



Navigating the Epistemic Terrain

An Ethnography of African Studies Research Praxis in Cameroon, 2000–2026

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ABSTRACT

The institutional and intellectual landscape of African Studies, particularly when conducted by African scholars within the continent, remains under-examined. This study addresses the praxis of producing knowledge about Africa from within, focusing on the specific socio-political and epistemic conditions in a Central African context. This ethnography aims to critically analyse the daily practices, institutional constraints, and epistemic negotiations of researchers engaged in African Studies. It seeks to understand how knowledge production is shaped by local and global academic structures and to identify pathways for more autonomous and relevant scholarly work. A multi-sited ethnographic study was conducted, comprising prolonged participant observation within three major research institutes, in-depth interviews with 42 established and early-career scholars, and textual analysis of grant proposals and published outputs. A dominant theme was the pervasive influence of donor-driven agendas, which redirected research priorities towards externally defined problems. Approximately 70% of interviewees described consciously tailoring project proposals to align with Northern funding criteria, often at the expense of locally identified research questions. This created a tension between scholarly integrity and career sustainability. The research praxis is characterised by a complex navigation between global academic expectations and local intellectual commitments. This dynamic sustains but also critically limits the decolonial potential of African Studies conducted within the continent. Strengthen institutional funding mechanisms for curiosity-driven research. Develop regional peer-review networks to foster intellectual autonomy. Integrate explicit training on epistemic negotiation and grant-crafting into doctoral programmes for early-career scholars. knowledge production, research praxis, epistemic negotiation, institutional ethnography, academic autonomy, Cameroon This paper provides a novel, empirically grounded analysis of the 'grantification' of African Studies, demonstrating how funding dependencies materially shape research agendas and epistemic outputs from within the continent.

Keywords: *Epistemic terrain, Research praxis, African scholarship, Cameroon, Decoloniality, Knowledge production, Ethnography*

Article Highlights

- 70% of scholars tailor proposals to Northern funding criteria, sidelining local questions.
- Donor-driven agendas redirect research priorities toward externally defined problems.
- A tension exists between scholarly integrity and career sustainability.
- Funding dependencies materially shape research agendas and epistemic outputs.

Pathways Forward

Strengthen institutional funding for curiosity-driven research. Develop regional peer-review networks. Integrate training on epistemic negotiation into doctoral programmes.

A critical ethnography of knowledge production from within the continent.

ABSTRACT-ONLY PUBLICATION

This is an abstract-only publication. The complete research paper with full methodology, results, discussion, and references is available upon request.

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