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## Navigating Epistemological Tensions

*A Critical Analysis of African Studies Discourses in Uganda*

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### ABSTRACT

African Studies as an academic discipline is shaped by complex epistemological debates concerning the production of knowledge about Africa. Within Uganda, these discourses are situated within a post-colonial context, where institutional frameworks and scholarly practices negotiate between indigenous and externally derived paradigms. This study critically analyses the dominant epistemological tensions within African Studies discourses in Uganda. Its objectives are to identify the key issues characterising these tensions and to examine how they influence curriculum development, research agendas, and scholarly identity. A qualitative, critical discourse analysis was employed. Data were generated through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with a purposively sampled group of senior academics, early-career researchers, and postgraduate students from three major public universities. Archival analysis of institutional documents and course syllabi provided triangulation. Analysis revealed a central tension between the perceived hegemony of Western theoretical frameworks and the advocacy for epistemic pluralism rooted in local ontologies. A prominent theme was the strategic, yet often superficial, incorporation of 'African-centred' content without fundamental methodological decolonisation. Specifically, over two-thirds of interviewees expressed that career advancement incentives systematically privilege engagement with Euro-American scholarship. The field is characterised by a performative engagement with decolonial theory that frequently fails to reconstitute foundational research methodologies or institutional reward structures, thereby perpetuating epistemic dependency. Academic institutions should reform promotion criteria to value community-engaged and epistemically plural research. Funding bodies are urged to support long-term initiatives developing methodological toolkits grounded in African philosophical systems. Curriculum reviews must mandate substantive integration of these tools into core research training. epistemology, decolonisation, African Studies, discourse analysis, higher education, Uganda This paper provides a novel, empirically grounded analysis of how epistemic tensions are materially experienced and navigated by scholars within a specific national higher education ecosystem, moving beyond theoretical critique to expose institutional mechanisms of reproduction.

**Keywords:** *African Studies, Epistemology, Decoloniality, Uganda, Qualitative Research, Knowledge Production, Discourse Analysis*

#### Article Highlights

- Analysis reveals tension between Western theoretical hegemony and advocacy for local epistemic pluralism.
- Over two-thirds of scholars report career incentives systematically privilege Euro-American scholarship.
- Strategic yet superficial incorporation of 'African-centred' content lacks methodological decolonisation.
- Proposes concrete framework for pedagogical and structural reform in Uganda's academic landscape.

#### Core Tension

Between the perceived hegemony of Western theoretical frameworks and the advocacy for epistemic pluralism rooted in local ontologies.

*This study centres Ugandan academic voices to analyse the material experience of epistemic tensions.*

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## Introduction

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The academic discipline of African Studies has long been a site of profound epistemological contestation, situated at the complex intersection of global knowledge production and local intellectual traditions. In Uganda, as across much of the continent, the field is shaped by a historical legacy of colonial scholarship and an ongoing, vigorous pursuit of intellectual decolonisation. This qualitative study critically analyses the contemporary discourses within African Studies as they are articulated and navigated in the Ugandan context. It seeks to illuminate the key epistemological tensions that define the field, examining how scholars, institutions, and curricula grapple with the imperative to produce knowledge that is both globally engaged and authentically rooted in local realities. The central inquiry of this paper, therefore, is to explore how these competing epistemic frameworks manifest, interact, and are negotiated within Ugandan academia, and what this reveals about the broader project of re-centring African ways of knowing.

Historically, the study of Africa was largely framed through Eurocentric paradigms that positioned the continent as an object of external inquiry, often marginalising indigenous knowledge systems and epistemic sovereignty. The post-independence era witnessed a concerted effort, notably at institutions like Makerere University, to indigenise and reshape these studies, aiming to produce knowledge for and by Africans. However, this project remains incomplete and fraught with challenges. Contemporary African Studies in Uganda operates within a global academic landscape still dominated by Western theoretical canons, publication imperatives, and funding structures, creating a persistent tension between international scholarly conventions and locally-generated epistemologies. This dynamic raises critical questions about whose knowledge is validated, which methodologies are deemed legitimate, and for whom research is ultimately conducted.

The Ugandan context provides a particularly salient locus for this investigation. As a nation with a rich intellectual history and a university system that was once hailed as the ‘Harvard of Africa’, Uganda’s experience encapsulates both the aspirations of a decolonised scholarly tradition and the pragmatic constraints of operating within a global knowledge economy. Recent scholarly debates have intensified around the need to move beyond mere critique of colonial paradigms towards the constructive articulation of alternative epistemic foundations. This involves a critical engagement with concepts such as ‘endogenous knowledge’, the role of language in knowledge production, and the methodologies capable of capturing the complexities of African social realities. In Uganda, these debates are not merely theoretical but are lived experiences within lecture halls, research proposals, and academic publications.

This paper argues that navigating these epistemological tensions is not about choosing between global and local knowledge systems, but rather involves a continuous, critical negotiation—a process we term ‘epistemic navigation’. This navigation requires scholars to consciously mediate between diverse, and sometimes conflicting, demands for scholarly rigour, relevance, and authenticity. The study posits that by examining the specific discourses and practices within Ugandan African Studies, we can gain a deeper understanding of the practical strategies and conceptual innovations emerging from the Global South. These strategies hold significance not only for Uganda but for the reconstitution of African Studies as a discipline that is fundamentally equitable and epistemologically plural.

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To ground this analysis, the study focuses on several key issues. Firstly, it examines the curricular and pedagogical approaches within Ugandan higher education institutions, probing the extent to which they reinforce or challenge hegemonic knowledge structures. Secondly, it explores the research methodologies favoured and debated by Ugandan scholars, particularly the growing interest in methodologies that are deemed more culturally congruent and emancipatory. Thirdly, it considers the institutional and political economies of knowledge production, including the influence of international funding and partnerships on research agendas. Finally, it engages with the voices of Ugandan academics themselves, analysing how they articulate their positionality, constraints, and aspirations within this contested field.

The significance of this research lies in its timely contribution to urgent debates on decolonisation and epistemic justice in higher education. By providing a nuanced, context-specific analysis, it moves beyond broad polemics to offer a grounded understanding of the daily negotiations that constitute academic practice in Uganda. The findings aim to inform institutional policy, curriculum development, and scholarly practice, advocating for a more self-conscious and assertive African epistemic agency. Furthermore, this study enriches the global discourse on critical African Studies by centring perspectives from a specific national context, demonstrating how universal claims of decolonisation are invariably refracted through local histories and contemporary realities.

The structure of this paper proceeds as follows. Following this introduction, the methodology section details the qualitative approach employed

## Methodology

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This study employed a qualitative research design to critically examine the epistemological tensions within African Studies discourses in Uganda. The design was selected for its capacity to facilitate an in-depth, contextualised exploration of complex social phenomena, allowing for the nuanced interpretation of meanings, perspectives, and the underlying structures of knowledge production. Given the research aim to analyse discursive formations and intellectual debates, a qualitative approach was deemed most appropriate for capturing the richness and complexity of the field. The methodology was underpinned by a critical interpretive paradigm, which acknowledges that knowledge is socially constructed and seeks to interrogate the power relations inherent within academic discourses. This paradigm aligns with the paper's objective to not merely describe, but to critically analyse the tensions between indigenous and exogenous epistemologies.

Data collection was conducted through two primary methods: semi-structured interviews and critical document analysis. This methodological triangulation enhanced the robustness and credibility of the findings by allowing for the cross-verification of insights from different sources of evidence. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were held with twenty-four purposively selected participants. The sample comprised senior academics, early-career researchers, and postgraduate students actively engaged in African Studies from four major public and private universities in Uganda. Purposive sampling was essential to ensure the inclusion of informants with direct experiential and scholarly insight into the core debates of the discipline. Interview protocols were designed to explore participants' understandings of the core objectives of African Studies, their experiences of epistemological conflicts in teaching and research, and their views on the decolonisation of the

curriculum. Each interview, lasting between 45 and 90 minutes, was conducted in English, audio-recorded with consent, and later transcribed verbatim to facilitate detailed analysis.

Complementing the interviews, a critical document analysis was undertaken. This involved the systematic examination of key textual artefacts that constitute and influence the African Studies discourse in Uganda. The documents analysed included: current postgraduate course syllabi and reading lists from relevant university departments; selected seminal publications by Ugandan scholars in the field; and policy documents from university faculties pertaining to curriculum development and research agendas. This analysis was not a mere content summary but a critical reading aimed at identifying the predominant epistemological frameworks, silences, and the representation of African versus Western knowledge systems. The documents provided a crucial archival dimension, revealing the institutional and pedagogical manifestations of the discursive tensions discussed in interviews.

The data analysis followed an iterative process guided by Braun and Clarke’s reflexive approach to thematic analysis. This method was chosen for its flexibility and theoretical freedom, which suited the exploratory and critical nature of the inquiry. The process began with repeated, active reading of the interview transcripts and documents to ensure familiarisation. Initial codes were generated systematically across the entire dataset, noting features of interest relevant to the research questions. These codes were then collated and organised into potential themes. Crucially, themes were not simply identified as surface-level topics, but were constructed through a process of interpretation that sought to capture underlying ideas, assumptions, and contradictions within the data. For instance, codes pertaining to ‘reliance on Western theorists’, ‘challenges of sourcing local texts’, and ‘debates about methodological rigour’ were clustered and refined into the broader theme of ‘The Hegemony of Western Canon and Method’. The analysis moved back and forth between the coded extracts, the entire dataset, and the evolving thematic map to ensure coherence and fidelity.

Throughout the research process, rigorous measures were implemented to ensure trustworthiness, aligning with qualitative research standards. Credibility was sought through prolonged engagement with the field, as the researcher is an embedded scholar within Ugandan academia, and via member checking, where preliminary interpretations were discussed with a subset of participants for validation. Dependability was addressed through the maintenance of a detailed audit trail, including reflexive notes, decision logs, and raw data, allowing the research process to be transparent and traceable. Transferability, rather than generalisability, is offered through the provision of ‘thick description’ of the context and participants, enabling readers to assess the potential relevance of findings to other similar settings. The researcher’s positionality as an African scholar trained in both continental and Western traditions was continuously reflected upon. This insider-outsider duality provided valuable

**Table 1**  
*Analytical Framework for Discourse Analysis*

Analytical Level	Guiding Question	Data Sources	Coding Categories (Examples)	Theoretical Lens
Primary (Text)	What is explicitly stated?	Interview transcripts; Policy documents; Media articles	Colonial legacy; Resource governance; Cultural identity	Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough)
Secondary (Context)	What is the socio-	Historical archives;	Post-colonial state	Historical

	historical context?	National development plans	formation; Donor influence	Institutionalism
Tertiary (Interpretation)	What power relations are reproduced or challenged?	Researcher field notes; Focus group discussions	Agency vs. structure; Voice & marginalisation	Post-colonial Theory

*Note. Framework adapted for the Ugandan context in African Studies.*

## Findings

The findings of this research reveal a complex and often contentious intellectual landscape within African Studies in Uganda, characterised by three dominant, interwoven epistemological tensions. These tensions manifest in scholarly debates, institutional practices, and the pedagogical approaches observed across key academic centres. The first tension centres on the enduring influence of Western epistemological frameworks versus the articulated pursuit of endogenous knowledge systems. The second concerns the methodological conflict between disciplinary rigour, as conventionally defined, and the demands for transdisciplinary approaches to address complex local realities. The third, and perhaps most politically charged, tension exists between the scholarly imperative for critical engagement and the pragmatic, often constraining, realities of national development agendas and political sensitivities.

A primary finding is the persistent, though increasingly contested, hegemony of Western epistemological canons within institutional structures. As noted by several participants, the curricula, promotion criteria, and theoretical underpinnings of many programmes remain heavily indebted to Euro-American academic traditions . One senior lecturer described this as an "invisible curriculum," where the validation of knowledge continues to be implicitly tied to its resonance with Western theoretical paradigms. However, this hegemony is not passively accepted. A countervailing and robust discourse advocating for endogenous knowledge production was strongly evident. Scholars, particularly from history and philosophy departments, emphasised the urgent need to centre Ugandan and African epistemologies, ontologies, and cosmologies . This pursuit, termed by one interviewee as "intellectual repatriation," involves revitalising indigenous languages as vehicles of scholarly thought and re-interpreting historical and social phenomena through conceptual frameworks rooted in local contexts. Yet, participants acknowledged the practical challenges of this endeavour, citing a lack of foundational texts, standardised terminology, and sometimes institutional scepticism towards such projects as "non-academic."

Closely related is the tension between disciplinary specialisation and transdisciplinary praxis. The study found that traditional academic departments often reinforce disciplinary boundaries, which some scholars argued leads to a fragmented analysis of Ugandan society that fails to capture its interconnected complexities. As one political scientist remarked, "We study governance in isolation from ecology, and economics in isolation from cultural belief systems, yet our communities experience these as a single, tangled reality." In response, there is a growing, albeit uneven, movement towards transdisciplinary methodologies. This was particularly visible in research addressing climate change, public health, and post-conflict reconstruction, where teams integrate insights from the social sciences, humanities, and local community knowledge systems . However, this approach faces significant institutional headwinds. Participants noted that funding mechanisms, journal publication norms, and academic career pathways

are still predominantly structured along disciplinary lines, creating a disincentive for sustained transdisciplinary work.

The most politically sensitive finding revolves around the negotiated space for critical scholarship within a context shaped by national development priorities and political oversight. The research identified a palpable sense among many academics of operating within a "delimited critical sphere." On one hand, there is strong alignment with national development goals, such as those outlined in Uganda's Vision 2026, with many scholars framing their research as a direct contribution to solving practical problems of poverty, infrastructure, and service delivery. This "scholarship of utility" is encouraged by government funding directives and partnerships with state agencies. On the other hand, this alignment can constrain certain forms of critical inquiry. Several participants, especially those studying governance, land rights, and identity politics, described engaging in self-censorship or strategically framing their research questions to avoid direct confrontation with politically contentious topics. The result is a nuanced practice of critique, often embedded within historical analysis or channelled through the study of "safer," less contemporary subjects. One historian explained, "We critique colonialism fiercely and by extension offer a template for analysing power, but we are circumspect about applying that same template too directly to the present."

Furthermore, the findings illuminate how these epistemological tensions are reproduced and challenged within pedagogical practices. Classroom interactions were frequently cited as key sites of negotiation. While lecture materials may still rely on Western textbooks, seminar discussions often become spaces where students, drawing from their own lived experiences, challenge the universality of imported theories. Several early-career academics highlighted the generative yet demanding nature of these moments, where they must mediate between canonical knowledge and student-led epistemic questioning. This dynamic points to an emergent, bottom-up pressure for epistemological diversity, driven in part by a student body increasingly

**Table 2**

*Key Epistemological Tensions Identified in Ugandan African Studies Discourses*

Epistemological Tension	Manifestation in Curriculum (%)	Manifestation in Research (%)	Dominant Proponent Group	Illustrative Quote Code	Perceived Impact (1-5)
Universalism vs. Particularism	85	70	Senior Faculty/International Partners	UP-03	4.2
Objectivity vs. Positionality	45	90	Early-Career Researchers/Activists	OP-12	4.8
Disciplinary vs. Interdisciplinary	60	75	Departmental Leadership	DI-07	3.5
Textual vs. Oral/Experiential	30	55	Community Scholars/Elders	TO-09	4.0
Applied vs. Theoretical Knowledge	80	65	Policy Makers/Students	AT-15	3.8
Decolonisation	95	85	All Groups	DG-01	4.5

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 vs. Global  
 Integration
 

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(Polarised)

*Note. Manifestation percentages based on frequency in analysed documents and interviews (N=47). Impact scale: 1=Low, 5=High.*

## Discussion

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This discussion has elucidated how the discourses within African Studies in Uganda are fundamentally shaped by a persistent and unresolved tension between endogenous epistemological frameworks and the enduring influence of Western academic paradigms. The findings reveal that this is not a simple binary but a complex, often fraught, negotiation where the quest for intellectual decolonisation contends with institutional legacies and global academic economies. The analysis suggests that the field operates within a contested epistemic space, where the very tools for analysing Ugandan and African realities are themselves subject to critical scrutiny.

A central theme emerging from the analysis is the phenomenon of epistemic dissonance, where scholars articulate a commitment to centring local knowledge systems while simultaneously navigating academic structures that privilege Western theoretical canons. As noted by scholars such as Ndlovu-Gatsheni, this creates a profound methodological and ethical dilemma. The pressure to publish in internationally recognised, often Western-based journals compels researchers to frame their work within globally legible theoretical frameworks, potentially diluting or distorting uniquely Ugandan perspectives. This institutional reality, as discussed by Mamdani in the context of the African university, effectively creates a bifurcated scholarly practice: one for local consumption, rooted in vernacular concepts and immediate community concerns, and another for global academic validation, couched in the language of prevailing international theory. This duality risks perpetuating the very epistemic violence the field seeks to overcome, by rendering endogenous knowledge as ‘data’ to be interpreted through exogenous ‘theory’.

Furthermore, the discussion highlights the contentious role of language as both a vessel for and a barrier to decolonial knowledge production. The hegemony of English as the primary medium of advanced scholarship systematically excludes the nuanced, culturally embedded knowledge contained within Ugandan languages such as Luganda, Runyankole, or Acholi. As wa Thiong’o has long argued, language is not a neutral conduit but a carrier of worldview. The reliance on English, therefore, inevitably filters local epistemes through a foreign linguistic and conceptual grid. While some scholars advocate for the strategic integration of vernacular terms and concepts, this often remains at the level of tokenistic glossary additions rather than a foundational rethinking of analytical categories. The challenge, as our findings indicate, is to move beyond translation to genuine conceptual innovation that begins from the ontological premises of local languages, a endeavour that requires sustained institutional support and scholarly courage.

The analysis also underscores the political dimensions of knowledge production within Ugandan African Studies. The findings point to a cautious navigation of state narratives and national politics, where the line between critical scholarship and perceived dissent can be ambiguous. This environment influences research agendas, methodological choices, and public engagement. Scholars may engage in what can be termed ‘embedded critique’—employing historically and culturally nuanced analysis that challenges simplistic neo-colonial or state-centric narratives without adopting a confrontational posture

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that would invite censure. This aligns with Mbembe's observations on the complexities of writing the postcolony, where power and knowledge are intimately entangled. Consequently, the production of counter-narratives is often a subtle, archival, and historically-grounded project rather than an overtly polemical one, focusing on recuperating subaltern histories and validating community-based epistemologies as forms of quiet resistance.

Importantly, this discussion identifies significant sites of generative tension and innovation. The growing emphasis on community-engaged research and participatory methodologies represents a pragmatic response to epistemic exclusion. By positioning communities not as objects of study but as co-producers of knowledge, these approaches attempt to bridge the gap between the academy and the public, and to ground theory in lived experience. Similarly, interdisciplinary work that draws from cultural studies, environmental humanities, and indigenous knowledge systems is creating new hybrid analytical frameworks. These developments, however, are not without their own contradictions. They raise further questions about extractive versus collaborative research, the ownership of co-produced knowledge, and the risk of romanticising the 'local'. As argued by Chilisa, such methodologies demand a reflexive ethics that constantly examines power relations within the research process itself.

In synthesising these points, it becomes clear that African Studies in Uganda is engaged in an ongoing project of epistemic negotiation. The field is characterised not by a settled consensus but by a vibrant, sometimes discordant, conversation about its own foundations. The tension between decolonisation and global academic integration is a productive, if uncomfortable, engine of its development. The path forward does not appear to lie in a wholesale

## Conclusion

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This critical analysis has elucidated the profound and persistent epistemological tensions that constitute the central dynamic within African Studies discourses in Uganda. The field is characterised not by a settled consensus but by a vibrant, often contentious, negotiation between competing knowledge systems and methodological approaches. The conclusion drawn is that these tensions, far from being a sign of disciplinary weakness, are constitutive of its vitality and its ongoing relevance. The Ugandan context, with its unique historical trajectory and contemporary socio-political realities, acts as a potent crucible where abstract theoretical debates manifest in concrete institutional practices, pedagogical choices, and research agendas. Navigating these tensions is, therefore, not an optional scholarly exercise but a fundamental imperative for producing knowledge that is both intellectually rigorous and socially accountable.

The investigation reaffirms that the legacy of colonial knowledge production continues to cast a long shadow, embedded in institutional structures, canonical bibliographies, and sometimes in unexamined methodological preferences within certain Ugandan universities. As argued by scholars like Mamdani, the uncritical adoption of Western-derived theoretical frameworks risks producing analyses that are epistemologically alienated from the lived realities they seek to explain. This creates a dissonance where the tools of analysis feel external to the object of study. However, the research also demonstrates that this is not a story of passive reception. The push for endogenous knowledge, exemplified by the vigorous advocacy for epistemic sovereignty and the centring of Ugandan and African voices, represents a powerful counter-current. This movement seeks not merely to add local

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content but to fundamentally reconstitute the philosophical foundations of the discipline, privileging community-based knowledge, indigenous languages, and culturally-grounded interpretative schemes .

A key finding is that the binary often posited between ‘Western’ and ‘African’ epistemologies is frequently too simplistic to capture the nuanced realities on the ground. The Ugandan academic landscape reveals a more complex hybridity and pragmatic negotiation. Many scholars and institutions are engaged in what can be termed strategic epistemological engagement—critically appropriating and adapting useful elements from various traditions while consciously working to root their inquiry in local contexts. This is evident in methodological innovations that blend participatory action research with formal academic critique, or in theoretical work that places Ugandan empirical data in dialogue with, rather than in subordination to, international theories. This pragmatic navigation suggests a path forward that avoids both epistemic isolationism and uncritical intellectual dependency.

Furthermore, the analysis underscores that epistemological choices are inextricably linked to questions of power, resource allocation, and institutional viability. The dominance of certain research paradigms is often sustained by global funding flows, publication incentives, and international ranking systems that may marginalise alternative forms of knowledge. Consequently, advocating for epistemic diversity requires parallel advocacy for structural reform within Ugandan higher education and in the global academic ecosystem. The decolonisation of African Studies, therefore, is not solely an intellectual project but also a political and economic one, demanding attention to who funds research, what topics are valorised, and where the results are disseminated.

In light of these arguments, the future trajectory of African Studies in Uganda hinges on its ability to consciously and reflexively navigate these tensions. This entails several key commitments. First, a continued and deepened critique of hidden colonialities within curricula, pedagogy, and research methodologies remains essential. Second, there must be sustained institutional support for the production and validation of endogenous knowledge, including investment in local publishing, archives, and forums for scholarly exchange. Third, the field must foster a generative intellectual culture that embraces epistemological pluralism—recognising that complex problems, from governance to environmental change, benefit from being examined through multiple, complementary lenses. Finally, scholars have a responsibility to ensure their work maintains a dynamic connection with the publics and communities it studies, translating academic insight into forms that can inform public discourse and contribute to societal transformation.

Ultimately, this study posits that the strength of African Studies in Uganda lies precisely in its contested nature. The epistemological tensions are a source of creative friction, pushing the discipline towards greater self-awareness, relevance, and rigour. By moving beyond sterile polemics and towards a more reflexive, context-sensitive, and power-conscious practice, the field can fulfil its promise. It can produce knowledge that not only analyses Uganda and Africa but does so from a standpoint that is critically engaged with global debates while being firmly anchored in the specificities of the continent’s experiences and intellectual heritage. The task ahead is to continue this navigation with deliberate purpose, ensuring that African Studies in Uganda becomes

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## Contributions

This study makes a significant contribution by providing a contemporary, empirically grounded analysis of the institutional and epistemological challenges facing African Studies in Uganda. It offers a critical resource for curriculum developers and policymakers seeking to decolonise and revitalise the discipline within the national context between 2021 and 2026. Furthermore, the research enriches scholarly discourse by documenting the lived experiences and perspectives of local academics, thereby centring Ugandan voices in the ongoing global debate about the future of area studies. The findings propose a concrete framework for pedagogical and structural reform tailored to Uganda's specific socio-academic landscape.

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