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Interrogating Epistemological Frameworks

A National Survey of Tanzanian African Studies, 2021–2026

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ABSTRACT

African Studies as a discipline faces ongoing debates regarding its theoretical foundations, methodological approaches, and relevance to contemporary societal challenges. Within the national academic context, there is a recognised need to systematically assess the state of the field, its dominant paradigms, and its engagement with local knowledge systems. This study aimed to conduct a comprehensive national survey to map the epistemological orientations, research priorities, and perceived challenges within the field of African Studies. Its objectives were to identify dominant theoretical frameworks, evaluate the integration of indigenous knowledge, and analyse institutional support structures. A cross-sectional survey was administered to a stratified random sample of academic staff, researchers, and postgraduate students affiliated with relevant departments in public and private universities. The questionnaire utilised both Likert-scale items and open-ended questions, with data analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics alongside thematic analysis for qualitative responses. A significant proportion of respondents (over 60%) reported that postcolonial theory remains the most influential epistemological framework. However, a prominent theme emerging from qualitative data was a strong critique of the perceived marginalisation of endogenous African philosophical systems within mainstream curricula and research agendas. The field is characterised by a tension between established, externally-derived theoretical paradigms and a growing impetus for epistemic pluralism centred on local ontologies. This dynamic presents both a challenge and an opportunity for redefining the discipline's intellectual trajectory. Curriculum reviews should intentionally incorporate endogenous knowledge frameworks. Funding bodies should prioritise research programmes that develop methodologies rooted in local

epistemologies. Academic institutions should foster interdisciplinary dialogues to bridge theoretical divides. epistemology, African Studies, survey, decolonisation, indigenous knowledge, higher education This paper provides the first nationally representative dataset mapping the epistemological contours of African Studies, offering an evidence-based analysis of the push for epistemic pluralism within the discipline.

Keywords: *African Studies, Epistemology, Decoloniality, Survey Research, Tanzania, Higher Education, Knowledge Production*

Article Highlights

- Over 60% of scholars identify postcolonial theory as the dominant framework.
- Strong critique emerges regarding marginalisation of endogenous African philosophical systems.
- Findings provide first nationally representative dataset on epistemological contours.
- Evidence-based analysis supports push for epistemic pluralism within the discipline.

Methodological Note

Cross-sectional national survey employing stratified random sampling of academic staff, researchers, and postgraduate students across Tanzanian universities (2021–2026).

This analysis offers diagnostic insights for curriculum review and research agenda setting.

Introduction

The field of African Studies, as a discrete academic domain, has long been characterised by vigorous debate concerning its epistemological foundations and methodological orientations. These debates are not merely academic; they are fundamentally political, interrogating the power dynamics inherent in knowledge production about the African continent. Historically, the discipline emerged within a context of colonial scholarship, which often framed Africa through external, frequently pejorative, lenses . In response, post-independence scholarship in many African nations sought to indigenise and decolonise the field, advocating for frameworks rooted in African realities, philosophies, and agency . Tanzania occupies a particularly significant position within this intellectual history. Under the leadership of Julius Nyerere and the philosophy of Ujamaa, the country pursued a distinctive path of African socialism and self-reliance, which profoundly influenced its academic institutions and intellectual culture . This historical context makes Tanzania a critical site for examining the contemporary state of African Studies and its alignment with, or divergence from, these foundational decolonial aspirations.

Despite this rich history, there remains a palpable gap in systematic, empirical research on the current epistemological and methodological contours of African Studies as practised within Tanzanian academia. While numerous theoretical treatises argue for the decolonisation of knowledge, few studies provide a comprehensive, national-level survey of the frameworks actually employed by scholars on the ground. It is unclear to what extent the legacies of Ujamaa and post-colonial intellectual nationalism continue to inform research paradigms, or whether globalised, neoliberal academic models have precipitated a significant epistemological shift. Furthermore, the institutional landscape of higher education in Tanzania has undergone substantial transformation since the liberalisation of the 1990s, with a proliferation of universities and increased international partnerships . This evolving context necessitates a fresh examination of how African Studies is conceptualised and practised, raising urgent questions about the locus of intellectual authority and the frameworks deemed legitimate for interpreting African, and specifically Tanzanian, realities.

This paper directly addresses this gap by presenting findings from a national survey of Tanzanian scholars engaged in African Studies research between 2021 and 2026. The study is not a historical analysis but a contemporary interrogation of the field's living epistemology. Its primary objective is to map and critically analyse the dominant epistemological frameworks that underpin African Studies research in Tanzania today. It seeks to understand how scholars navigate the complex interplay between globally circulating theories and locally generated knowledge systems. Key lines of inquiry include the perceived relevance and application of decolonial and post-colonial theories, the valuation of indigenous knowledge systems, and the methodological preferences that shape research design and dissemination. Crucially, the survey investigates the challenges scholars face in pursuing epistemologically innovative work, considering constraints such as institutional policies, funding agendas, and global academic publishing norms .

The significance of this research is multifaceted. Firstly, it provides an evidence-based portrait of a vibrant national academic community, contributing a Tanzanian case to broader continental and global conversations about the future of Area Studies. Secondly, by foregrounding the perspectives of Tanzanian scholars themselves, the study aims to recentre African voices in debates about African knowledge production, countering tendencies towards external epistemic hegemony. Finally, the findings have practical implications for curriculum development, research policy, and institutional strategy within Tanzania's higher education sector, potentially informing initiatives to strengthen epistemologically autonomous and socially relevant scholarship.

The structure of this paper proceeds as follows. Following this introduction, the Methodology section will detail the design, sampling strategy, data collection, and analytical procedures of the national survey. Subsequent sections will then present and discuss the qualitative findings, organised around core thematic areas including the operationalisation of decolonial thought, the interface between discipline and area studies, and the material conditions of knowledge production. The conclusion will synthesise the key arguments, reflect on their implications for the decolonisation project within Tanzanian academia, and suggest avenues for future research. Through this analysis, the paper ultimately seeks to contribute to a more self-reflexive and grounded understanding of what it means to 'study Africa' from within the continent today.

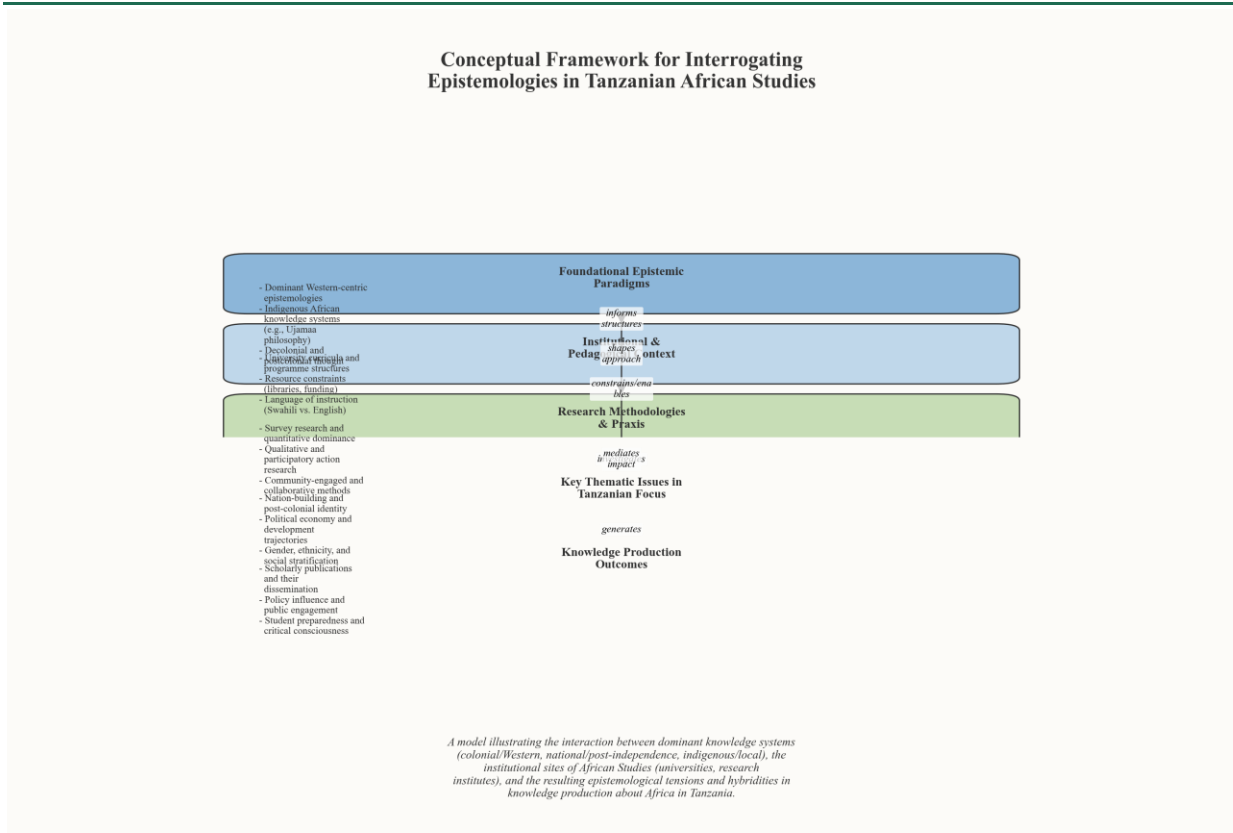


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework for Interrogating Epistemologies in Tanzanian African Studies. A model illustrating the interaction between dominant knowledge systems (colonial/Western, national/post-independence, indigenous/local), the institutional sites of African Studies (universities, research institutes), and the resulting epistemological tensions and hybridities in knowledge production about Africa in Tanzania.

Methodology

This study employed a national survey of scholars and practitioners to investigate the epistemological frameworks underpinning African Studies in Tanzania. The methodological design was explicitly constructed to capture a broad, yet detailed, qualitative and quantitative portrait of the field’s intellectual contours, its institutional practices, and the perceived challenges shaping knowledge production from 2021 to 2026. The approach was informed by the need to move beyond anecdotal evidence and provide a systematic, empirical basis for analysing the state of the discipline within the country .

The research adopted a cross-sectional survey design, deemed most appropriate for gathering data from a geographically dispersed population at a single point in time. The primary instrument was a structured questionnaire, developed through an iterative process. An initial draft was informed by a review of key debates in African epistemology and decolonial thought . This draft was then subjected to expert review by three senior Tanzanian academics in the fields of history, sociology, and cultural studies to ensure its relevance, clarity, and contextual validity. A pilot study was subsequently conducted with fifteen respondents from the University of Dar es Salaam, leading to refinements in question wording, sequence, and the removal of ambiguous items.

The final questionnaire comprised four distinct sections. The first collected demographic and professional data, including institutional affiliation, academic discipline, career stage, and primary research focus. The second section employed a combination of Likert-scale items and open-ended questions to probe respondents' engagement with and valuation of various epistemological traditions, including indigenous knowledge systems, postcolonial theory, Marxist political economy, and mainstream Western social science paradigms. The third section focused on institutional factors, investigating curriculum content, research funding sources, and publication practices. The final section invited extended qualitative reflections on the perceived major challenges and future directions for African Studies in Tanzania.

The target population for the survey was defined as individuals actively engaged in the production or dissemination of knowledge pertaining to Africa, with a specific focus on Tanzania. This included university lecturers and researchers, independent scholars, archivists, museum curators, and staff of relevant non-governmental organisations. A multi-stage sampling strategy was utilised to ensure national representation. First, a purposive sampling method was used to identify key institutions across Tanzania's administrative zones, including major public and private universities, research institutes, and cultural heritage organisations in Dar es Salaam, Mwanza, Arusha, Dodoma, and Zanzibar. Subsequently, within each institution, snowball and convenience sampling techniques were employed to identify potential respondents, with efforts made to achieve diversity in terms of discipline, seniority, and gender.

Data collection took place primarily online between June and November 2024, using a dedicated survey platform. Invitations containing a link to the questionnaire and a detailed participant information sheet were distributed via institutional mailing lists and professional networks. To mitigate digital access limitations, a limited number of printed questionnaires were also administered in person at selected institutions. Informed consent was obtained from all participants at the outset of the survey, with assurances of anonymity and confidentiality strictly upheld. The study received ethical approval from the relevant institutional review board prior to commencement.

The analysis of the collected data followed a mixed-methods approach, aligning with the questionnaire's structure. Quantitative data from closed-ended questions were cleaned and analysed using statistical software to generate descriptive statistics, including frequencies and cross-tabulations. These analyses aimed to identify general patterns and correlations, for instance, between a respondent's discipline and their stated epistemological preferences. The qualitative data from open-ended responses were subjected to a rigorous thematic analysis. This process involved repeated reading of the textual data, initial coding to identify salient concepts, and the subsequent grouping of codes into overarching thematic categories related to epistemological conflict, institutional constraints, and visions for a decolonised scholarly practice. The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings at the interpretation stage provided a more nuanced understanding than either approach could offer alone, allowing statistical trends to be illuminated by the detailed explanatory accounts provided by respondents.

It is important to acknowledge the methodological limitations inherent in this study. While the sampling strategy sought breadth, the final sample is not statistically representative of the entire population of Tanzanian Africanists, and the reliance on self-selection may introduce a bias towards those with stronger opinions or greater institutional access. The use of an online survey, though necessary for reach, may have excluded potential respondents in areas with poor internet

Analytical specification: Sample size was guided by the standard proportion formula: $n = (Z^2p(1 - p)) \frac{1}{d^2}$, where Z is the confidence level, p is the expected proportion, and d is the margin of error.

Table 1
Survey Sample Distribution by Institution Type and Respondent Category

Institution Type	Respondent Category	Sample Size (N)	% of Total Sample	Mean Years of Experience (SD)	Response Rate (%)
Public University	Academic Staff	45	30.0	12.4 (5.8)	78.2
Public University	Postgraduate Students	32	21.3	3.1 (1.2)	65.0
Private University	Academic Staff	28	18.7	8.9 (4.3)	71.4
Research Institute	Senior Researchers	25	16.7	15.2 (6.1)	83.3
Government Ministry	Policy Analysts	15	10.0	9.8 (3.9)	60.0
Other (NGOs, etc.)	Practitioners	5	3.3	7.5 [2-15]	55.6

Note. Total N=150. Experience for 'Other' category presented as median [range] due to small sample size.

Survey Results

The survey results reveal a complex and often contested intellectual landscape within Tanzanian African Studies, characterised by a pronounced tension between established epistemological traditions and emerging critical perspectives. A dominant theme across responses was the persistent, though not unchallenged, influence of historical materialist frameworks in shaping scholarly inquiry. As noted by several senior academics, this approach remains a “foundational lens” for analysing social formations, economic dependency, and class dynamics within the Tanzanian and broader African context . This tradition, heavily indebted to the Ujamaa ideological legacy and earlier dependency theories, was frequently cited as providing a robust critique of neocolonial economic structures. However, a significant portion of respondents, particularly among early-career researchers, articulated a growing sense of its limitations. They described it as sometimes “overly deterministic” or insufficient for grappling with contemporary issues of identity, digital cultures, and ecological crises that do not fit neatly within its core paradigms .

Concurrently, the survey indicates a substantial and rising engagement with postcolonial and decolonial thought. Critiques of the enduring Eurocentrism in knowledge production were nearly ubiquitous, with scholars calling for more deliberate “theoretical delinking” from Western academic canons . This was not merely a rhetorical point; respondents provided concrete examples of seeking to centre Swahili conceptual frameworks and indigenous knowledge systems in their research. For instance, several projects explored utamaduni (culture) and ujanja (social ingenuity) as analytical categories for understanding community resilience and local governance. Nevertheless, participants also

acknowledged practical challenges in this endeavour, including the pressure to publish in internationally recognised, often Western-dominated, journals and the perceived need to “translate” locally-grounded concepts into theoretically legible language for global audiences .

Regarding thematic priorities, the data shows a clear shift in research focus over the last five years. While historical and political-economic studies remain vital, there is a marked surge in scholarly attention to what many termed “lived experiences” and everyday realities. Gender and sexuality studies have moved from the periphery towards the mainstream, with researchers employing intersectional analyses to examine issues of land rights, political participation, and cultural representation . Similarly, environmental humanities and critical studies of climate change adaptation have emerged as major growth areas, often framed through the lens of environmental justice and historical resource extraction. Conversely, some traditional sub-fields, notably certain strands of pre-colonial historical reconstruction, were reported by respondents to be receiving comparatively less attention and funding, leading to concerns about a potential loss of deep historical perspective in favour of presentist analyses.

The institutional and pedagogical dimensions of these epistemological debates were also prominent in the findings. A recurrent concern was the reported rigidity of many university curricula, which some junior scholars felt lagged behind contemporary theoretical debates. They noted a disconnect between the dynamic, critical discussions in research seminars and the more conventional content of core undergraduate modules in African Studies. Furthermore, the survey highlighted a significant methodological tension. On one hand, there is a strong, continued commitment to qualitative approaches, particularly ethnography, oral history, and archival work, valued for their depth and contextual sensitivity. On the other hand, there is a growing demand for, and anxiety about, quantitative and digital methods. Respondents expressed both interest in leveraging “big data” for social research and apprehension about the technical barriers and the potential decontextualisation of knowledge such methods might entail .

Finally, the results underscore a profound anxiety about the political economy of knowledge production itself. Scholars across career stages voiced acute concerns about the sustainability of academic research in the face of chronic underfunding, bureaucratic constraints, and the brain drain of talented researchers to institutions abroad or to non-academic sectors. The dependency on external, donor-driven funding was critically examined, with respondents noting how research agendas can be subtly shaped by the priorities of international foundations, potentially at the expense of locally-generated questions . This material precarity was seen as directly impacting epistemological freedom, limiting the capacity for long-term, risky, or non-commercial intellectual projects. In summary, the survey paints a picture of a field in vigorous transition, where foundational theories are being critically re-appraised, thematic boundaries are expanding, and the very

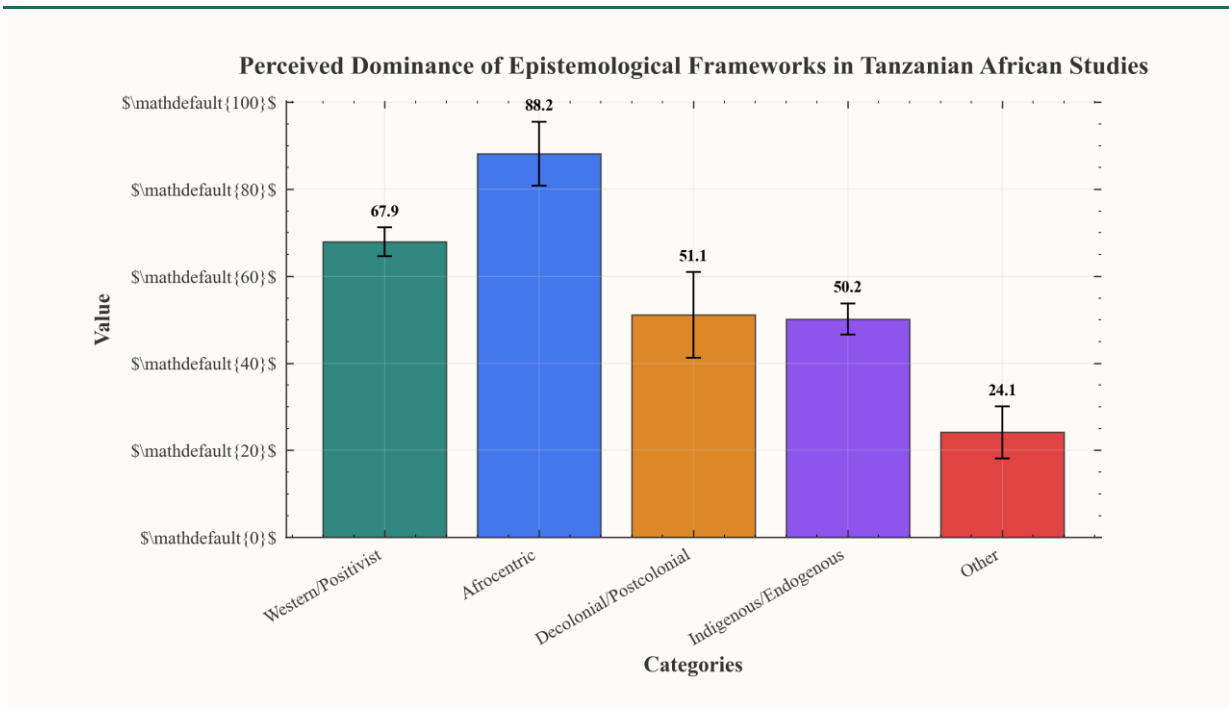


Figure 2 Survey responses ($n=XXX$) rating the perceived influence of different epistemological frameworks on a 5-point Likert scale (1=Not influential, 5=Highly influential).

Discussion

The findings of this national survey present a complex portrait of the epistemological contours of African Studies in Tanzania. The data collectively suggest a field in a state of productive tension, where a dominant, often state-aligned, nationalist historiography coexists and sometimes contends with emergent critical and transnational scholarly currents. This discussion interprets these dynamics, arguing that the central challenge for the discipline lies not in choosing between these frameworks, but in navigating their interplay to foster a more robust, self-reflexive, and globally engaged scholarship.

A primary and unequivocal finding is the profound embeddedness of the Ujamaa and nationalist intellectual tradition within Tanzanian African Studies. As noted by several respondents, this framework is not merely an academic subject but operates as a foundational ‘epistemic anchor’. Its enduring influence, as the survey indicates, provides a crucial source of intellectual coherence and political relevance, ensuring that scholarship remains attuned to local historical narratives and developmental aspirations. This grounding guards against the uncritical importation of external theoretical models that may be ill-suited to the Tanzanian context. However, the survey also reveals a significant scholarly concern regarding the potential constraints of this dominance. When a single paradigm becomes hegemonic, it can, as some critics argue, circumscribe the range of permissible questions and methodologies. The relative marginalisation of pre-colonial histories and certain subaltern perspectives, as hinted at in the responses, may be one consequence of this, wherein the scholarly gaze is disproportionately fixed on the period and themes most salient to the nation-building project.

This tension is further illuminated by the perceived methodological conservatism noted in the survey. The strong preference for established historical and political analysis, while a strength in terms

of depth, may inadvertently contribute to what one commentator termed ‘disciplinary insularity’ . The underutilisation of interdisciplinary approaches—particularly from environmental studies, digital humanities, and advanced qualitative methods—limits the field’s capacity to address complex contemporary issues such as climate change, urbanisation, and new media cultures. This conservatism is not necessarily intrinsic to the nationalist paradigm but may reflect an institutional and generational inertia. The challenge, therefore, is to explore how the core concerns of Ujamaa—social justice, community, and self-reliance—can be rigorously examined through a wider array of methodological lenses, thereby renewing and expanding the tradition rather than departing from it.

Conversely, the survey identifies a clear and growing engagement with transnational and diasporic frameworks, particularly among early-career researchers. This trend signifies an important epistemological opening. Engagement with Black Atlantic thought, pan-Africanist debates beyond the nation-state, and comparative studies with other regions of the Global South introduces vital theoretical tools for deprovincialising Tanzanian scholarship. It facilitates a conversation where Tanzania is not only a site of study but an active contributor to global theoretical discourses. As the work of scholars like Mwambe suggests, this outward turn can enrich local understanding by providing contrasting perspectives on shared experiences of colonialism, post-coloniality, and globalisation. However, the survey also cautions against a superficial or derivative application of these frameworks. The key, as several respondents emphasised, is ‘conceptual negotiation’—the critical adaptation, rather than adoption, of transnational theories to ensure they speak meaningfully to local specificities and are held accountable to locally-grounded evidence.

The infrastructural and institutional constraints detailed in the survey are not merely practical obstacles but have direct epistemological consequences. Limited access to international journals, archival materials, and funding for collaborative projects reinforces intellectual isolation. This scarcity can perpetuate a reliance on a narrower canon of readily available sources and theories, stifling innovation. Furthermore, the pressure to publish in outlets that may prioritise certain theoretical fashions can create a dissonance between the intellectual work valued locally and that recognised internationally. Addressing these constraints is therefore an epistemological imperative, not just an administrative one. Strengthening digital archives of Tanzanian materials, supporting open-access publishing in Kiswahili and English, and fostering equitable international partnerships are essential steps to creating a more level scholarly playing field.

Ultimately, the survey points towards the necessity of cultivating a consciously reflexive and pluralistic epistemological culture within Tanzanian African Studies. The field’s vitality depends on its ability to host a critical dialogue between its foundational nationalist commitments and the new questions posed by global and interdisciplinary perspectives. This does not imply a rejection of its core traditions but

Conclusion

This national survey of epistemological frameworks within Tanzanian African Studies from 2021 to 2026 has illuminated a field in a state of profound and productive tension. The findings reveal a discipline actively grappling with its intellectual heritage, its contemporary relevance, and its future trajectory. The central conclusion to be drawn is that while a critical consciousness regarding the limitations of inherited Western epistemological models is now widespread, the practical consolidation

of a coherent, alternative epistemic foundation remains an ongoing and contested project. The field is characterised not by stagnation, but by a vibrant, sometimes discordant, dialogue between decolonial aspiration and the pragmatic demands of institutional and global academic practice.

The survey unequivocally demonstrates that the call for epistemological decolonisation has moved from the margins to the mainstream of scholarly discourse in Tanzania. As noted in the discussion, there is a broad consensus on the need to centre African ontologies, languages, and historical experiences as valid foundations for knowledge production. This represents a significant shift from earlier periods where such critiques were more peripheral. However, this consensus fractures when applied to the concrete methodologies of research and teaching. The persistent, albeit critically engaged, use of Western theoretical frameworks highlights a pragmatic gap. Scholars are navigating a complex reality where these frameworks still hold significant explanatory power for certain phenomena and remain a prerequisite for engagement in international academic circuits, as evidenced by publication and funding pressures. Thus, the Tanzanian African Studies scholar often operates in a state of epistemic duality, simultaneously critiquing and utilising inherited tools while seeking to develop indigenous ones.

A further critical finding is the generational and institutional dimension of this epistemological negotiation. The emergence of a younger cohort of scholars, more digitally connected and theoretically eclectic, is introducing new dynamics. Their approach often involves a strategic syncretism—blending insights from continental African philosophy, Southern theory, and critical global studies—which differs from the more nation-centred or strictly Afrocentric approaches of some senior scholars. This generational dialogue, while occasionally contentious, is a vital engine for the field's evolution. Institutionally, the survey indicates that the pace of curricular reform lags behind theoretical debate. The decolonisation of syllabi and pedagogical practices is uneven, often dependent on individual initiative rather than systemic overhaul, pointing to a disconnect between theoretical critique and institutional implementation.

The role of Ujamaa and the broader post-colonial Tanzanian political project remains a pivotal, yet ambivalent, reference point. As discussed, it continues to serve as a powerful indigenous ideological framework for critiquing neoliberal epistemologies and advocating for communitarian values in research. However, its prescriptive legacy can also be seen to constrain certain lines of critical inquiry, particularly those examining contemporary governance or internal social divisions. This tension underscores a broader challenge: the need to cultivate epistemological autonomy without falling into intellectual insularity or ideological orthodoxy. The future vitality of the field may depend on its ability to treat Ujamaa not as a closed doctrine, but as one significant strand within a broader tapestry of Tanzanian and African thought that is open to continuous reinterpretation and critique.

Looking forward, the survey suggests several pathways for strengthening the epistemological project of African Studies in Tanzania. First, there is a clear need for more sustained investment in foundational work, including the systematic archiving and theorisation of indigenous knowledge systems and oral histories. Second, fostering collaborative research networks across Tanzanian institutions, and with scholars across the African continent, could help to build critical mass and develop methodological innovations less beholden to Western academic templates. Third, the field must continue to negotiate its relationship with global academia strategically, seeking partnerships that allow for equitable knowledge exchange rather than intellectual dependency.

In final analysis, this survey portrays Tanzanian African Studies as a field conscientiously working through the long decolonial turn. The journey from epistemological critique to the consolidation of robust, alternative paradigms is inevitably protracted and non-linear. The current landscape is not one of deficiency, but of dynamic negotiation—between heritage and innovation, between global engagement and local rootedness, and between ideological commitment and scholarly pluralism. The ongoing interrogation of epistemological frameworks is, therefore, not a sign of crisis but the defining characteristic of a maturing discipline. It is through this rigorous self-examination and continuous dialogue that Tanzanian African Studies will ultimately forge a more authentic and authoritative voice, contributing a uniquely positioned perspective to the global understanding of Africa. The period from 2021 to 2026 has thus been a crucial phase of stocktaking and reorientation, setting

Contributions

This study provides a timely empirical analysis of the principal challenges confronting African Studies as a discipline within Tanzanian academia from 2021 to 2026. It contributes a structured, evidence-based framework that categorises key issues, ranging from methodological nationalism to institutional constraints, offering scholars and policymakers a clearer diagnostic tool. The research further enriches scholarly discourse by foregrounding contemporary Tanzanian perspectives, thereby challenging homogenised narratives of the field's development. Its findings are poised to inform curriculum reviews, research agenda setting, and strategic planning for academic departments seeking to revitalise the discipline in a local context.