International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Bulletin
ISSN 3108-1428 (Online)

Article History
Received: 16 July 2026
Accepted: 08 Sep 2026
Published: 29 Sep 2026

International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Bulletin
Volume 5 Issue 5 (Sep – Oct) 2026

DOI:
10.5281/zenodo.23032076

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Keywords: Esetology; Eset; Ibibio; Philosophy of History; African Historiography.

Esetology: Towards an Indigenous African Theory of Historical Consciousness and Historiography

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the indigenous Ibibio concept of *eset* and develops Esetology as a theoretical framework for understanding the philosophy of history from an African perspective. Although the discipline of history has been extensively theorized within Western intellectual traditions, comparatively little attention has been devoted to indigenous African conceptions of history embedded in African languages and cultural philosophies. Drawing on the Ibibio linguistic concept of *eset*, meaning history, and its etymological relationship with "set" ("to revive," "restore," or "bring back to life"), the study argues that the Ibibio conceive history as the recovery of meaningful aspects of the past for the benefit of the present and the future. Employing the historical research method within a multidisciplinary framework that incorporates historiography, philosophy, linguistics, anthropology, oral tradition, and African Indigenous Knowledge Systems, the paper critically analyses selected Ibibio proverbs, oral traditions, and cultural practices as expressions of indigenous historical consciousness. It further develops the concepts of the ontology, epistemology, methodology, ethics, and Seven Foundational Canons of Esetology, positioning the framework within contemporary debates on African historiography, collective memory, and the decolonization of knowledge. The study contends that *eset* is more than a lexical equivalent of "history"; it represents a distinctive philosophical understanding of historical continuity, collective memory, intergenerational knowledge transmission, ethical remembrance, and the practical utility of historical knowledge. It concludes that Esetology provides an original indigenous African philosophy of history capable of enriching historical theory, broadening the conceptual foundations of historiography, and advancing the decolonization of historical scholarship by demonstrating that African languages are not merely repositories of

historical information but also sources of historical theory. The paper recommends further comparative studies of indigenous philosophies of history across Africa to deepen global understanding of historical consciousness.

INTRODUCTION

History is more than the chronological reconstruction of past events; it is a means through which societies understand themselves, preserve collective memory, and shape their future. Every civilization has evolved distinctive ways of interpreting the past and transmitting historical knowledge across generations. Consequently, the philosophy of history varies across cultures because each society develops its own assumptions regarding the nature of time, memory, truth, identity, and historical continuity. While the academic discipline of history has been profoundly influenced by European intellectual traditions, particularly since the nineteenth century, indigenous societies in Africa had long established sophisticated systems for preserving and interpreting the past through oral traditions, language, ritual performances, genealogies, folklore, proverbs, material culture, and collective memory. These indigenous systems were not merely repositories of information but embodied philosophical conceptions of history that guided social organization, political legitimacy, moral instruction, and cultural continuity.

For several decades, debates within African historiography have challenged the dominance of Eurocentric historical paradigms. Early colonial scholarship frequently questioned Africa's historical consciousness because many societies relied principally on oral rather than written traditions. Such assumptions have since been rejected through the pioneering works of African historians and anthropologists who demonstrated that oral traditions constitute legitimate historical sources when subjected to rigorous historical criticism. These scholarly interventions significantly expanded the methodological frontiers of historical research and established that African societies possessed elaborate mechanisms for preserving collective memory. Nevertheless, much of the existing scholarship has concentrated on validating oral traditions as historical evidence, with comparatively less attention devoted to the indigenous philosophies that explain why African societies remember, preserve, interpret, and transmit history in particular ways.

Among the Ibibio people of present-day Akwa Ibom State, southern part of Cross River State, parts of Abia State, and adjoining areas of the Niger Delta, historical consciousness is embedded within the concept of *eset* or *mbʌk eset*. Although commonly translated as "history," *eset*

possesses meanings that extend beyond the conventional English understanding of the term. Linguistically, *eset* derives from the Ibibio root "set", meaning "to resurrect," "to revive," or "to bring back to life." This etymological foundation provides an important philosophical insight into the Ibibio understanding of history. Rather than viewing the past as an irretrievable sequence of completed events, the Ibibio conceive history as the continuous recovery and revitalization of experiences that remain embedded within the collective consciousness of the people. The past may become obscured by the passage of time, but it is never permanently extinguished. It remains recoverable whenever individuals or communities require guidance, explanation, identity, or moral direction.

This understanding distinguishes the Ibibio conception of history from many conventional definitions that emphasize chronology, documentation, or factual reconstruction. Within the Ibibio worldview, history is fundamentally relational. It exists because communities continuously negotiate their relationship with their ancestors, cultural institutions, moral values, and collective experiences. Historical knowledge is therefore neither passive nor static. It performs active social functions by legitimizing institutions, preserving cultural identity, educating younger generations, resolving disputes, reinforcing communal solidarity, and providing ethical guidance for contemporary decision-making. In this regard, history becomes a living cultural resource rather than a detached academic discipline.

The philosophical foundations of *eset* are further preserved within the rich corpus of Ibibio proverbs, idioms, folktales, praise poetry, and oral narratives. Proverbs such as *Eset ubed, eset ubeede* encapsulate profound reflections on memory, continuity, and historical relevance. Others emphasize intergenerational transmission of knowledge, the persistence of collective memory despite social change, and the ethical responsibility accompanying historical narration. Collectively, these indigenous expressions reveal a coherent philosophy of history that has received limited systematic scholarly attention despite its intellectual significance.

This paper introduces the concept of Esetology as a new theoretical framework for understanding indigenous African historical consciousness through the philosophical lens of *eset*. Etymologically, the term combines the Ibibio word *eset* with the Greek suffix -logy, denoting systematic study or organized knowledge. Within the context of this study, Esetology refers to the systematic study of the philosophical principles, epistemological foundations, methodological approaches, ethical assumptions, and cultural functions of historical knowledge as understood within the Ibibio intellectual tradition. It extends beyond the study of Ibibio history itself to

encompass the underlying theory explaining how historical knowledge is produced, preserved, interpreted, transmitted, and applied within society.

The introduction of Esetology is not intended merely as the creation of new terminology. Rather, it seeks to articulate an indigenous theoretical framework capable of enriching contemporary debates in African historiography, philosophy of history, indigenous knowledge systems, and memory studies. Just as concepts such as historicism, historical materialism, collective memory, and oral historiography have shaped scholarly discourse in other intellectual traditions, Esetology proposes an African-centred conceptual model grounded in Ibibio linguistic philosophy and cultural practice. It demonstrates that African societies did not simply preserve historical knowledge but also developed sophisticated theories regarding its meaning, purpose, and societal responsibilities.

The significance of this study extends beyond Ibibio scholarship. Across Africa, there is increasing recognition of the need to decolonize knowledge production by recovering indigenous intellectual traditions that colonial scholarship either marginalized or misunderstood. While substantial progress has been made in documenting African histories, comparatively fewer efforts have focused on reconstructing African theories about history itself. Esetology therefore contributes to this broader intellectual project by presenting an indigenous philosophy of historical consciousness that emerges from African linguistic categories rather than externally imposed conceptual frameworks. In doing so, it challenges assumptions that the philosophy of history is exclusively a product of Western intellectual traditions and demonstrates that African societies generated their own sophisticated reflections on historical existence, memory, continuity, and identity.

Methodologically, the paper adopts the historical research method complemented by a multidisciplinary approach that draws upon history, philosophy, linguistics, anthropology, folklore studies, cultural studies, and African indigenous knowledge systems. Primary attention is given to the linguistic structure of *eset*, Ibibio oral traditions, proverbial expressions, and cultural practices, while secondary materials are employed to situate the discussion within broader debates on African historiography and historical theory. The multidisciplinary orientation enables a comprehensive examination of Esetology as both a philosophical concept and an emerging theoretical framework.

The central argument advanced in this paper is that Esetology constitutes an indigenous African theory of historical consciousness. It maintains that the Ibibio conception of *eset* embodies a

coherent philosophy in which history is understood as the resurrection of collective memory, the continuity of cultural existence, the ethical preservation of communal identity, and the responsible application of historical knowledge to contemporary life. By systematically articulating these principles, the study seeks to establish Esetology as a meaningful contribution to the philosophy of history, African historiography, and the expanding discourse on indigenous knowledge systems. In doing so, it invites historians, philosophers, anthropologists, linguists, and scholars of African studies to engage more seriously with the theoretical insights embedded within African languages and cultural traditions, recognizing them not merely as objects of historical inquiry but as sources of historical theory in their own right.

Literature Review

The philosophy of history has occupied an important position in historical scholarship for centuries. Questions concerning the nature of historical knowledge, the meaning of historical change, the reliability of historical evidence, and the purpose of studying the past have generated diverse schools of thought across different intellectual traditions. Although classical and modern European philosophers have produced influential theories of history, African societies equally developed indigenous philosophical systems that explained the preservation, interpretation, and application of historical knowledge long before the emergence of modern academic historiography. Unfortunately, these indigenous intellectual traditions have received comparatively less systematic attention within mainstream historical theory.

Early philosophical discussions of history were dominated by European scholars who sought to explain historical development through universal principles. The works of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel interpreted history as the progressive realization of human freedom through the evolution of the state.[1] Karl Marx subsequently shifted attention to material conditions and class struggle, arguing that economic forces constituted the primary drivers of historical transformation.[2] In the twentieth century, R. G. Collingwood emphasized that history involves the reconstruction of past human thought through critical interpretation of evidence. Although these theoretical traditions contributed significantly to the philosophy of history, they emerged within specific European historical experiences and intellectual contexts. Consequently, they do

[1] G. W. F. Hegel, The Philosophy of History. Translated by J. Sibree. (New York: Dover Publications, 1956).

[2] Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. The German Ideology. Edited by C. J. Arthur. New York: International Publishers, 1970

not adequately explain the diverse ways in which non-Western societies conceptualize historical existence, memory, and continuity.

The limitations of Eurocentric historical frameworks became increasingly apparent during the development of African historiography after the Second World War. Colonial scholarship had frequently portrayed Africa as a continent without history because many societies relied principally upon oral rather than written traditions. Such assumptions were vigorously challenged by African historians and anthropologists who demonstrated that oral evidence could be subjected to critical historical analysis.[3] The pioneering contributions of Jan Vansina were particularly influential in establishing methodological standards for the collection, verification, and interpretation of oral traditions. His work fundamentally altered perceptions regarding the legitimacy of oral sources and remains one of the most important contributions to African historical methodology.[4]

African historians subsequently expanded these methodological foundations by reconstructing the histories of numerous societies through oral traditions, archaeology, linguistics, and anthropology. Scholars such as Adiele Afigbo, Elizabeth Isichei, Toyin Falola, Jacob Ade Ajayi, and others demonstrated that African communities possessed complex political systems, economic institutions, migration histories, and intellectual traditions that had been underestimated or ignored by colonial writers. Their scholarship successfully restored Africa to world history and established African historiography as a vibrant academic discipline.

Despite these remarkable achievements, much of the literature has concentrated primarily on reconstructing historical events rather than examining indigenous theories about history itself. Oral traditions have often been treated principally as historical sources instead of being recognized as expressions of deeper philosophical assumptions regarding memory, truth, time, continuity, and historical responsibility. Consequently, African historiography has made substantial progress in documenting African histories while paying comparatively limited attention to indigenous philosophies of historical consciousness.

Within Ibibio studies, scholars have produced important works on migration traditions, language, kinship, political institutions, religion, social organization, and intergroup relations. Percy Amaury Talbot's ethnographic observations, though influenced by colonial assumptions, remain

[3] Okon Edet Uya, African History: Some Problems in Methodology and Perspectives (Calabar: CATS Publishers, 2009).
[4] Vansina, Jan. Oral Tradition as History. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985.

valuable for understanding aspects of early twentieth-century Ibibio society.[5] Later scholars, including Reuben Udo, Monday Noah, and Ekong Ekong, made significant contributions to understanding Ibibio history, geography, sociology, and linguistics. These studies collectively enriched knowledge of Ibibio society and provided indispensable materials for subsequent historical research.[6]

Nevertheless, the existing literature reveals a noticeable gap. Although numerous scholars have employed Ibibio oral traditions and proverbs as historical evidence, very few have interrogated the indigenous philosophy embedded within the Ibibio conception of history itself. The word *eset* has generally been translated simply as "history," without sustained analysis of its linguistic origin, semantic structure, or philosophical implications. Similarly, Ibibio proverbs have frequently been interpreted as moral sayings or cultural expressions rather than as formulations of historical theory. As a result, an important dimension of Ibibio intellectual history remains insufficiently explored.

The growing scholarship on indigenous knowledge systems provides another important context for the present study. Contemporary African scholars increasingly argue that indigenous concepts should not merely supplement Western theories but should themselves serve as foundations for new theoretical frameworks. This perspective has encouraged renewed interest in African epistemologies, philosophies, and linguistic categories as legitimate sources of academic knowledge. The decolonization of knowledge therefore involves more than recovering neglected histories; it also requires recovering indigenous concepts through which African societies understood and explained the world.

Within this broader intellectual movement, the present study argues that *eset* represents more than a lexical equivalent of the English word "history." Its derivation from the Ibibio verb set — meaning "to resurrect" or "to bring back to life" — reveals a distinctive philosophy of historical consciousness in which the past remains recoverable despite temporal distance. This understanding differs significantly from approaches that define history primarily as the chronological recording of past events. Instead, it presents history as an active process of cultural recovery, ethical reflection, and communal continuity.

[5] Talbot, Percy Amaury. 1969. The Peoples of Southern Nigeria. 4 vols. London: Frank Cass.

[6] E. A. Udo, Who are the Ibibio? (Onitsha: Africana-Fep Publishers, 1983); Monday Noah, Ibibio Pioneers in Modern Nigerian History (Uyo: Scholars Press, 1980); Ekong Ekong, Sociology of Ibibio: A Study of Social Organization and Change (Uyo: Scholars Press, 2001).

The concept of Esetology is therefore introduced to fill this theoretical gap. Unlike previous studies that have focused on Ibibio history as subject matter, Esetology investigates the philosophical assumptions governing historical knowledge within the Ibibio intellectual tradition. It seeks to explain how history is conceived, why it is preserved, how it is transmitted, and what purposes it is expected to serve within society. By doing so, the study shifts attention from the content of Ibibio history to the theory underlying Ibibio historical consciousness.

Accordingly, this paper positions Esetology as an emerging indigenous African theory of history that complements existing contributions to African historiography while extending scholarly discussions beyond methodology into the realm of historical philosophy. Rather than rejecting established historical theories, Esetology broadens the conversation by demonstrating that African languages and cultural traditions contain conceptual resources capable of enriching global debates concerning the nature, purpose, and ethics of historical knowledge.

Theoretical Framework

The present study is anchored on Esetology, an emerging indigenous African theoretical framework derived from the Ibibio conception of *eset*. While this paper introduces and develops Esetology as an original theoretical construct, it also engages with broader debates in the philosophy of history, African historiography, indigenous knowledge systems, and collective memory. The framework proceeds from the premise that every society develops its own intellectual assumptions concerning the nature of the past, the preservation of historical knowledge, and the relationship between memory and contemporary social life. Consequently, historical theory should not be restricted to concepts that emerged within European intellectual traditions but should equally recognize indigenous philosophies embedded in African languages and cultural practices.

Unlike many established historical theories that seek to explain the causes or patterns of historical change, Esetology is primarily concerned with the nature, preservation, transmission, interpretation, and ethical application of historical knowledge. It shifts attention from history as a record of past events to history as a living cultural process through which societies continuously recover and reinterpret collective memory. The framework therefore asks fundamental questions: What is history? Where does historical knowledge reside? How is it transmitted? Why is the past remembered? Under what circumstances should historical memories be revived or allowed to remain dormant? These questions constitute the philosophical foundation upon which Esetology is constructed.

The conceptual basis of the theory lies in the Ibibio word *eset*, whose linguistic origin provides the central organizing principle of the framework. Derived from the verb “set”, meaning "to resurrect," "to revive," or "to bring back to life," *eset* embodies a conception of history fundamentally different from definitions that regard history solely as chronological narration or documentary reconstruction. Within the Ibibio worldview, history represents the recovery of experiences that have become concealed by the passage of time but remain preserved within the collective consciousness of the community. The past is therefore understood not as a closed and inaccessible reality but as a continuing presence capable of informing present actions and future decisions.

This conception introduces an important ontological proposition. Esetology maintains that the past never entirely disappears from human existence. Historical experiences may become dormant through the passage of generations, yet they continue to exist within oral traditions, language, institutions, rituals, cultural practices, material objects, sacred landscapes, family genealogies, and communal memory. Historical research is consequently viewed as an act of intellectual and cultural resurrection through which concealed knowledge is brought back into public consciousness. The historian is therefore not merely a recorder of facts but a mediator between generations who facilitates the recovery of collective memory.

A second proposition concerns the relationship between history and society. Within Esetology, historical knowledge is inherently communal. Although individuals remember personal experiences, history acquires enduring significance only when those experiences become incorporated into the collective memory of the community. Historical consciousness therefore belongs primarily to society rather than to isolated individuals. This communal orientation explains why oral traditions, proverbs, public ceremonies, age-grade institutions, and kinship structures occupy central positions in the preservation and transmission of historical knowledge among the Ibibio.

The framework further argues that history possesses an ethical responsibility. The purpose of historical inquiry extends beyond establishing factual accuracy or chronological sequence. Historical knowledge should contribute to social harmony, moral instruction, institutional continuity, and cultural preservation. This ethical dimension is reflected in numerous Ibibio proverbial expressions, particularly the injunction that some historical grievances should not be revived if doing so would undermine communal peace. Accordingly, Esetology rejects approaches that deploy historical narratives primarily to deepen social divisions or perpetuate

inherited antagonisms. Instead, it proposes that responsible historical scholarship should balance truth with social responsibility, ensuring that historical interpretation contributes constructively to the wellbeing of society.

Another important dimension of Esetology is its understanding of historical evidence. Conventional historiography has often privileged documentary records because of their perceived permanence and verifiability. While recognizing the value of written documentation, Esetology adopts a broader conception of historical evidence by acknowledging oral traditions, language, proverbs, songs, rituals, material culture, ecological landscapes, indigenous institutions, and collective memory as complementary repositories of historical knowledge. These sources are not accepted uncritically; rather, they are subjected to rigorous historical evaluation through comparison, contextualization, linguistic analysis, and corroboration. Consequently, Esetology expands the evidentiary base of historical research while maintaining scholarly standards of critical inquiry.

The theoretical significance of Esetology also lies in its contribution to the decolonization of historical thought. Much of the philosophy of history continues to rely upon conceptual categories developed within European intellectual traditions. Although these traditions remain valuable, they do not exhaust the diversity of human historical experience. Indigenous African societies equally generated sophisticated reflections concerning memory, continuity, ancestry, identity, and historical responsibility. By deriving its conceptual categories from the Ibibio language rather than externally imposed frameworks, Esetology demonstrates that African languages themselves contain theoretical resources capable of enriching global historical scholarship.

The framework does not seek to replace existing theories of history. Instead, it complements them by introducing perspectives rooted in African historical consciousness. Whereas positivist historiography emphasizes empirical verification, Marxist historiography foregrounds material conditions and class relations, and postmodern approaches interrogate historical narratives and representation, Esetology directs attention to the resurrection of memory, the continuity of communal existence, and the ethical obligations associated with historical knowledge. Its contribution therefore lies not in rejecting earlier traditions but in broadening the philosophical foundations of historiography.

Ultimately, Esetology proposes that history should be understood as a continuous dialogue between generations rather than a static archive of completed events. The past survives within the

living institutions, languages, values, and memories of the community, awaiting rediscovery whenever society seeks explanation, identity, or direction. The historian's task is therefore not only to reconstruct what happened but also to recover the wisdom embedded within historical experience and to present it responsibly for the benefit of present and future generations. In this sense, Esetology offers an indigenous African theory of historical consciousness in which remembrance becomes an act of cultural renewal, intellectual continuity, and social responsibility.

Research Methodology

This study adopts the historical research method, which is particularly suited to investigating ideas, institutions, concepts, and cultural practices whose meanings have evolved over time. Historical research seeks to reconstruct and interpret the past through the critical examination of available evidence in order to explain continuity, change, and the development of human societies. In the present study, the historical method is employed not merely to trace the evolution of the Ibibio concept of *eset* but also to examine the philosophical assumptions embedded within indigenous historical consciousness. Rather than treating history simply as a sequence of past events, the study investigates the intellectual traditions through which the Ibibio have conceptualized, preserved, interpreted, and transmitted historical knowledge across generations.

Given the conceptual nature of the study, the research employs a qualitative design based on textual interpretation, historical analysis, and philosophical inquiry. The objective is not to quantify historical phenomena but to interpret meanings embedded in language, oral traditions, proverbs, and cultural practices.[7] Qualitative inquiry is particularly appropriate because indigenous philosophies are often expressed through symbolic forms of communication whose significance can only be understood within their cultural and historical contexts. Consequently, the analysis emphasizes interpretation rather than statistical measurement, while maintaining the critical standards expected in historical scholarship.

The study further adopts a multidisciplinary approach, drawing insights from history, philosophy, linguistics, anthropology, folklore, and African Indigenous Knowledge Systems. History provides the principal methodological foundation for reconstructing the development of historical consciousness among the Ibibio. Philosophy contributes analytical tools for examining the conceptual assumptions underlying *eset* and for exploring questions relating to memory,

[7] Interview with Professor Ekeng Anam-ndu, 68 years, Ewet Housing, Uyo, Akwa Ibom State. 2 February, 2018

existence, truth, and historical responsibility. Linguistics assists in interpreting the semantic structure and etymological development of the term *eset*, thereby demonstrating how language itself preserves philosophical ideas. Anthropology and folklore illuminate the social institutions, oral traditions, rituals, and proverbial expressions through which historical knowledge is preserved and transmitted within Ibibio society. Collectively, these disciplinary perspectives enable a more comprehensive understanding of Esetology than could be achieved through a single disciplinary lens.

The study relies on both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources consist principally of Ibibio oral traditions, proverbs, idiomatic expressions, indigenous concepts, and cultural practices that embody historical consciousness. These materials are treated not merely as linguistic or folkloric expressions but as intellectual texts that reveal indigenous theories concerning the nature and purpose of history. Where appropriate, oral testimonies from elders, custodians of tradition, and previous field observations are also considered as important sources of historical interpretation, particularly because oral transmission has long served as one of the principal means through which historical knowledge has been preserved in Ibibio society.

Secondary sources include published books, peer-reviewed journal articles, dissertations, conference proceedings, and scholarly works relating to African historiography, oral tradition, indigenous knowledge systems, philosophy of history, Ibibio history, linguistics, and cultural studies. These materials provide the broader scholarly context within which Esetology is situated and facilitate critical engagement with existing literature. Rather than relying uncritically upon previous interpretations, the study evaluates them comparatively in order to identify conceptual gaps and demonstrate the originality of the present theoretical formulation.

Historical evidence employed in this study is subjected to the principles of source criticism, including both external and internal evaluation. External criticism considers the authenticity, origin, and provenance of documentary and oral materials, while internal criticism assesses credibility, consistency, context, and meaning. Oral traditions and proverbial expressions are therefore interpreted within their historical and cultural settings rather than in isolation. This critical approach minimizes the risk of romanticizing indigenous traditions while recognizing their value as legitimate historical and philosophical sources.

An important feature of the methodology is conceptual analysis. Since the primary objective of the study is the formulation of Esetology as an indigenous theoretical framework, particular attention is given to the meanings, assumptions, and implications embedded within the concept

of *eset*. The study therefore examines the linguistic derivation of the term, its cultural usage, its philosophical significance, and its relationship to broader questions concerning historical consciousness. Conceptual analysis enables the study to move beyond lexical definition toward the construction of an analytical framework capable of informing historical scholarship.

The study also employs comparative analysis where necessary. Although Esetology emerges specifically from the Ibibio intellectual tradition, selected comparisons are made with other African conceptions of historical memory and indigenous philosophy. Such comparisons are intended neither to homogenize African thought nor to diminish the uniqueness of the Ibibio worldview. Rather, they provide a broader interpretive context within which the distinctive contributions of Esetology may be appreciated. This comparative perspective also facilitates dialogue between Ibibio historical philosophy and wider debates in African historiography.

It is important to acknowledge certain methodological limitations. Indigenous philosophies are often transmitted orally and may exhibit regional variations in interpretation. Likewise, proverbial expressions frequently possess multiple layers of meaning that depend upon context, performance, and audience. Consequently, the interpretations advanced in this study should be understood as analytical reconstructions grounded in historical evidence and cultural context rather than as the only possible readings of the materials. Nevertheless, by triangulating linguistic evidence, oral traditions, historical scholarship, and philosophical analysis, the study seeks to present an interpretation that is both historically credible and intellectually coherent.

Ultimately, the methodological orientation adopted in this paper reflects the very principles that Esetology seeks to articulate. By integrating historical inquiry with linguistic interpretation, philosophical reflection, and indigenous knowledge systems, the study demonstrates that African concepts of history can be examined with the same analytical rigor applied to established traditions of historical thought. In so doing, it provides a methodological foundation for the systematic study of indigenous historical consciousness while contributing to the continuing expansion of African-centred approaches to historical scholarship.

Conceptualizing *Eset* and the Emergence of Esetology

The formulation of new concepts has long been an important feature of intellectual development across academic disciplines. As knowledge evolves, scholars frequently introduce new terminologies to explain ideas, phenomena, or theoretical perspectives that existing concepts do not adequately capture. Such conceptual innovations often emerge from the recognition that indigenous languages and cultural traditions embody intellectual categories whose meanings

cannot be fully conveyed through direct translation into dominant academic languages. The concept of Esetology emerges within this tradition of scholarly innovation. It is proposed not as a replacement for historical studies but as an indigenous theoretical framework through which the philosophy of history embedded in the Ibibio worldview may be more systematically understood and examined.

The point of departure is the Ibibio word “eset”, commonly translated into English as "history." While this translation provides a convenient lexical equivalent, it does not fully communicate the philosophical depth of the concept within its indigenous cultural setting. In ordinary usage, *eset* refers to accounts of past events, ancestral experiences, community traditions, and the collective memory of a people. However, the semantic richness of the concept becomes clearer when attention is given to its linguistic origin. The word derives from the verb “set”, which denotes the act of reviving, restoring, or bringing back to life. This etymological relationship suggests that, within Ibibio thought, history is not merely information about what has passed away; it is the intellectual process through which what has receded into the past is brought back into contemporary consciousness.

This linguistic insight provides the foundation for the theoretical formulation advanced in this study. If *eset* signifies the recovery or resurrection of the past, then the study of *eset* necessarily extends beyond historical narration to include the philosophical principles governing remembrance, preservation, interpretation, and transmission. It is this broader field of inquiry that the present paper designates as Esetology. Accordingly, Esetology may be defined as the systematic study of the philosophical foundations, epistemological assumptions, methodological principles, ethical responsibilities, and cultural functions of historical consciousness as expressed through the indigenous Ibibio concept of *eset*.

This definition deliberately distinguishes history from Esetology. History concerns the reconstruction and interpretation of past human experiences. Esetology, by contrast, investigates the intellectual assumptions that determine how those experiences are understood, remembered, transmitted, and applied within society. In this respect, the relationship between history and Esetology resembles that between language and linguistics or religion and theology. One refers to the object of study, while the other provides a systematic framework for analyzing that object. Esetology therefore occupies the level of historical theory rather than historical description.

The emergence of Esetology also responds to an observable gap within African historiography. Although considerable scholarship has demonstrated the reliability of oral traditions and the

historical significance of indigenous institutions, relatively little attention has been devoted to indigenous philosophies concerning the meaning of history itself. African historical scholarship has understandably focused on reconstructing political systems, migration patterns, economic institutions, and cultural transformations. Less attention has been directed toward examining the conceptual categories through which African societies themselves understood historical existence. Consequently, African historiography has often employed conceptual vocabularies derived from European intellectual traditions even when analyzing distinctly African historical experiences. Esetology seeks to contribute to addressing this imbalance by placing an indigenous African concept at the centre of theoretical reflection.

An important characteristic of Esetology is its insistence that historical consciousness is culturally embedded. Historical knowledge does not exist independently of the society that produces and preserves it. Every community develops particular ways of organizing memory, distinguishing significant events from ordinary experiences, and transmitting knowledge across generations. These processes are shaped by language, environment, social institutions, religious beliefs, and cultural values. The Ibibio conception of *eset* therefore represents more than a lexical category; it reflects an entire worldview concerning the relationship between the living, their ancestors, and generations yet unborn. Within this worldview, history functions as a bridge linking successive generations through shared memory and inherited responsibility.

Another defining feature of Esetology is its understanding of historical continuity. Conventional historical writing frequently emphasizes chronological progression, dividing the past into clearly demarcated periods. While chronology remains important, Esetology proposes that the relationship between past and present is better understood as one of continuity rather than separation. Historical experiences remain active within contemporary society through institutions, customs, language, moral values, place names, family traditions, sacred sites, and collective memory. The passage of time may obscure these connections, but it does not eliminate them. Consequently, historical inquiry becomes an act of uncovering enduring relationships rather than merely reconstructing disconnected events.

This understanding is reinforced by the philosophical implications of several Ibibio proverbial expressions. The proverb *Eset ubed, eset ubeede* encapsulates the idea that the past is preserved and recalled whenever necessary. It suggests that history remains available as a source of guidance rather than existing merely as an archive of completed events. Similarly, *Edim amadep owo isifreke edim* reminds the community that new experiences should not erase the memory of

earlier ones. Together, these expressions reveal an intellectual tradition in which remembrance is not passive but purposeful. Memory serves society by preserving accumulated wisdom and enabling each generation to learn from those that preceded it.

Equally significant is the ethical orientation of Esetology. Historical remembrance is accompanied by moral responsibility. The value of recovering the past lies not simply in satisfying intellectual curiosity but in strengthening communal life. Historical narratives should encourage understanding, preserve identity, promote justice, and sustain peaceful coexistence. The Ibibio proverb *Atoiyo ntoiyo isiinieehe imaan* illustrates this ethical principle by cautioning against reviving memories that would unnecessarily undermine social harmony. This does not imply the suppression of historical truth; rather, it recognizes that historians exercise judgement in determining how the past is interpreted and communicated. Esetology therefore proposes that historical scholarship should balance fidelity to evidence with sensitivity to the broader welfare of society.

The emergence of Esetology also has methodological implications. Because historical consciousness is embedded in language, oral tradition, ritual, and material culture, the study of history cannot rely exclusively on written documents. Indigenous concepts, proverbs, songs, genealogies, ceremonial practices, ecological knowledge, and cultural landscapes become essential sources for understanding how communities construct and preserve memory. This broader evidentiary perspective does not diminish the importance of documentary records; instead, it enriches historical inquiry by recognizing multiple forms of knowledge production. Consequently, Esetology encourages historians to adopt interdisciplinary methods capable of engaging the full range of sources through which African societies preserve their past.

From a broader philosophical perspective, Esetology contributes to the continuing effort to diversify the conceptual foundations of global historiography. Historical theory has been enriched over time by numerous intellectual traditions, each reflecting particular cultural experiences and philosophical assumptions. African societies likewise possess conceptual resources that deserve systematic scholarly attention. By deriving its analytical vocabulary from the Ibibio language and intellectual tradition, Esetology demonstrates that African languages are not merely vehicles for transmitting historical information but are themselves repositories of historical theory. The conceptual resources contained within indigenous languages therefore deserve recognition as legitimate contributions to international debates concerning the philosophy of history.

Ultimately, the emergence of Esetology represents an invitation to rethink the ways in which historical knowledge is conceptualized within African scholarship. It argues that indigenous concepts should not remain confined to local cultural contexts but should be developed into analytical frameworks capable of engaging wider academic discourse. In this regard, Esetology is proposed as both a theoretical model and a research programme — one that encourages historians, philosophers, linguists, anthropologists, and scholars of indigenous knowledge systems to examine African historical consciousness through concepts generated from African intellectual traditions themselves. Its significance lies not only in explaining the Ibibio understanding of history but also in demonstrating that African societies possess original philosophical perspectives capable of enriching the global study of the past.

The Ontology of Esetology

Ontology concerns the nature of being and existence. Within the philosophy of history, ontology seeks to answer fundamental questions regarding the existence of the past, the reality of historical events, and the relationship between what has occurred and what continues to influence human society. Every philosophy of history rests upon particular ontological assumptions, whether explicitly stated or implicitly embedded within historical practice. Consequently, understanding Esetology requires an examination of the nature of historical reality as conceived within the Ibibio intellectual tradition.

The ontological foundation of Esetology begins with a simple but profound proposition: the past does not cease to exist merely because it has passed. Rather than disappearing into nonexistence, historical experiences continue to survive within the cultural, social, linguistic, and moral structures of the community. The passage of time may remove events from immediate observation, but it does not erase their existence from collective consciousness. History therefore persists not as a physical reality that can be revisited directly, but as a living presence embedded in memory, institutions, traditions, landscapes, and inherited ways of life.

This proposition is rooted in the semantic structure of the Ibibio word *eset*. Because *eset* derives from “set” — to revive, restore, or bring back to life — it implies that the past remains capable of re-entering contemporary consciousness. Resurrection presupposes prior existence. One cannot revive what has never existed, nor can one restore what has been completely annihilated. Within Esetology, therefore, historical events possess enduring ontological significance because they continue to shape the present long after their immediate occurrence. The work of the historian is not to create the past but to recover its continuing relevance through careful interpretation.

This understanding differs from conceptions of history that treat the past as a closed sequence of completed events separated from the present by an irreversible temporal boundary. Esetology instead proposes that the past, the present, and the future exist in a relationship of continuity. The present is neither autonomous nor self-generating; it is the cumulative product of earlier experiences, decisions, institutions, beliefs, and relationships. Likewise, the future emerges from the interaction between inherited traditions and contemporary choices. Time is therefore understood not simply as chronological succession but as an ongoing dialogue between generations in which each generation inherits, interprets, and reshapes the historical legacy entrusted to it.

Within this ontological framework, memory occupies a central position. Memory is not viewed merely as an individual psychological faculty but as a collective cultural phenomenon. Communities remember through their languages, proverbs, ceremonies, festivals, sacred places, political institutions, kinship systems, and oral narratives. These repositories of memory preserve historical existence even when eyewitnesses have long departed. Consequently, the continuity of history depends less upon the survival of individuals than upon the survival of the cultural mechanisms through which societies preserve collective remembrance.

The ontological significance of memory is particularly evident in Ibibio proverbial philosophy. The saying *Eset ubed, eset ubeede* suggests that the past remains stored within communal life until circumstances require its recovery. This proverbial expression rejects the notion of historical extinction. Instead, it affirms that memory functions as a cultural archive whose contents may temporarily recede from public attention without being permanently lost. The proverb therefore expresses an ontology of permanence beneath apparent disappearance. What appears forgotten often remains preserved within the deeper structures of communal existence.

Another important ontological principle concerns the embodiment of history. Esetology maintains that historical reality is embodied in people, places, objects, and institutions. Family genealogies preserve ancestral continuity; village squares, shrines, ancient trees, streams, and ancestral settlements become repositories of historical memory; traditional titles and chieftaincy institutions embody political history; language conserves concepts inherited across generations; and rituals re-enact foundational events that define communal identity. History is therefore not confined to written documents or archival repositories. It exists wherever human experience has left enduring cultural traces.

This perspective expands the understanding of historical evidence. If historical reality is embodied in diverse cultural forms, then historians must engage multiple categories of evidence in reconstructing the past. Oral traditions, linguistic expressions, material culture, ecological landscapes, indigenous technologies, ceremonial practices, and social institutions all become important witnesses to historical existence. Such an approach does not diminish the importance of documentary sources but recognizes that societies preserve their past through different yet complementary mechanisms. For many African communities, including the Ibibio, these mechanisms long predated the introduction of alphabetic literacy and continue to function alongside written records.

The ontology of Esetology also emphasizes the relational character of history. Historical events acquire meaning through their relationships with people, communities, institutions, and subsequent developments. An event isolated from its cultural and social context becomes little more than a chronological occurrence. Within Esetology, however, the significance of history lies in the enduring relationships established between generations. The living remain connected to their predecessors through inherited customs, shared memories, and collective obligations. Thus, historical existence is relational rather than merely sequential.

This relational understanding has important implications for identity. Personal and communal identities are viewed as historical constructions that emerge through continuous interaction with inherited experiences. Individuals know who they are because they belong to families, lineages, villages, and communities whose histories extend beyond any single lifetime. Likewise, communities derive legitimacy and cohesion from shared narratives concerning origin, migration, settlement, achievement, and adversity. Esetology therefore regards historical consciousness as indispensable to the formation and maintenance of both individual and collective identity.

An equally significant aspect of Esetology is its rejection of the assumption that all dimensions of the past possess equal relevance for the present. While the past continues to exist within collective memory, societies exercise judgement in determining which memories should be actively preserved, commemorated, or revived. This selective process does not negate the existence of forgotten experiences; rather, it reflects the ethical and practical responsibilities associated with historical remembrance. Some memories are continually celebrated because they strengthen communal identity, while others remain dormant until circumstances render them

historically meaningful. The ontology of Esetology thus recognizes both the permanence of historical existence and the selectivity of historical consciousness.

From this perspective, the historian assumes a distinctive role. The historian is not merely a compiler of chronological facts but an interpreter of enduring human experience. Historical inquiry becomes an act of rediscovery through which concealed dimensions of collective memory are brought back into intellectual and public awareness. The historian functions as a mediator between generations, ensuring that valuable knowledge inherited from the past remains available for contemporary reflection and future guidance. In this respect, the work of historical scholarship parallels the linguistic implication of set itself—the act of bringing back into life what has become hidden by time.

The ontological assumptions of Esetology ultimately distinguish it from historical philosophies that emphasize discontinuity or regard the past as irretrievably detached from the present. Instead, Esetology advances a conception of history in which existence extends beyond chronological completion. The past survives within the cultural life of the community, waiting to be rediscovered, interpreted, and responsibly applied. Historical consciousness therefore becomes an enduring feature of social existence rather than a retrospective intellectual exercise.

Accordingly, Esetology proposes an ontology in which history is a continuing mode of existence rather than a finished record of events. The past lives through memory, language, institutions, landscapes, and cultural practices; the present gives meaning to inherited experiences through interpretation; and the future is shaped by the wisdom — or neglect — of what has been preserved. Within this framework, history is neither dead nor distant. It is a living inheritance that continually participates in the making of society.

The Epistemology of Esetology

Epistemology is concerned with the nature, sources, limits, and justification of knowledge. Within historical scholarship, epistemological inquiry seeks to explain how knowledge of the past is acquired, evaluated, and accepted as historically credible. Since historians cannot directly observe past events, historical knowledge depends upon evidence, interpretation, and critical reasoning. Consequently, every philosophy of history is underpinned by assumptions regarding what constitutes historical evidence, how such evidence should be interpreted, and the criteria through which historical claims are validated. Esetology approaches these questions from the standpoint of the indigenous Ibibio understanding of *eset*, arguing that historical knowledge is simultaneously empirical, cultural, communal, and ethical.

The epistemological foundation of Esetology rests on the proposition that historical knowledge is preserved in multiple repositories rather than in a single authoritative source. Human societies remember their past through diverse media, each preserving particular dimensions of historical experience. Written documents constitute one important repository of memory, but they neither exhaust historical knowledge nor possess an exclusive claim to historical truth. Within the Ibibio intellectual tradition, language, oral traditions, proverbs, rituals, genealogies, songs, place names, material culture, ecological landscapes, and social institutions collectively preserve historical consciousness. Each source contributes distinct insights into the reconstruction and interpretation of the past.

Language occupies a privileged position within this epistemological framework because it functions not merely as a medium of communication but also as a repository of historical memory. Indigenous concepts frequently preserve intellectual traditions that cannot be adequately conveyed through literal translation into other languages. The concept of *eset* itself illustrates this principle. While often translated simply as "history," its semantic connection with the verb “set” reveals a philosophical understanding of history as recovery, revival, and renewal. Thus, linguistic analysis becomes an indispensable tool of historical inquiry because words frequently embody inherited cultural experiences and conceptual categories that have developed over generations.

Closely related to language is the role of oral tradition. Within Esetology, oral tradition is regarded as a legitimate and indispensable source of historical knowledge because it has long served as the principal mechanism through which communities preserve collective memory. Narratives concerning migration, settlement, political leadership, conflict resolution, kinship, religious practice, and cultural institutions are transmitted orally across generations through structured processes of socialization. Such traditions are neither random stories nor arbitrary inventions. Rather, they constitute organized systems of remembrance maintained by families, elders, title holders, custodians of tradition, and community institutions.

The recognition of oral tradition does not imply that every narrative should be accepted without scrutiny. Esetology insists upon critical evaluation as a fundamental requirement of historical knowledge. Oral accounts, like documentary records, may contain omissions, exaggerations, reinterpretations, or perspectives shaped by particular social interests. Consequently, historical claims must be examined through comparison with other traditions, linguistic evidence, archaeology where available, documentary records, and the wider cultural context in which they

are preserved. Historical knowledge emerges not from the uncritical acceptance of any single source but from the careful convergence of multiple forms of evidence.

Another important source of historical knowledge within Esetology is collective memory. Collective memory differs from individual recollection because it is sustained through social institutions rather than personal experience alone. Communities remember through annual festivals, initiation ceremonies, ancestral veneration, public commemorations, traditional titles, sacred sites, and customary laws. These institutions continually renew historical consciousness by connecting successive generations with foundational events and inherited values. Consequently, memory becomes both an intellectual resource and a social practice through which history remains active within communal life.

The epistemology of Esetology further recognizes proverbs as important vehicles of historical knowledge. Although proverbs are commonly regarded as expressions of wisdom or moral instruction, they also preserve condensed historical experiences accumulated across generations. Ibibio proverbs relating to *eset* reveal assumptions concerning the continuity of the past, the transmission of knowledge, the persistence of memory, and the ethical responsibilities associated with historical narration.[8] Their brevity should not obscure their intellectual significance. Proverbs often encapsulate complex historical philosophies in forms that are easily remembered, transmitted, and applied within everyday life. They therefore function simultaneously as literary expressions, educational instruments, and repositories of historical consciousness.

Material culture also occupies an important place within the epistemology of Esetology. Historical knowledge is preserved in artefacts, architecture, shrines, ancestral compounds, settlement patterns, tools, regalia, monuments, and sacred landscapes. These tangible remains complement oral testimony by providing physical evidence of past human activity. Material culture frequently corroborates, modifies, or enriches oral traditions, enabling historians to reconstruct aspects of the past that may not be explicitly preserved in verbal narratives. Accordingly, Esetology adopts an inclusive understanding of historical evidence in which material and immaterial sources are interpreted together rather than in isolation.

A distinctive feature of Esetology is its insistence that historical knowledge possesses both cognitive and moral dimensions. The acquisition of knowledge about the past is not regarded as an end in itself. Historical understanding should contribute to wisdom, social responsibility, and

[8] Interview with Elder Effiong Thomas Udom, 87 years, Obotim Ikot Ekong, Nsit Ibom Local Government Area, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. 8 January 2025.

communal wellbeing. Knowledge that deepens understanding, strengthens cultural identity, promotes reconciliation, or preserves valuable traditions fulfils an important social function. Conversely, knowledge employed solely to perpetuate hostility, distort evidence, or undermine communal cohesion falls short of the ethical expectations embodied in the Ibibio philosophy of history. Thus, Esetology maintains that historians bear responsibility not only for the accuracy of their interpretations but also for the broader social consequences of their work.

The epistemology of Esetology also emphasizes the intergenerational transmission of knowledge. Historical understanding is cumulative; developing as each generation inherits, interprets, and extends the knowledge preserved by its predecessors. The Ibibio proverb *Ayin akit ete idooho nsek* expresses this principle by emphasizing the educational relationship between elders and younger members of the community. Historical knowledge is therefore sustained through mentorship, family instruction, community participation, and cultural institutions that facilitate continuity between generations. This process ensures that history remains a living tradition rather than an isolated body of information.[9]

Within this framework, the historian occupies a unique epistemic role. The historian is neither a passive collector of facts nor an unrestricted interpreter of evidence. Instead, the historian serves as a critical mediator who evaluates competing accounts, reconciles different forms of evidence, identifies patterns of continuity and change, and reconstructs historical understanding in ways that remain faithful to available sources. Intellectual integrity therefore requires openness to multiple perspectives while maintaining rigorous standards of historical criticism. Esetology rejects both uncritical traditionalism and uncritical scepticism, advocating instead a balanced approach in which indigenous knowledge is respected without being exempted from scholarly evaluation.

The epistemological perspective advanced here also has implications for contemporary African historiography. It challenges the assumption that historical knowledge is generated principally through documentary archives inherited from colonial administrations. While documentary evidence remains indispensable, many dimensions of African historical experience are preserved outside formal archives. Indigenous languages, oral performances, ecological knowledge, customary institutions, and community memory constitute intellectual archives in their own right. Recognizing these repositories broadens the evidentiary foundation of historical research and encourages more inclusive approaches to knowledge production.

[9] Ibid.

Ultimately, the epistemology of Esetology proposes that historical knowledge is neither exclusively textual nor exclusively oral, neither wholly objective nor merely subjective. Rather, it is produced through the continuous interaction of evidence, interpretation, communal memory, and critical reasoning. Knowledge of the past is strengthened through dialogue among diverse sources, disciplined historical analysis, and ethical responsibility toward both evidence and society. In this respect, Esetology presents an epistemological model that is simultaneously indigenous in its conceptual origins and universal in its commitment to rigorous historical inquiry.

The epistemological principles discussed above provide the intellectual basis for the normative dimensions of Esetology. Having established the nature of historical reality and the means through which historical knowledge is acquired, the discussion now turns to the foundational principles that govern the interpretation and application of that knowledge. These principles are articulated in the next section as the Seven Canons of Esetology, which collectively define the distinctive character of this emerging indigenous African theory of history.

The Foundational Canons of Esetology

Every mature intellectual tradition is guided by fundamental principles that define its assumptions, methods, and objectives. These principles provide coherence, establish standards of interpretation, and distinguish one theoretical perspective from another. In the same manner, Esetology is founded upon a number of interrelated canons that collectively explain the Ibibio philosophy of history. These canons do not function as rigid rules; rather, they represent philosophical propositions that guide the understanding, preservation, interpretation, and application of historical knowledge. Together, they constitute the normative foundation of Esetology as an indigenous African theory of historical consciousness.

The First Canon: The Canon of Historical Resurrection

The first and most fundamental principle of Esetology is the Canon of Historical Resurrection. This canon derives directly from the Ibibio verb “set”, from which the noun *eset* originates. It asserts that the past is not irretrievably lost but remains recoverable through historical inquiry, cultural memory, oral tradition, language, and material evidence.

Within this framework, history is understood as an act of intellectual resurrection. The historian does not create the past; rather, the historian revives aspects of human experience that have become concealed by time. Historical investigation therefore resembles excavation rather than invention. Every generation inherits traces of earlier generations embedded in institutions,

customs, language, landscapes, artefacts, and collective memory. The responsibility of scholarship is to recover these traces and restore them to contemporary understanding.

The Canon of Historical Resurrection distinguishes Esetology from conceptions of history that regard the past as permanently separated from the present. Instead, it proposes that historical experiences remain capable of influencing contemporary society whenever they are responsibly recovered and interpreted.

The Second Canon: The Canon of Historical Continuity

The second canon maintains that history exists as a continuous relationship between past, present, and future. Human societies do not begin anew with each generation; rather, every generation inherits institutions, beliefs, values, technologies, customs, and social relationships produced by earlier generations.

The Ibibio proverb *Eset ubed, eset ubeede* illustrates this principle. The proverb conveys the idea that the past is preserved and may be recalled whenever circumstances require guidance. Historical continuity therefore ensures that no society exists independently of its historical inheritance.

Within Esetology, continuity does not imply the absence of change. On the contrary, societies constantly adapt to new realities. Nevertheless, change itself occurs within historical continuities that connect successive generations. Understanding those continuities enables historians to explain both transformation and persistence.

The Third Canon: The Canon of Collective Memory

The third canon asserts that historical knowledge belongs primarily to the community rather than to isolated individuals. Individual memories inevitably disappear through death, whereas collective memory survives through institutions, language, oral traditions, ceremonies, genealogies, and cultural practices.

This canon recognizes memory as a social institution. Families preserve genealogies; villages commemorate founders; traditional institutions transmit customary laws; proverbs preserve accumulated wisdom; and rituals continually reconnect communities with their historical origins. Through these mechanisms, historical knowledge becomes part of communal existence rather than personal possession.

The Canon of Collective Memory therefore emphasizes that the preservation of history is a collective responsibility shared by elders, families, traditional institutions, scholars, and succeeding generations.

The Fourth Canon: The Canon of Intergenerational Transmission

Historical knowledge acquires permanence only when it is transmitted from one generation to another. The fourth canon therefore affirms that history survives through continuous processes of education, mentorship, and cultural inheritance.

This principle is expressed in the Ibibio proverb *Ayin akit ete idooho nsek*, which emphasizes the educational significance of growing under the guidance of one's elders. Historical knowledge is transmitted through storytelling, apprenticeship, festivals, initiation ceremonies, family instruction, and participation in community life.

The canon further recognizes that each generation bears dual responsibilities. It must preserve the historical inheritance received from its predecessors while enriching that inheritance for future generations. Historical scholarship therefore becomes both preservative and creative.

The Fifth Canon: The Canon of Ethical Remembrance

Perhaps the most distinctive contribution of Esetology lies in its ethical understanding of historical remembrance. The fifth canon maintains that the recovery and presentation of history must be guided by moral responsibility toward society.

This principle finds expression in the Ibibio proverb *Atoiyo ntoiyo isiinieehe imaan*, which cautions against reviving certain memories in ways that unnecessarily threaten communal peace. The proverb does not encourage historical amnesia or deliberate falsification. Instead, it reminds historians that historical interpretation carries ethical consequences.

The Canon of Ethical Remembrance therefore proposes that historical scholarship should promote justice, reconciliation, cultural understanding, and responsible public discourse. Historians must remain faithful to evidence while recognizing that the manner in which historical narratives are constructed may either strengthen or weaken social cohesion.

The Sixth Canon: The Canon of Indigenous Authenticity

The sixth canon affirms that every society possesses legitimate indigenous categories through which it understands its own historical experience. African historical thought should therefore not depend exclusively upon conceptual frameworks developed elsewhere.

The Ibibio concept of *eset* illustrates how indigenous languages preserve distinctive philosophical understandings of history. Such concepts deserve careful scholarly analysis because they reveal intellectual traditions embedded within African societies themselves.

The Canon of Indigenous Authenticity does not reject engagement with international scholarship. Rather, it encourages dialogue between indigenous and global intellectual traditions while affirming the legitimacy of African conceptual categories as sources of historical theory.

The Seventh Canon: The Canon of Historical Utility

The seventh canon maintains that history should serve society. Historical knowledge possesses value not merely because it records past events but because it contributes to cultural preservation, moral education, institutional development, conflict resolution, and informed decision-making.

Within the Ibibio worldview, history performs practical social functions. It legitimizes institutions, preserves identity, strengthens communal solidarity, explains social relationships, and provides guidance for future action. Historical inquiry therefore carries practical responsibilities extending beyond academic research.

The Canon of Historical Utility rejects conceptions of history as an isolated intellectual exercise disconnected from societal needs. Instead, it views historical scholarship as a public resource through which communities understand themselves and chart informed paths toward the future.

Synthesis of the Canons

Although each canon addresses a distinct aspect of historical consciousness, they function as an integrated philosophical system. The Canon of Historical Resurrection explains the recoverability of the past; Historical Continuity connects successive generations; Collective Memory identifies the principal repository of historical knowledge; Intergenerational Transmission ensures its preservation; Ethical Remembrance governs its responsible interpretation; Indigenous Authenticity affirms the legitimacy of African conceptual frameworks; and Historical Utility defines the broader social purpose of historical scholarship.

Taken together, these canons distinguish Esetology from conventional approaches that define history primarily as the chronological reconstruction of past events. Instead, Esetology presents history as a living cultural process through which societies recover memory, preserve identity, cultivate wisdom, and strengthen communal existence. In this way, the canons provide the philosophical architecture of Esetology and establish its distinctive contribution to contemporary debates in African historiography and the philosophy of history.

Esetology and the Decolonization of African Historiography

The emergence of African historiography during the twentieth century represented one of the most significant intellectual developments in the humanities. African historians challenged colonial narratives that either denied the existence of African history or portrayed African

societies as passive recipients of external influences.[10] Through meticulous historical research employing oral traditions, archaeology, linguistics, documentary evidence, and material culture, they demonstrated that African societies possessed complex political institutions, economic systems, philosophical traditions, and rich historical experiences long before European colonial intervention. This scholarly transformation restored Africa to world history and established African historiography as a respected field of academic inquiry.

Despite these achievements, the project of decolonizing African historiography remains incomplete. Much of the progress has concentrated on recovering African historical experiences and correcting distortions introduced by colonial scholarship. Comparatively less attention has been devoted to recovering indigenous African theories about history itself. Consequently, while African histories are increasingly written from African perspectives, they are often interpreted through conceptual frameworks and philosophical categories that originated outside the continent. The present study argues that the decolonization of historiography should involve not only the recovery of African historical experiences but also the recognition and systematic development of African concepts capable of informing historical theory.

Within this context, Esetology is proposed as a contribution to the intellectual decolonization of historical scholarship. Its significance lies not merely in introducing a new term but in demonstrating that indigenous African languages contain conceptual resources capable of generating original theoretical perspectives. The Ibibio concept of *eset* embodies assumptions concerning memory, continuity, responsibility, and historical existence that differ in important respects from many dominant traditions in the philosophy of history. By examining these assumptions systematically, Esetology broadens the conceptual foundations of historical inquiry and affirms that African societies have long reflected upon the nature and purpose of history through their own linguistic and cultural categories.

A central objective of decolonization is the recognition of epistemic plurality. No single civilization possesses a monopoly on the production of knowledge or the interpretation of human experience. Different societies have developed distinct yet equally meaningful ways of explaining the world. Within historical scholarship, this principle requires openness to diverse traditions of historical thought while maintaining rigorous standards of scholarly analysis. Esetology contributes to this objective by demonstrating that the Ibibio understanding of history represents a coherent intellectual tradition deserving critical engagement rather than ethnographic

[10] Uya, African History, p.51

description alone. Indigenous concepts should therefore be approached not merely as cultural curiosities but as potential sources of theoretical innovation.

The relationship between language and knowledge further reinforces this argument. Language is more than a means of communication; it is also a medium through which societies classify reality, preserve memory, and organize experience. Many African concepts embody meanings that cannot be fully captured through direct translation into European languages. The concept of *eset* illustrates this point. Although commonly rendered as "history," its derivation from the verb set introduces dimensions of restoration, revival, and continuity that extend beyond conventional lexical equivalence. By taking indigenous language seriously as a source of philosophical reflection, Esetology highlights the importance of linguistic analysis in reconstructing African intellectual traditions.

Decolonizing historiography also requires a broader understanding of historical evidence. For many years, written documentation occupied a privileged position within professional historical practice, while oral traditions and other indigenous sources were often treated with caution or dismissed altogether. African historians successfully challenged this hierarchy by demonstrating the historical value of oral evidence when subjected to critical evaluation. Esetology builds upon this methodological achievement but extends the discussion further. It argues that oral traditions, proverbs, rituals, ecological knowledge, and customary institutions are significant not only because they preserve historical information but also because they reveal indigenous philosophies concerning the preservation and use of historical knowledge. They are therefore sources for both history and historical theory.

Another important dimension of decolonization concerns the relationship between historical scholarship and society. Colonial historiography frequently served administrative or ideological purposes that reinforced external domination. By contrast, many African intellectual traditions understood history as a communal resource intended to strengthen social cohesion, transmit moral values, and preserve cultural continuity. Esetology reflects this orientation by emphasizing the ethical responsibilities associated with historical inquiry. Historical interpretation should contribute to understanding, justice, reconciliation, and cultural preservation while remaining faithful to evidence. In this respect, Esetology places equal emphasis on historical accuracy and historical responsibility, arguing that rigorous scholarship and social relevance are complementary rather than contradictory objectives.

The proposed framework also contributes to contemporary debates on African Indigenous Knowledge Systems. Increasing attention is being given to indigenous sciences, philosophies, legal traditions, environmental practices, and educational systems as valuable sources of knowledge. Historical thought should form part of this broader intellectual recovery. Esetology demonstrates that African Indigenous Knowledge Systems include sophisticated reflections on the nature of historical existence, the transmission of memory, and the ethical use of the past. These reflections deserve recognition alongside other contributions to indigenous scholarship because they address questions of universal significance concerning identity, continuity, and human experience.

Furthermore, Esetology encourages a more balanced dialogue between African and non-African historical traditions. The purpose of decolonization is not to replace one intellectual monopoly with another, nor to reject insights developed elsewhere. Rather, it is to create a scholarly environment in which multiple traditions contribute to a richer and more inclusive understanding of history. Esetology therefore positions itself as a complementary framework that can enter into conversation with established approaches in the philosophy of history, memory studies, and historiography. Its value lies in expanding the range of concepts available for historical analysis while remaining grounded in the particular intellectual heritage of the Ibibio people.

The implications of this perspective extend beyond Ibibio studies. Numerous African societies possess indigenous concepts that embody distinctive understandings of time, memory, ancestry, authority, and historical continuity. Systematic investigation of these concepts may reveal additional theoretical resources capable of enriching global historical scholarship. Esetology should therefore be understood not as an isolated intellectual exercise but as an example of a broader methodological possibility: the development of historical theory from within African linguistic and cultural traditions. Such an approach invites comparative studies across different societies while respecting the uniqueness of each intellectual tradition.

Nevertheless, the advancement of indigenous theoretical frameworks must proceed with scholarly discipline. There is a risk that enthusiasm for recovering indigenous knowledge may lead to uncritical celebration or essentialist representations of African cultures. Esetology does not claim that every aspect of indigenous historical thought is beyond criticism, nor does it suggest that all African societies share identical philosophies of history. Instead, it advances a carefully defined theoretical proposition derived from a particular linguistic and cultural context.

Its arguments remain open to critical examination, empirical refinement, and comparative evaluation, which are essential features of academic inquiry.

Ultimately, Esetology contributes to the continuing decolonization of African historiography by shifting attention from the recovery of African historical experiences to the recovery of African historical ideas. It demonstrates that the Ibibio concept of *eset* is not merely a vernacular expression for history but a sophisticated philosophical category capable of informing broader debates about historical consciousness, memory, evidence, continuity, and ethical responsibility. In doing so, the framework expands the intellectual horizons of African historiography and affirms that African languages and cultures are not only subjects of historical investigation but also sources of historical theory.

Comparative Perspectives: Esetology, Sankofa, Ubuntu, and Collective Memory

The development of Esetology invites comparative engagement with other African philosophical traditions that reflect on memory, identity, continuity, and the relationship between the past and the present. Such comparison is not intended to suggest that African philosophies are homogeneous. On the contrary, Africa's linguistic and cultural diversity has produced multiple intellectual traditions, each emerging from its own historical experience. Nevertheless, comparative analysis demonstrates that many African societies share an appreciation of the enduring significance of the past while expressing this appreciation through different conceptual frameworks.[11]

One of the most widely discussed African concepts is the Akan notion of Sankofa, often represented by a bird turning backwards to retrieve an egg from its back. Sankofa literally conveys the idea that it is not wrong to return to recover what has been forgotten or neglected.[12] The concept emphasizes that societies must revisit their historical experiences in order to build a better future. In educational philosophy, cultural studies, and African-centred scholarship, Sankofa has become a metaphor for historical recovery and intellectual renewal.

At first glance, Sankofa appears closely related to Esetology because both emphasize the continuing relevance of the past. However, important distinctions remain. Sankofa primarily functions as an ethical injunction encouraging the recovery of forgotten values and experiences.

[11] Kwasi, Wiredu, Cultural Universals and Particulars: An African Perspective (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996); Paulin J. Hountondji, African Philosophy: Myth and Reality. 2nd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996).

[12] Christel N. Temple, The Emergence of Sankofa Practice in the United States: A Modern History (New York: Peter Lang, 2010).

Esetology, by contrast, extends beyond ethical encouragement to formulate a comprehensive philosophy of history. It explores not only why the past should be revisited but also the nature of historical existence, the sources of historical knowledge, the ethics of historical interpretation, and the methodological principles governing historical inquiry. Thus, while Sankofa inspires historical recovery, Esetology seeks to explain the philosophical foundations upon which such recovery rests.

Another significant African philosophical tradition is Ubuntu, widely associated with Southern Africa. Ubuntu is commonly summarized by the expression, "a person is a person through other persons," emphasizing human interdependence, communal responsibility, and shared humanity.[13] Ubuntu has influenced scholarship in ethics, political philosophy, law, peacebuilding, and leadership studies because it places relationships at the centre of human existence.

Although Ubuntu is principally an ethical philosophy rather than a philosophy of history, it intersects with Esetology in important respects. Both reject radical individualism and emphasize the communal foundations of human identity. Within Esetology, historical knowledge belongs primarily to the community rather than to isolated individuals, while Ubuntu understands personal identity through social relationships. Nevertheless, Esetology directs its principal attention to historical consciousness and collective memory rather than interpersonal ethics. The relationship between the two perspectives is therefore complementary rather than identical.

The concept of collective memory, developed most prominently in the work of Maurice Halbwachs, provides another useful point of comparison. Halbwachs argued that memory is socially constructed and maintained through groups rather than existing solely within individual minds. Families, religious communities, educational institutions, and other social organizations shape the ways in which societies remember the past. His work has profoundly influenced memory studies, historical sociology, and cultural history.[14]

Esetology shares Halbwachs' recognition of the communal nature of memory but differs in its philosophical orientation. Collective memory theory primarily explains the social mechanisms through which memory is preserved. Esetology accepts these mechanisms while extending the discussion to include indigenous understandings of historical existence, cultural continuity,

[13] Mogobe B. Ramose, African Philosophy through Ubuntu (Harare: Mond Books, 2002); Thaddeus, Metz, "Ubuntu as a Moral Theory and Human Rights in South Africa." (African Human Rights Law Journal 11 (2): 532–559, 2011).

[14] Maurice, Halbwachs, On Collective Memory. Edited and translated by Lewis A. Coser. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

ethical responsibility, and historical utility. Thus, collective memory constitutes one dimension of Esetology rather than its entirety.[15]

The French historian Pierre Nora introduced the concept of *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory), arguing that societies preserve historical consciousness through monuments, museums, archives, commemorative rituals, and symbolic landscapes. Nora's insight is particularly relevant because it demonstrates that memory is embedded within physical and cultural environments.[16] Similar observations may be made within Ibibio society, where ancestral compounds, sacred groves, shrines, village squares, streams, ancient trees, and traditional institutions function as repositories of historical memory. Esetology therefore broadens the idea of sites of memory by interpreting them through indigenous categories of historical consciousness rather than exclusively through modern commemorative practices.

The comparative significance of Esetology also extends to contemporary debates on indigenous knowledge systems. Scholars such as Paulin Hountondji[17] and Kwasi Wiredu[18] have argued that African intellectual traditions should be studied critically and systematically rather than treated merely as objects of ethnographic curiosity. Their work calls for the development of conceptual frameworks rooted in African languages and philosophical traditions. Esetology aligns with this broader intellectual project by demonstrating that the Ibibio concept of *eset* possesses theoretical potential capable of contributing to international discussions on historiography and the philosophy of history.

The comparative analysis presented here highlights an important conclusion. Esetology neither duplicates nor replaces existing African philosophies. Instead, it occupies a distinctive position by focusing specifically on historical consciousness. Whereas Sankofa emphasizes historical recovery, Ubuntu foregrounds communal ethics, and collective memory theory explains the social preservation of remembrance, Esetology integrates these concerns within a broader philosophy of history rooted in the Ibibio intellectual tradition. Its originality lies in presenting an

[15] Ibid.
[16] Pierre, Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire." Representations 26: 7–24, 1989.

[17] Paulin J. Hountondji, African Philosophy: Myth and Reality. 2nd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996).

[18] Kwasi, Wiredu, Cultural Universals and Particulars: An African Perspective (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996).

indigenous African framework that simultaneously addresses the ontology, epistemology, ethics, methodology, and social purpose of historical knowledge.

Consequently, Esetology enriches contemporary scholarship by demonstrating that African historical thought is capable not only of preserving historical experiences but also of generating theoretical perspectives that engage global academic debates. Rather than remaining confined to local cultural interpretation, the concept offers historians, philosophers, anthropologists, linguists, and scholars of African Indigenous Knowledge Systems a new framework through which indigenous philosophies of history may be explored and compared.

Conclusion

The central argument of this paper has been that the Ibibio concept of *eset* embodies a distinctive philosophy of history that extends beyond the conventional understanding of history as a chronological record of past events. Through a historical research method supported by a multidisciplinary approach, the study has demonstrated that *eset* represents an indigenous conception of historical consciousness in which the past is regarded as recoverable, meaningful, and continually relevant to the life of the community. By tracing the linguistic origin of *eset*, examining its philosophical implications, and interpreting its expression through Ibibio proverbs, oral traditions, and cultural practices, the paper has argued that the Ibibio possess a coherent indigenous theory of history that deserves systematic scholarly recognition.

Building upon this foundation, the study has introduced Esetology as the systematic study of the philosophy, epistemology, methodology, ethics, and social functions of history as conceived within the Ibibio intellectual tradition. Rather than serving merely as a new terminology, Esetology has been presented as an emerging theoretical framework capable of enriching contemporary debates in African historiography, philosophy of history, indigenous knowledge systems, and memory studies. By distinguishing between *eset* as the Ibibio concept of history and Esetology as the scholarly framework derived from it, the paper has sought to provide conceptual clarity while opening a new direction for historical scholarship.

The theoretical discussions have shown that Esetology is founded upon a distinctive understanding of historical reality. It rejects the notion that the past is permanently detached from the present, proposing instead that historical experiences continue to exist through language, collective memory, institutions, material culture, landscapes, customs, and inherited social values. Within this framework, history is understood as an enduring cultural presence that is continually rediscovered and reinterpreted rather than as a closed archive of completed events.

The historian therefore assumes the role of an interpreter and custodian of collective memory, recovering knowledge that informs contemporary society and guides future generations.

The epistemological analysis further established that historical knowledge is preserved through multiple and complementary repositories. Written documents remain indispensable, but they are joined by oral traditions, proverbs, indigenous concepts, genealogies, rituals, place names, ecological knowledge, and material culture as legitimate sources of historical understanding. Esetology therefore advocates an inclusive approach to historical evidence, one that combines critical historical inquiry with sensitivity to indigenous systems of knowledge preservation. In doing so, it broadens the evidentiary base of historical research while maintaining the standards of scholarly criticism required within the historical discipline.

The formulation of the Seven Foundational Canons of Esetology represents one of the principal contributions of this study. Collectively, these canons articulate the philosophical assumptions that govern the recovery, continuity, preservation, transmission, ethical interpretation, authenticity, and practical application of historical knowledge. They provide a coherent framework through which historians may examine the relationship between memory, identity, community, and historical responsibility. Although derived from the Ibibio intellectual tradition, these canons also offer broader analytical possibilities for comparative studies of indigenous philosophies of history across Africa and beyond.

By situating Esetology within wider debates on the decolonization of African historiography, this paper has also argued that intellectual decolonization requires more than recovering African historical experiences. It equally requires recovering African concepts through which societies have historically understood and interpreted the past. African languages are not merely instruments of communication; they are repositories of philosophical ideas, conceptual categories, and theoretical insights. The Ibibio concept of *eset* illustrates how linguistic analysis can reveal indigenous theories of historical consciousness capable of contributing to global academic discourse. Consequently, Esetology demonstrates that African intellectual traditions are not only worthy subjects of historical investigation but are themselves sources of historical theory.

The comparative analysis undertaken in this paper has further shown that Esetology occupies a distinctive position among African philosophical traditions. While sharing important concerns with concepts such as Sankofa, Ubuntu, and theories of collective memory, it differs by presenting a comprehensive philosophy of history centred on the nature, transmission, ethics, and

utility of historical knowledge. This comparative perspective underscores both the originality of Esetology and its potential to contribute meaningfully to interdisciplinary scholarship involving history, philosophy, anthropology, linguistics, cultural studies, and African Indigenous Knowledge Systems.

The significance of Esetology extends beyond the academic study of the Ibibio. It provides a model for exploring the philosophical foundations of history embedded within other African languages and cultures. Many indigenous societies possess concepts that encode distinctive understandings of memory, time, ancestry, continuity, and identity. Systematic investigation of these concepts may contribute to a more inclusive philosophy of history that reflects the diversity of human historical thought. In this regard, Esetology should be understood not as a closed theoretical system but as an invitation to further scholarly inquiry, critical debate, comparative research, and theoretical refinement.

The study acknowledges that Esetology is an emerging framework and therefore remains open to further development. Future research may examine its applicability to comparative African historiography, indigenous historical methodologies, memory studies, heritage conservation, digital archiving, public history, and history education. Additional linguistic, ethnographic, archaeological, and historical investigations may also refine its conceptual foundations and broaden its explanatory scope. Such continued engagement will strengthen the framework and determine its wider relevance within historical scholarship.

Ultimately, this paper affirms that history, from the Ibibio perspective, is neither a static record nor a distant memory. It is a living inheritance that connects generations, preserves identity, transmits wisdom, and shapes the moral and cultural direction of society. By recovering the philosophical depth of *eset* and advancing Esetology as a systematic framework for understanding indigenous historical consciousness, this study contributes to the continuing expansion of African-centred scholarship and to the global conversation on the philosophy of history. It is hoped that this contribution will encourage historians and scholars of African studies to engage more deeply with the conceptual wealth embedded in African languages, thereby enriching both the discipline of history and humanity's collective understanding of the past.

Article Publication Details
This article is published in the **International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Bulletin**, ISSN 3108-1428 (Online). In Volume 5 Issue 5 (Sep – Oct) 2026.
The journal is published and managed by **IRPG**.

Acknowledgements
We sincerely thank the editors and the reviewers for their valuable suggestions on this paper.

Funding
The authors declare that no funding was received for this work.

Data availability
No datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate
The author(s) declare that it is not applicable.

Consent for publication
The author(s) declare that this is not applicable.

Competing interests
The author(s) declare that they have no competing interests.

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