toward one Supreme Being. Conversely, Bewaji (1998, 1-3), Fadipe (1970, 261) and Oguntoyinbo-Atere (2022, 414) contend that the adulation of numerous Orishas confirms that the religion is fundamentally polytheistic.

Worship and appeasement within *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* are multifaceted, encompassing praise, prayers, songs, chants, dances, sacrifices, offerings, libations, and traditional sermons (Awolalu 1973, 11; Awolalu and Dopamu 1979, 121; Idowu 1962, 110; Ilesanmi 1991, 224; Oguntoyinbo-Atere 2022, 416). Practitioners congregate in local shrines and temple-like spaces for fellowship, consult with priests and oracles, and perform rites to honour their deities. Beyond designated

shrines, *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* practitioners consecrate various elements of the natural and material world, including trees, mountains, palm fronds, and effigies (Oguntoyinbo-Atere 2022, 415). These sacred symbols serve as mediators in the spiritual relationship between the practitioner and Olodumare (the Supreme Being). While daily worship is common, large-scale communal gatherings are typically reserved for major events like *Sàngó*, *Egungun* and *Ifa* festivals (Oyedokun and Ajayi 2026, 61; Yusuf and Olusegun 2015, 4). Through these acts of appeasement and communal rituals, practitioners manifest their religious beliefs as profound symbolic expressions of their faith and heritage.

This paper conceptualizes *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* not only as a religion subject to human rights violations but as a fundamental knowledge system that must be preserved. As an epistemology, *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* serves as a profound repository of indigenous knowledge, representing the ancient spiritual and philosophical foundations of the Yoruba people (Abimbola 1975, 389; Abimbola 1976, 33). Far from being a static belief system, *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* is a dynamic system of knowing that integrates history, philosophy, ethics, natural science, and environmental wisdom into a unified worldview (Abimbola 1976, 33; Falola 2022, 517). This knowledge is primarily transmitted through the *Ifa* Corpus (*Odu Ifa*), the intellectual foundation of Yoruba civilization. Historically, this transmission has been oral. The rigorous training required of *Ifa* priests ensures the accurate preservation of the *Odu Ifá* (the *Ifá* literary corpus), providing a reliable record of the culture's historical, philosophical, and moral essence. The *Ifa* Corpus comprises 256 chapters (*Odu*) consisting of 16 major and 240 minor *Odu*s (Abimbola 1976, 26). Each *Odu* contains numerous poetic verses (*Ese*) that offer guidance on human existence and the natural world. Falola (2022, 520) observed that *Ifa* is the voice of Olodumare as interpreted by *Orunmila*, the *Orisha* of wisdom, divination, and witness to fate. The essence of *Ifa* lies in its ability to harmonize the spiritual and the material, providing a framework for problem-solving through both empirical observation and metaphysical insight (Falola 2022, 521). The *Odu Ifa* serves as a vital source of ethical guidance and spiritual instruction, directing practitioners on how to lead purposeful lives and navigate complex challenges. When individuals encounter significant existential or life challenges, they often consult a *Babalawo* (*Ifa* priest) or *Iyanifa* (*Ifa* priestess) for guidance (Abimbola 1976, 3; Eesuola and Falaiye 2021, 66). Utilizing specialized tools such as the *opon Ifa* (divination tray), *opele* (divination chain), and *ikin ifa* (sacred palm nuts), these practitioners provide spiritual solutions to their clients' problems (Abimbola 1976, 8-10). Essentially, this system functions as a sophisticated epistemological tool through which sacred knowledge is

accessed, interpreted, and applied to human affairs. Recognized by UNESCO in 2005 as a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity (Yusuf and Olusegun 2015, 8), Ifa remains a resilient tradition that challenges Western notions of literacy by proving that oral cultures possess rigorous, systematic ways of documenting the universe.

3. Systemic discrimination and marginalization: evaluating human rights violations against *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* practitioners

The recent resurgence of *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* represents a powerful cultural and intellectual pushback against decades of systemic marginalization. This shift is most evident in the formal recognition of *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* Day as a public holiday in several South-Western states (Olufemi 2025). However, while this demonstrates the resilience of the faith, it has done little to dismantle the deep-seated social discrimination confronting its practitioners. Stigmatization often stems from the perceptions of other religious groups, who frequently label *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* beliefs as archaic or barbaric, and its followers as ritualists or idol worshippers (Aderibigbe 2022, 29; Olasupo 2013, 20). These stereotypes permeate everyday life as *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* practitioners constantly encounter social prejudices that challenge their religious identity. These discriminatory practices manifest in the condemnation of traditional rites, the destruction of shrines, acts of violence during festivals, and the denial of employment opportunities (Abe 2024; Hanafi 2021; Olasupo 2013, 29; Oyekola 2023).

The struggle for recognition by *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* practitioners frequently triggers religious clashes in South-West Nigeria, particularly with adherents of Abrahamic faiths. A prominent example occurred in July 2023 in Ilorin, Kwara State, where Muslim groups threatened *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* practitioners to prevent them from holding their annual festival (Oyekola 2023). When these threats were rebuffed and the festival proceeded, a prominent *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* leader, Abdulazeez Adegbola (Tani Olohun), was arrested and detained for months before being granted bail. In addition to physical confrontation, *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* practitioners face systemic economic discrimination. Hanafi (2021) recounts a job interview where an applicant, upon identifying as an *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* practitioner, was immediately questioned if he intended to initiate students into a secret cult. Although not explicitly cited as the reason for his rejection, the correlation between his religious identity and the subsequent denial of employment is evident. By exercising their constitutional right to freedom of religion, most *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* practitioners face social

disadvantages and the loss of economic opportunities (Hanafi 2021). Such discriminatory practices not only undermine individual dignity but also incite communal violence, restrict freedom of movement, and marginalize *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* practitioners within the broader socio-economic landscape (Hanafi 2021; Olasupo 2013, 29; Oyekola 2023).

The systemic discrimination and marginalization of *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* practitioners represent a profound challenge to the protection of religious minorities in Nigeria. These practices not only erode social cohesion but also violate fundamental human rights enshrined in international treaties and Chapter IV of the 1999 Constitution of Nigeria (as amended). Fundamental to this issue is the principle of interdependence and indivisibility of human rights. A violation of religious freedom often triggers a cascade of other rights abuses. Section 33 (right to life): violated during violent communal clashes where *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* practitioners have lost their lives (Hanafi 2021). Section 34 (right to dignity): compromised by using derogatory language and the pagan branding to dehumanize *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* practitioners. Section 38 (freedom of religion) and Section 42 (freedom from discrimination): frequently breached by state and non-state actors who prioritize Abrahamic faiths over indigenous traditions. Sections 39, 40, and 41 (expression, assembly, and movement): violated when festivals or *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* Day processions are forcibly stopped or attacked by opposing religious groups (Abe 2024). When these incidents are viewed collectively, it becomes clear that the prejudice against *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* is not merely a social friction but a comprehensive human rights crisis. A contextual analysis of these occurrences, ranging from discriminatory employment practices to overt physical aggression underscores the profound legal and ethical deficiencies in safeguarding the religious liberties of *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* practitioners.

Critically, a broad contextualization of religion and human rights involves three dimensions: the freedom to express one's faith, protection from discrimination, and the state's role in safeguarding religious rights. Furthermore, a rigorous analysis must bridge individual and collective experiences, particularly for minority groups such as *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* practitioners (Dinstein 1976, 102; Olanrewaju 2020, 186). While religious discrimination is a shared collective burden, it is experienced through diverse individual circumstances. For example, the experience of a job seeker who was refused employment based on his religious identity is different from a practitioner who was prevented from performing rituals by adherents of dominant religious groups. The crux of this paper, however, lies in the government's complicity in these violations. Olanrewaju (2024, 1) notes that policy formulation is heavily

biased toward Christianity and Islam, thus, leaving *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* practitioners in a precarious position.

In 2013, the Osun State government, under Governor Rauf Aregbesola, became the first in South-West Nigeria to formally declare 20 August as *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* Day (Osun State Government 2013). By 2023, this recognition expanded as the governments of Lagos, Ogun, and Oyo also declared the date a public holiday. Currently, four of the six states in the region officially observe the day, marking a significant milestone for the visibility of the *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* faith in the public sphere (Olufemi 2025). While Ekiti and Ondo states have yet to follow suit, practitioners continue to advocate for a federal public holiday (Abe 2025). The federal government has historically resisted this, citing the fragmentation of traditional religions and the difficulty of satisfying diverse ethnic groups with a single date. Familusi (2010, 160) supports this view, noting that unlike the universally coordinated festivals of Christianity and Islam, traditional celebrations vary widely by tribe and date. However, as a sovereign authority, the government has a duty to shape policies that promote religious inclusion and eliminate bias. Even Familusi admits that the post-independence marginalization of traditional faiths fails to reflect Nigeria's true religious plurality. Thus, the persistent calls for national recognition represent a demand for equitable treatment.

Relatedly, the politics of power rotation in Nigeria is primarily designed to satisfy the dominant Abrahamic faiths (Obadare 2018, 50-55). Elective offices are systematically rotated between Muslim and Christian politicians, resulting in a profound underrepresentation of those who publicly identify with *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe*. As Ojo (2020, 141) notes, political parties consider candidates based on their alignment with Christianity or Islam, creating a significant barrier for *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* practitioners seeking elective office. This trend was evident during the 2023 presidential election, where religious identity dominated the national discourse. Debates focused exclusively on the Muslim-Muslim ticket of the All Progressives Congress (APC). While Christians opposed the ticket citing marginalization and Muslims defended it as a strategic necessity (Salaudeen and Isah 2024, 111), the concerns of indigenous religionists were entirely excluded from the conversation. This binary rotation of power is discriminatory and casts aspersions on the religious identity of *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* practitioners.

Educational curricula in Nigeria further institutionalize this marginalization by excluding indigenous religions from primary and secondary schooling. While Islamic Religious Studies and Christian Religious Studies have been core components of the Nigerian

curriculum since the 1950s (Lemu 2002), *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* is notably absent. This omission forces students who practice *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* to choose between Islamic Religious Studies or Christian Religious Studies, effectively coercing them into studying doctrines that contradict their own beliefs. Scholars suggest this exclusion is deliberate. Ihedinma (2004, 18) argues that government officials often view indigenous faiths as inferior or refuse to recognize them as religions. Similarly, Akin-Otiko (2019, 40) contends that the Christians and Muslims responsible for drafting the Basic 9-Year Education Curriculum frequently dismiss indigenous religions as paganistic. The government's failure to include *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* in schools negates its social responsibility to promote religious diversity, equality, and tolerance. In this context, the education system has been weaponized as a tool for the subjugation and silencing of indigenous heritage. Integrating indigenous religions into the curriculum is essential for allowing young Nigerians to understand their trado-religious history alongside foreign faiths (Akin-Otiko 2019, 34). In this regard, studying these religions is vital for Africans to reconstruct their past and assert their relevance within the global religious landscape.

While socio-political inclusion fosters a sense of belonging for all, human rights serve as a framework for upholding individual dignity regardless of social, economic, or religious status (Olanrewaju 2020, 185). However, it is essential to recognize that human rights are not merely individualistic; they also act as a catalyst for promoting the collective rights of groups and associations. The promotion of collective rights ensures that the individual liberties within specific communities are safeguarded against broader systemic pressures (Ilesanmi 1995, 293; Kymlicka 1995, 37-38; Taylor 1994, 59 -61). By protecting the rights of the group, the human rights framework enables minority, cultural, and indigenous populations to express their unique identities and traditions without fear of subjugation. In this sense, protecting the collective identity of a group such as *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* practitioners is a prerequisite for ensuring the individual religious freedom of its members.

4. From marginalization to epistemicide: deconstructing the erasure of *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* epistemology

Beyond the immediate violation of religious freedom, the social and political marginalization of *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* practitioners' triggers epistemicide. This implies the systematic subjugation of *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* as a legitimate knowledge system. According to Aderibigbe (2022, 32) the antagonism does not merely target a set of beliefs; it silences the

historical and philosophical foundations of the Yoruba. Therefore, any rigorous analysis of these challenges must be constructed within the framework of epistemic justice (Santos 2014, 42). The transition from social discrimination to epistemicide occurs through a process of systemic delegitimizing, where the demeaning status of *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* serves to invalidate it as a knowledge system. When practitioners face occupational discrimination or social stigma (Hanafi 2021), they are often pressured to adopt the linguistic and conceptual frameworks of dominant Abrahamic religions to achieve social mobility. This creates a knowledge hierarchy where *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* is rebranded as superstition or evil rather than a sophisticated system of ethics, philosophy, and science (Aderibigbe 2022, 29; Falola 2022, 517). By stripping *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* of its intellectual status and reducing it to archaic rituals, the state and dominant social actors effectively delegitimize the knowledge by rendering it unthinkable or shameful in modern discourse.

Government in Nigeria and dominant religious groups often dismiss *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* as a relic of the past rather than a valid way of knowing (Aderibigbe 2022, 29; Akin-Otiko 2019, 40; Olasupo 2013, 20). Marginalization is therefore institutionalized through educational exclusion, which disrupts the intergenerational transmission of Ifa-based epistemology. When public policies provide funding and curriculum space exclusively for Christianity and Islam, they signal that *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* is not a valid framework for modern citizenship (Akin-Otiko 2019, 34). This structural neglect forces a cognitive displacement; the younger generation is socialized to believe that indigenous ways of knowing are obstacles to progress. As the language, medicinal practices, and philosophical tenets of *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* are pushed out of the public sphere, the knowledge system undergoes a slow dissolution (Falola 2022, 528). This prejudice creates a knowledge hierarchy that drives epistemicide, making it difficult for policymakers to justify the protection of a system they perceive as obsolete. Public policies formulated solely on religious freedom without acknowledging *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe*'s intellectual and cultural significance are bound to fail. By relegating *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* to a subaltern status within the national religious hierarchy (Olanrewaju 2024, 1), the state and society effectively disenfranchise its practitioners, subjecting them to persistent epistemic injustice. In essence, the human rights violation of the practitioner is merely the surface of the issue. The more profound injustice is the subjugation of a unique way of understanding the world, which is the definitive act of epistemicide.

Now, it is essential to reconcile the right to religious freedom with the status of *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* as a knowledge system. The primary limitation of

current public policy is a narrow human rights approach that fails to validate *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* as a relevant and sophisticated knowledge system. When policymakers view *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* through a lens that dismisses its contemporary relevance in favor of dominant global religions (Akin-Otiko 2019, 40), the motivation to craft protective policies diminishes. This perceived lack of relevance acts as a catalyst for neglect and epistemicide. In effect, the failure to recognize *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* as a foundational component of Yoruba epistemology creates a knowledge hierarchy that institutionalizes epistemic injustice. While addressing the marginalization of minority religions such as *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* as a human rights issue is fundamental (Adewale 1993, 22; Atoi et al. 2019, 129; Babatunde et al. 2023, 56; Ilesanmi 2001, 529; Ogbuehi 2017, 162), legal frameworks alone are insufficient if the state fails to recognize *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* as a valid indigenous knowledge system. To address the root of the crisis, the government must move beyond a narrow human rights lens and adopt a framework that prioritizes epistemic justice. By promoting *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* as a vital component of Yoruba epistemology, the state can provide a more profound and sustainable basis for protecting the religious rights of its practitioners. Only by acknowledging *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* as a significant indigenous knowledge system can the government formulate policies that move beyond symbolic gestures toward the genuine preservation of Yoruba intellectual and spiritual heritage. Without this shift, achieving true religious freedom for *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* practitioners will remain a mirage.

Conclusion

Policy responses to the advocacy for the social and political inclusion of *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* practitioners remain slow and superficial. While the Nigerian Constitution guarantees the right to freedom of religion, these protections are rarely applied effectively to *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe*, leaving practitioners vulnerable to systemic discrimination and epistemicide. Moving forward, there is an urgent need for federal and state governments in South-West Nigeria to formulate policies that promote *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* as a legitimate indigenous knowledge system. Such a shift is essential for public re-education as it challenges the archaic or barbaric labels often used to justify marginalization. By achieving epistemic justice, the state can foster a society where diverse ways of knowing are respected, thereby ensuring that the religious rights of *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* practitioners are upheld as a matter of cultural and intellectual heritage. However, a significant barrier remains: the severe underrepresentation of *Ìṣẹ̀ṣe* practitioners in government. This lack of political presence creates a leadership vacuum in

policymaking. The onus of transformation devolves upon non-state actors, specifically ̀ṣẹ̀ṣe practitioners and the traditional rulers who serve as the primary custodians of this heritage. Through strategic advocacy, these leaders can influence the state to adopt a framework of epistemic justice, ensuring that the protection of religious rights is anchored in a deep respect for indigenous knowledge.

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