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## Decolonising the Epistemic Terrain

A Commentary on the Challenges and Prospects for African Studies Research in Nigeria (2021–2026)

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### ABSTRACT

African Studies research within the continent, particularly in Nigeria, operates within a complex intellectual landscape shaped by enduring colonial epistemological frameworks. This creates significant challenges for producing endogenous knowledge that reflects local realities and priorities. This commentary critically analyses the prevailing challenges confronting African Studies scholarship in Nigeria and articulates a coherent agenda for its decolonisation and revitalisation over a defined future period. The analysis employs a critical discursive review, synthesising observations from institutional practices, funding patterns, and scholarly outputs to construct a situated critique. A dominant theme is the systemic marginalisation of indigenous knowledge systems and methodologies, with over 70% of analysed research proposals from major institutions privileging Western theoretical frameworks. This epistemic dependency stifles innovative, context-specific inquiry. Decolonising African Studies in Nigeria requires a fundamental reorientation of its epistemic foundations, moving beyond critique to the active cultivation of autonomous scholarly practices. Key actions include reforming university curricula to centre African epistemes, establishing research funding explicitly for methodologies grounded in indigenous paradigms, and strengthening continental scholarly networks to reduce dependency on Global North validation. epistemology, decolonisation, knowledge production, research methodology, indigenous knowledge This commentary provides a novel, integrated policy framework that links specific institutional reforms—particularly in research funding allocation—to the concrete advancement of epistemic sovereignty in African Studies.

**Keywords:** *decolonisation, epistemic violence, African knowledge systems, Nigerian academia, research methodologies, postcolonial critique, Global South*

#### Article Highlights

- Over 70% of analysed research proposals privilege Western theoretical frameworks over indigenous knowledge systems.
- Chronic underfunding and deteriorating infrastructure stifle sustained scholarly innovation within Nigerian institutions.
- Reforming curricula and funding to centre African epistemes is essential for epistemic sovereignty.
- Strengthening continental networks can reduce dependency on Global North validation.

#### Core Argument

Meaningful decolonisation is both the paramount challenge and most vital prospect for revitalising African Studies in Nigeria—a praxis, not just a theoretical posture.

*This commentary provides an integrated policy framework linking institutional reforms to epistemic sovereignty.*

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## Introduction

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The field of African Studies stands at a critical juncture, particularly within the continent itself. Historically shaped by external epistemological frameworks and institutional priorities, the discipline has long grappled with questions of intellectual sovereignty, relevance, and transformative potential. This commentary engages with these enduring debates by focusing on the specific context of Nigeria, a nation whose academic landscape is both a microcosm of broader continental challenges and a pivotal site for imagining new scholarly futures. Examining the period from 2021 to 2025, a timeframe marked by significant global shifts and local socio-political transformations, this paper offers a critical appraisal of the challenges and prospects for African Studies research conducted within Nigeria. Its central argument is that a meaningful decolonisation of the epistemic terrain—understood not merely as a theoretical posture but as a praxis of knowledge production—is both the paramount challenge and the most vital prospect for the field’s revitalisation in the Nigerian academy.

The imperative to ‘decolonise’ African Studies is not a novel proposition, yet its urgency and application demand continual re-examination. As scholars such as Ndlovu-Gatsheni have consistently argued, coloniality persists not only in political economies but deeply within knowledge architectures, often rendering African institutions as peripheral consumers rather than central producers of theory about their own realities. In Nigeria, this dynamic manifests in curricula, research funding agendas, and publication circuits that frequently privilege exogenous paradigms, sometimes at the expense of locally-grounded epistemologies and urgent community-identified questions. Consequently, research in African Studies can risk becoming an echo of external scholarly conversations rather than a robust engagement with the complex textures of Nigerian and African life. This commentary contends that addressing this epistemic dissonance is the foundational step towards research that is both rigorous and emancipatory.

The choice of Nigeria as the focal point for this analysis is deliberate and significant. Boasting the largest concentration of universities and research institutes in Africa, Nigeria’s academic community holds substantial potential to set the agenda for African Studies on the continent. However, this potential is perennially constrained by a well-documented suite of structural impediments. These include, but are not limited to, chronic underfunding, deteriorating research infrastructure, and the ‘brain drain’ of intellectual talent—factors which collectively stifle sustained scholarly innovation. Furthermore, the Nigerian context presents unique internal pluralities—of ethnicity, language, and historical experience—that both enrich and complicate the project of crafting a coherent yet non-hegemonic national contribution to African Studies. Analysing the field within this specific national frame allows for a nuanced understanding of how global discourses on decolonisation intersect with palpable local institutional realities.

This paper proceeds as a commentary, a format chosen to provide a critical, synthesising perspective on the state of the field rather than to present new empirical data. It aims to interrogate the prevailing conditions of knowledge production and to map the contours of possible futures. The period 2021–2025 serves as a pertinent temporal lens, capturing a post-2020 world reconfigured by a global pandemic, intensified debates on social justice, and a deepening crisis of neoliberalism—all of which have profound implications for academic practice. The discussion that follows will delve into the multifaceted challenges facing African Studies researchers in Nigeria, from institutional constraints to methodological conservatism. It will then explore emergent prospects, including the strategic use of digital technologies, the growth of trans-local collaborative networks, and the increasing scholarly

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valorisation of indigenous knowledge systems. Ultimately, the objective is to contribute to an ongoing dialogue about how African Studies, from its Nigerian vantage point, can transcend its historical limitations to generate knowledge that is authentically rooted, critically engaged, and vital for shaping the continent's trajectory in the twenty-first century.

## Analysis and Discussion

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The analysis presented herein contends that the decolonisation of African Studies research in Nigeria is not merely an intellectual exercise but a multifaceted struggle against entrenched epistemic, institutional, and material constraints. This discussion will interrogate the core challenges while mapping the emergent prospects, arguing that a sustainable decolonial project requires a simultaneous reconfiguration of knowledge production, institutional architectures, and funding paradigms.

A primary, and perhaps most profound, challenge lies in the persistent hegemony of Western epistemological frameworks within Nigerian academia. Despite decades of post-colonial critique, the theoretical lenses, methodological preferences, and evaluative criteria dominant in many Nigerian universities often remain uncritically imported. This creates a paradoxical situation where research on Africa is frequently conducted through conceptual prisms developed in and for different historical and cultural contexts, thereby marginalising indigenous knowledge systems and ways of knowing. The consequence is a form of epistemic alienation, where local researchers are incentivised to produce work that speaks primarily to international, often Western, academic audiences rather than addressing pressing local and continental concerns in locally resonant terms. This external validation loop perpetuates a dependency that undermines the very goal of intellectual self-determination central to decolonisation.

Compounding this epistemic challenge are severe institutional and infrastructural deficits. Nigerian public universities, the traditional bastions of African Studies research, are chronically underfunded and plagued by systemic instability, including frequent strikes and disruptions to academic calendars. This environment is scarcely conducive to sustained, long-term scholarly inquiry. Research libraries often lack current journals and foundational texts, while digital access to global scholarly databases remains prohibitively expensive and unreliable for many. Furthermore, the bureaucratic machinery for administering research grants is often cumbersome and inefficient, discouraging potential scholars and delaying projects. These material conditions create a hostile ecosystem for rigorous research, forcing many talented academics into a survival mode that leaves little room for the deep, contemplative work that transformative African Studies requires.

The funding landscape for African Studies research in Nigeria presents another critical axis of analysis. There remains a stark disparity between the availability of funding from international donor agencies and that from domestic sources. While international grants are often essential for enabling research, they can inadvertently reinforce the epistemic biases discussed earlier, as they may prioritise themes and methodologies aligned with the donors' strategic interests. This can skew the research agenda away from locally generated questions. The near-absence of robust, consistent, and substantial funding from the Nigerian government and private sector for humanities and social science research signifies a troubling devaluation of this knowledge domain. This financial precarity not only limits the scope and scale of research but also contributes to the brain drain, as scholars seek more supportive environments abroad, further depleting local intellectual capital.

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However, within this constrained terrain, significant prospects for a decolonial resurgence are discernible. The most potent lies in the deliberate centring of African epistemologies and methodologies. This involves not merely adding ‘African content’ to existing frameworks but fundamentally rethinking the philosophical foundations of inquiry. Scholars are increasingly advocating for and practising methodologies that privilege oral histories, indigenous languages, community-based participatory research, and other approaches that break from positivist traditions and honour the complexity of African realities . The digital revolution, despite its uneven access, offers a further prospect. Online open-access repositories, digital archives of indigenous knowledge, and platforms for virtual collaboration can help circumvent some physical infrastructural barriers. Social media and blogging platforms also enable Nigerian scholars to engage public audiences directly, democratising knowledge and fostering a more socially engaged scholarship.

The role of interdisciplinary and the strategic formation of intra-African research networks constitute another vital prospect. African Studies is inherently interdisciplinary, and leveraging this can foster innovative approaches to complex problems. More importantly, building stronger collaborative networks with scholars across the continent can reduce intellectual dependency on the Global North and foster a more authentic Pan-African scholarly conversation. Initiatives that facilitate the sharing of resources, data, and comparative insights across African institutions are crucial for building a self-sustaining epistemic community. Furthermore, engaging critically with the diaspora as partners rather than as primary sources of validation can enrich the research landscape with diverse perspectives while maintaining a firm anchor on the continent.

Ultimately, the decolonisation project must also confront the question of relevance and audience. A decolonial African Studies in Nigeria must strive to speak to multiple publics: the international academy, certainly, but more urgently, to

## Conclusion

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In conclusion, this commentary has argued that the project of decolonising African Studies research in Nigeria between 2021 and 2025 is both an urgent necessity and a complex, multi-layered endeavour. The analysis confirms that the field continues to grapple with profound structural and epistemic challenges, many of which are legacies of colonial knowledge systems. The persistent reliance on Western theoretical frameworks, the marginalisation of indigenous knowledge systems, and the material constraints of funding, infrastructure, and institutional support collectively stifle the production of authentically African-centred scholarship. As noted, the hegemony of Western journals and citation metrics often dictates research agendas, inadvertently perpetuating a form of intellectual dependency that the decolonial project seeks to dismantle .

Nevertheless, the period under review is not devoid of significant prospects and nascent transformative energy. The growing scholarly insistence on epistemic disobedience and the re-centring of African ontologies provide a robust philosophical foundation for change . The conscious promotion of endogenous methodologies and the validation of local languages as mediums of serious academic discourse are critical steps towards intellectual self-determination. Furthermore, the potential of digital humanities and strategic inter-institutional collaborations within Africa offers pragmatic pathways to circumvent some traditional barriers, fostering a more integrated and self-reliant scholarly community .

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The responsibility for advancing this decolonial agenda is collective. Nigerian universities and research institutes must move beyond rhetorical commitments to implement concrete policies that reward community-engaged, transdisciplinary research and support publications in African-led platforms. Funding bodies, both national and pan-African, are urged to prioritise grants that explicitly champion epistemic diversity and methodological innovation rooted in local contexts. Individual scholars, particularly the emerging generation, must be empowered and encouraged to take intellectual risks, to ‘speak from’ rather than merely ‘speak about’ Africa, and to cultivate scholarly rigour that does not equate to mimicry of Western academic norms .

Ultimately, decolonising African Studies in Nigeria is not an endpoint but an ongoing process of critical engagement, reconstruction, and reclamation. It demands a sustained commitment to building an epistemic terrain where Nigerian and African scholars are the primary architects of knowledge about their own realities. The journey towards a truly liberated African Studies discipline is fraught with obstacles, yet the imperative for scholarly authenticity and the intellectual vibrancy evident in current debates provide considerable cause for cautious optimism. The years leading to 2025 present a crucial window of opportunity to consolidate these efforts, ensuring that the field becomes a dynamic, self-defining space capable of generating knowledge that is not only relevant to Africa’s present challenges but also foundational to its future aspirations.

## **Contributions**

This commentary makes a distinct contribution by analysing the specific institutional and epistemic challenges facing African Studies within Nigeria during the 2020s. It moves beyond generalised critiques to offer a grounded assessment of contemporary pressures, including funding constraints, research infrastructure, and the complex relationship between local and international scholarly agendas. By centring the perspective of scholars based in Nigerian institutions, the work provides a timely and necessary framework for rethinking the field’s future. It concludes with actionable proposals aimed at strengthening endogenous research capacities and fostering more equitable academic partnerships on the continent.