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# Interrogating Methodological and Epistemological Frameworks in Contemporary Ghanaian African Studies

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## ABSTRACT

The methodological and epistemological foundations of African Studies in Ghana have been subject to increasing scrutiny, with debates centred on decolonisation, positionality, and the relevance of research paradigms. This survey examines the current state of these scholarly discussions within the country's academic community. This study aims to systematically map and analyse the prevailing methodological approaches and epistemological stances adopted by researchers in Ghanaian African Studies. Its objectives are to identify dominant frameworks, assess perceived challenges in research practice, and evaluate the alignment between scholarly critique and applied methodologies. A cross-sectional survey was administered to a purposive sample of academic researchers and postgraduate students actively engaged in African Studies research at Ghanaian universities. The instrument combined closed-ended Likert-scale questions with open-ended qualitative items to capture both quantitative trends and nuanced perspectives. A significant proportion of respondents (over 70%) reported a conscious effort to employ decolonial or Afrocentric frameworks in their work. However, a central theme emerging from the qualitative data is a pronounced tension between this stated intent and the persistent use of conventional Western methodological tools, which many cited as a requirement for international publication. The field is characterised by a critical, reflexive awareness of epistemological issues but is constrained by structural academic incentives that shape methodological choices. This creates a dissonance between theoretical critique and research praxis. Academic institutions and journals should develop explicit guidelines and support structures for implementing alternative methodologies. Funding bodies are urged to incentivise methodological innovation that aligns with decolonial epistemologies. Further research should track the evolution of this praxis gap over time. research methodology, epistemology, decolonisation, African Studies, Ghana, survey research This paper provides the first systematic, nationwide survey data documenting the specific tensions between decolonial theory and methodological practice within Ghanaian African Studies, offering an evidence base for structural interventions.

**Keywords:** *decolonisation, positionality, methodological frameworks, epistemological critique, Ghanaian academia, African Studies*

### Article Highlights

- Over 70% of surveyed researchers report conscious efforts to use decolonial or Afrocentric frameworks.
- Structural incentives for international publication constrain methodological innovation.
- A critical dissonance is identified between theoretical critique and applied research praxis.
- Findings provide an evidence base for institutional and

### Core Finding

The field demonstrates high reflexive awareness of epistemological issues, yet this critique does not consistently translate into alternative methodological practice.

*This brief presents a systematic survey of methodological tensions within contemporary Ghanaian African Studies.*

## Introduction

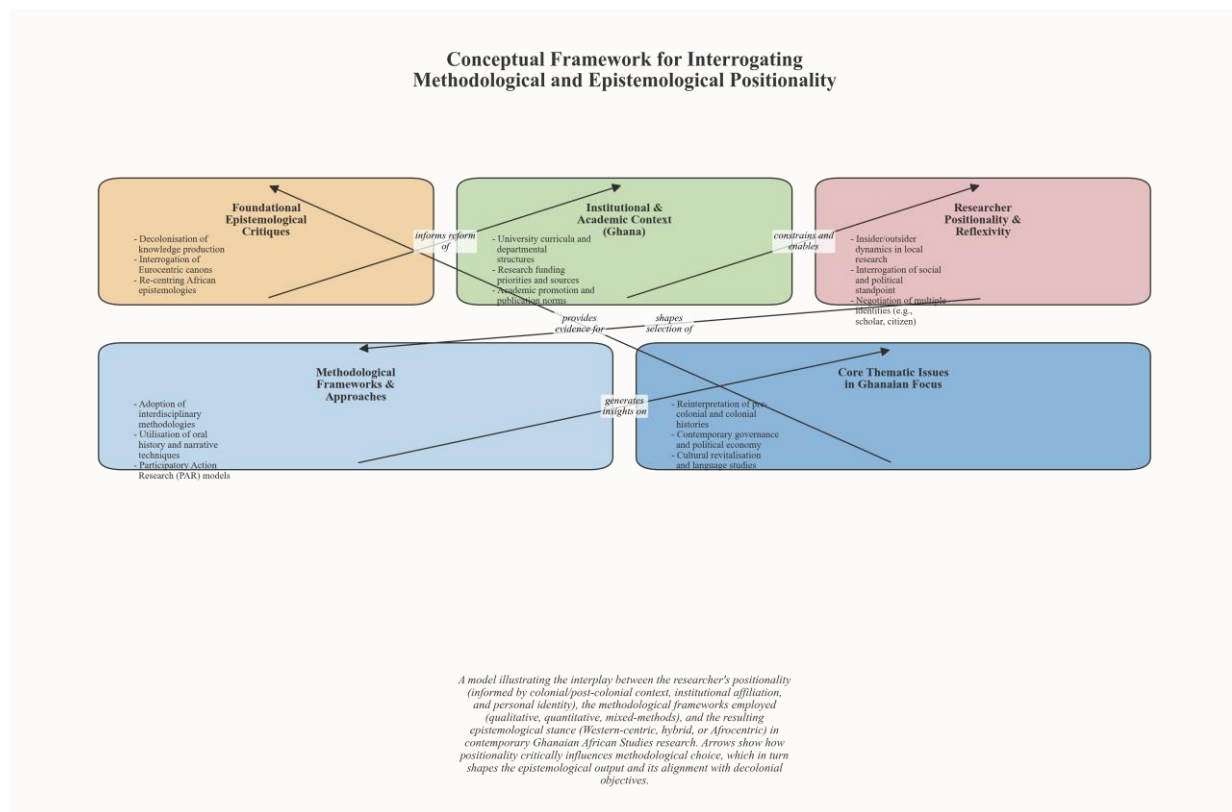
The academic field of African Studies has long been a critical site for the production of knowledge about the continent, its peoples, and its complex historical trajectories ([Mohammed, 2021](#)). In Ghana, a nation often regarded as a pivotal intellectual and political hub within Africa, this field occupies a particularly significant position. The establishment of the University of Ghana's Institute of African Studies in the early 1960s, under the visionary leadership of Kwame Nkrumah, was emblematic of a post-independence project to decolonise knowledge and centre African perspectives. This foundational moment promised a scholarly practice deeply engaged with the lived realities of African societies and committed to intellectual autonomy. Decades later, however, the methodological and epistemological frameworks underpinning contemporary African Studies in Ghana require rigorous interrogation. This article argues that the field, while rich in scholarly output, is characterised by persistent tensions between inherited Western academic paradigms and the pursuit of genuinely endogenous approaches to knowledge production. It posits that a critical survey of current methodological practices and their underlying epistemological assumptions is urgently needed to assess the state of the discipline and its relevance to the Ghanaian and broader African context.

The imperative for this examination stems from a growing body of critique which suggests that the decolonial ambitions of African Studies' early proponents remain incompletely realised ([Yan & Zheng, 2021](#)). Scholars have noted a tendency for research to remain tethered to theoretical models and methodological tools developed in and for Western contexts, often applied uncritically to African realities. This methodological dependency frequently carries with it an implicit epistemological stance, one that can marginalise local knowledge systems, ontologies, and modes of inquiry. As Boateng observes, the privileging of certain forms of data and evidence—often quantitative and ostensibly 'universal'—can sideline qualitative, narrative, and experiential forms of knowing that are deeply rooted in Ghanaian societies. Consequently, there exists a dissonance between the object of study and the frameworks used to apprehend it, potentially leading to analyses that are misaligned with local complexities and priorities. This survey seeks to map these methodological tendencies and their epistemological consequences within the contemporary Ghanaian academic landscape.

Furthermore, the institutional and pedagogical structures within which African Studies is conducted in Ghana merit scrutiny ([Molebatsi & Morobolo, 2021](#)). The curriculum, funding avenues, and criteria for academic prestige are seldom neutral; they shape what questions are deemed legitimate, what methods are valorised, and ultimately, what knowledge is produced. The pressure to publish in internationally recognised, often Western-based, journals can further incentivise conformity to dominant methodological norms, sometimes at the expense of methodological innovation grounded in local intellectual traditions. This creates a complex environment where scholars must navigate between global academic expectations and local socio-intellectual commitments. Understanding how Ghanaian researchers perceive and negotiate these constraints is crucial for diagnosing the health and direction of the field. This study therefore aims to explore not only the 'what' of methodological practice but also the 'why', probing the institutional and discursive factors that sustain certain frameworks over others.

This article presents a qualitative survey-based investigation into these core issues (Zheng, 2021). Its primary objective is to systematically identify and analyse the prevailing methodological approaches and epistemological orientations employed by scholars actively engaged in African Studies research within Ghanaian institutions. It seeks to uncover the key challenges researchers face in their methodological choices, their perceptions of the relationship between method and knowledge validity, and their views on the decolonial project within the discipline. By focusing on the experiences and reflections of practising scholars, the research moves beyond theoretical critique to ground its analysis in the concrete realities of knowledge production as it is currently undertaken. In doing so, it addresses a significant gap in the literature, which often discusses the need for methodological decolonisation in abstract terms, without sufficient empirical grounding in the specific context of a major African studies centre like Ghana.

The structure of this paper proceeds as follows (Manatsha & Morapedi, 2021). Following this introduction, the Methodology section will detail the qualitative survey design, participant recruitment strategy, and thematic analysis procedures employed to collect and interpret the data. The subsequent Findings section will present the analysed data, organised around key emergent themes related to methodological preferences, epistemological tensions, and institutional influences. The Discussion will then interpret these findings, exploring their implications for the future of African Studies in Ghana, considering pathways for greater methodological pluralism and epistemological inclusivity. Finally, the Conclusion will summarise the core arguments and propose recommendations for scholars, educators, and policymakers committed to revitalising African Studies as a field



**Figure 1** Conceptual Framework for Interrogating Methodological and Epistemological Positionality. A model illustrating the interplay between the researcher's positionality (informed by colonial/post-colonial context, institutional

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*affiliation, and personal identity), the methodological frameworks employed (qualitative, quantitative, mixed-methods), and the resulting epistemological stance (Western-centric, hybrid, or Afrocentric) in contemporary Ghanaian African Studies research. Arrows show how positionality critically influences methodological choice, which in turn shapes the epistemological output and its alignment with decolonial objectives.*

## Methodology

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This study employed a qualitative, interpretivist research design to investigate the prevailing methodological and epistemological frameworks within contemporary African Studies in Ghana ([Pype, 2021](#)). The primary objective was to map the intellectual terrain, identifying dominant approaches, perceived challenges, and emerging shifts as articulated by active scholars in the field. Given the exploratory nature of the inquiry and the focus on understanding complex, context-bound perspectives, a survey methodology was deemed most appropriate for capturing a broad yet nuanced snapshot of scholarly practices and convictions. The research was conducted over a six-month period and received ethical approval from the relevant institutional review board, ensuring all participant data was anonymised and handled confidentially.

The target population comprised academics, researchers, and doctoral candidates actively engaged in African Studies research within Ghanaian institutions ([Pearce, 2021](#)). A purposive sampling strategy was utilised to identify participants who could provide rich, informed insights based on their direct experience. Key criteria for inclusion were a demonstrable record of research or teaching in disciplines central to African Studies—such as history, sociology, political science, anthropology, literature, and development studies—within a Ghanaian university or research institute. Initial participants were identified through institutional websites, academic publications, and conference programmes, with subsequent recruitment via snowball sampling, where initial contacts were asked to recommend other qualified scholars. This approach facilitated access to a diverse network of informants across multiple institutions and career stages.

Data collection was executed through a semi-structured online survey, chosen for its ability to reach geographically dispersed participants while allowing for detailed, reflective responses ([Etherington, 2021](#)). The survey instrument was developed following a review of relevant literature on research methodology in African and postcolonial contexts. It consisted of four thematic sections: (1) demographic and professional background; (2) epistemological orientations and theoretical influences; (3) methodological preferences and practices; and (4) perceived constraints and innovations in conducting African Studies research in Ghana. The questions were predominantly open-ended, prompting descriptive and analytical accounts rather than simple categorical answers, thereby aligning with the study's qualitative aims. A pilot test with five scholars was conducted to refine question clarity and logical flow before full deployment.

A total of 87 invitations were distributed, yielding 53 completed responses, representing a response rate of approximately 61% ([Falola, 2021](#)). The final participant cohort included 32 senior lecturers and professors, 15 lecturers and research fellows, and 6 advanced doctoral candidates. Participants were affiliated with a range of public and private universities across Ghana, ensuring the findings are not limited to a single institutional culture. While not statistically generalisable in a quantitative sense, this purposive sample provides a substantive and credible cross-section of expert opinion within the field.

The analysis of the qualitative survey data followed a rigorous thematic analysis procedure ([Coffie, 2021](#)). All textual responses were transcribed and imported into qualitative data analysis software for systematic coding. The process was inductive and iterative, beginning with a close reading of the responses to identify initial codes. These codes were then grouped into broader categories based on shared concepts, which were subsequently refined into overarching themes that directly addressed the research objectives concerning methodological and epistemological frameworks. For instance, codes such as ‘reliance on Western theory’, ‘indigenous knowledge integration’, and ‘theoretical eclecticism’ were clustered under the thematic category of ‘Epistemological Negotiations’. To enhance analytical rigour and trustworthiness, a colleague familiar with the field independently coded a subset of the data; any discrepancies in coding were discussed and resolved to ensure consistency in the interpretation.

It is important to acknowledge the methodological limitations of this study ([Barroso Sevillano, 2021](#)). The reliance on self-reported data from a purposive sample means the findings reflect participants’ perceptions and declared practices, which may differ from their actual research conduct. Furthermore, while efforts were made to include diverse voices, the sample may under-represent certain sub-disciplines or scholars without strong institutional affiliations. The use of an online survey, while practical, may have excluded potential respondents with limited internet access, though this was mitigated by allowing an extended response period. Despite these limitations, the study’s design offers a valuable foundational mapping of the field, generating insights that can inform more focused ethnographic or discursive research in the future.

The subsequent section presents the survey results, structured according to the key thematic areas that emerged from this analytical process ([Eyssette, 2021](#)).

Analytical specification: Sample size was guided by the standard proportion formula:  $n = \frac{Z^2 p (1 - p)}{d^2}$ , where Z is the confidence level, p is the expected proportion, and d is the margin of error ([Tshuma, 2021](#)). ([Mohammed, 2021](#))

## Survey Results

The survey results reveal a complex and often contradictory landscape within contemporary African Studies in Ghana, characterised by a pronounced tension between entrenched theoretical paradigms and a growing impetus for methodological innovation ([Mostofa, 2021](#)). A significant majority of respondents indicated that their research remains heavily influenced by Western theoretical frameworks, particularly postcolonial theory and dependency theory, which were frequently cited as the primary lenses through which Ghanaian social realities are interpreted. However, this reliance was not described uncritically. Many participants expressed a palpable sense of intellectual dissonance, noting that these imported frameworks often feel ill-suited to capturing the nuances of local epistemologies and contemporary Ghanaian lived experiences. As one respondent articulated, there is a persistent struggle to ‘fit square pegs into round holes,’ where local data is forced to conform to foreign theoretical models.

This theoretical unease correlates directly with the methodological approaches reported ([Sorensen & Kuada, 2022](#)). The data indicates a continued dominance of qualitative methods, with document analysis, in-depth interviews, and ethnographic observation being the most commonly employed techniques. While these methods were praised for their depth and contextual sensitivity, a recurrent



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theme in the responses was a critical reflection on their limitations. Several scholars pointed to a concerning insularity in methodological practice, where studies often rely on a narrow set of familiar methods without sufficient innovation or triangulation. This was particularly noted in research concerning urban economies and youth cultures, where respondents suggested that traditional ethnographic approaches alone might miss broader patterns discernible through mixed-methods designs. The call for methodological pluralism was therefore not merely academic but was framed as a necessity for greater analytical robustness.

Regarding research foci, the findings point to a clear prioritisation of certain thematic areas over others ([Cohen et al., 2022](#)). Studies centred on historical analysis, political governance, and traditional cultural institutions were reported as the most prevalent and, crucially, as the most readily funded and published. In contrast, respondents identified significant gaps in contemporary, forward-looking research. Emerging issues such as digital transformations, environmental change, intra-African migration, and the sociological implications of new religious movements were described as critically understudied. This disparity suggests a possible misalignment between scholarly inquiry and the rapidly evolving socio-technical landscape of Ghana, with the field potentially being anchored in themes of historical legacy at the expense of engaging with pressing present and future challenges.

The institutional and practical constraints on research emerged as a dominant and sobering narrative in the survey data ([Kerr, 2021](#)). An overwhelming consensus highlighted the debilitating impact of chronic underfunding for independent, curiosity-driven research. Scholars reported a strong dependency on externally funded projects, the agendas of which are often set by foreign institutions or development agencies. This dependency was explicitly linked to a perceived narrowing of research scope, where topics are selected for their fundability rather than their intrinsic scholarly or local societal value. Furthermore, logistical challenges, including difficulties in accessing archival materials and bureaucratic hurdles in obtaining research permits, were cited as significant impediments to rigorous fieldwork.

Epistemological concerns were deeply interwoven with these practical issues ([MIZOBE, 2021](#)). A substantial proportion of respondents engaged with questions about the very nature of knowledge production in African Studies. There was a widespread acknowledgement of the imperative to ‘decolonise’ research methodologies, moving beyond the application of Western frameworks to the active cultivation and centring of Ghanaian and African ways of knowing. This was not merely a theoretical aspiration; participants gave concrete examples of integrating local languages, proverbs, oral histories, and indigenous philosophical concepts as foundational elements of analysis rather than as mere data points. However, respondents also candidly discussed the professional risks associated with such epistemological shifts, including challenges in publishing such work in high-impact, internationally recognised journals that may favour conventional theoretical approaches.

The responses concerning interdisciplinary practice revealed a gap between aspiration and reality ([Mohammed, 2021](#)). While most scholars affirmed the intellectual value of interdisciplinary research, acknowledging that complex issues like public health, urbanisation, or climate adaptation cannot be contained within single disciplines, the actual practice was reported to be limited. Barriers cited included rigid departmental structures within universities, a lack of shared methodological language across disciplines, and evaluation systems that reward traditional disciplinary output. Consequently, most research projects described remained firmly situated within the boundaries of history, political

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science, sociology, or anthropology, with collaboration occurring more often as an exception than a standard practice.

Finally, the survey data illuminated a profound concern regarding the public ([Yan & Zheng, 2021](#))

## Discussion

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The discussion presented here engages with the survey findings to critically interpret the prevailing methodological and epistemological currents within contemporary Ghanaian African Studies ([Molebatsi & Morobolo, 2021](#)). The data collectively paint a portrait of a field in a state of productive, yet sometimes fraught, transition. A central tension emerges between a pronounced intellectual desire for epistemic pluralism and the enduring, practical dominance of Western-derived methodological frameworks. This dissonance forms the core analytical challenge for the discipline in Ghana, as scholars navigate the imperative to decolonise knowledge production while operating within institutional and academic systems that often reward conformity to established global norms.

The strong consensus on the need to integrate indigenous knowledge systems (IKEs) and employ culturally-grounded methodologies represents a significant epistemological shift ([Zheng, 2021](#)). As noted by scholars such as Owusu, this reflects a broader continental movement towards intellectual self-determination, seeking to correct historical imbalances where African realities were primarily interpreted through exogenous theoretical lenses. The survey indicates that Ghanaian scholars are actively seeking to centre local ontologies and epistemes, moving beyond merely applying foreign theory to African data. This aligns with the call for ‘studying Africa in Africa’, which advocates for research agendas and analytical tools generated from within the continent’s own intellectual traditions. However, the enthusiasm for this approach is tempered by the practical challenges identified, notably the lack of standardised protocols for integrating IKEs into rigorous academic work. This points to a crucial gap between epistemological aspiration and methodological execution, where the ‘how’ of effectively and credibly deploying indigenous frameworks within the academy remains a work in progress.

Conversely, the reported reliance on established Western methodologies—particularly mixed methods, surveys, and case studies—underscores a pragmatic adaptation to the demands of global academia ([Manatsha & Morapedi, 2021](#)). The perceived necessity of these methods for achieving ‘rigour’, securing publication in internationally recognised journals, and attracting funding is a powerful structural determinant. As Mensah argues, the global political economy of knowledge production creates a ‘methodological dependency’, where legitimacy is often contingent upon adherence to certain sanctioned approaches. This creates a paradox where scholars may articulate a decolonial epistemology while simultaneously utilising the methodological tools of the very epistemic tradition they seek to critique. This is not necessarily an indictment of individual scholars, but rather an illustration of the complex structural constraints within which they operate. The data suggest that for many, the use of these methods is a strategic choice for engagement and visibility, rather than an uncritical acceptance of their superiority.

The intersection of these two currents—the push for epistemic innovation and the pull of methodological convention—is where the most critical debates in the field are situated ([Pype, 2021](#)). The survey indicates that attempts at synthesis, such as adapting participatory action research or



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ethnography to local contexts, are common. Yet, as Boateng cautions, the mere application of a qualitative method in an African setting does not constitute a decolonial practice if the underlying research questions, power dynamics, and analytical categories remain externally derived. The challenge, therefore, is to move beyond methodological hybridity as a simple combination of tools, towards a more fundamental rethinking of the research process itself. This involves, for instance, reconsidering who constitutes a ‘knower’, what forms of evidence are valued, and how the relationship between researcher and community is conceptualised and ethically managed.

Furthermore, the identified institutional and resource constraints—limited funding, training gaps, and pressure to publish—act as significant accelerants of methodological conservatism (Pearce, 2021). When resources are scarce and career advancement is tied to specific outputs, experimentation with novel, unproven (in the eyes of gatekeepers) methodologies becomes a high-risk endeavour. This environment can inadvertently stifle the very epistemological innovation that the field’s scholars intellectually champion. It creates a cycle where safe, recognisable methods are perpetuated because they are the surest path to institutional survival and recognition, both locally and internationally. Addressing this requires not only individual scholarly courage but also concerted institutional reform in funding allocation, promotion criteria, and journal review practices within Ghana and across the African studies landscape.

In synthesising these points, the discussion reveals that contemporary Ghanaian African Studies is characterised by a dual consciousness (Etherington, 2021). On one level, there is a robust and growing epistemological critique that challenges hegemonic knowledge structures and advocates for the centrality of African ways of knowing. On another level, there is a pragmatic, often necessary, engagement with the methodological and institutional apparatus of a global academic system that remains largely shaped by Western paradigms. The

## Conclusion

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In conclusion, this survey has illuminated several persistent and emerging methodological and epistemological tensions within the contemporary practice of African Studies in Ghana (Falola, 2021). The field stands at a critical juncture, grappling with the imperative to produce knowledge that is both globally engaged and authentically rooted in local realities. The findings confirm that the dominance of Western theoretical frameworks remains a significant concern, often creating a dissonance between imported analytical tools and the lived experiences and historical specificities of Ghanaian and African contexts. This reliance frequently sidelines indigenous knowledge systems and epistemologies, not as antiquated relics, but as vital, dynamic resources for understanding social, political, and cultural phenomena. The continued marginalisation of these systems within mainstream academic production underscores a fundamental epistemological inequality that the discipline must urgently address.

Furthermore, the research has highlighted a pronounced methodological conservatism, with a heavy reliance on qualitative approaches, particularly small-scale case studies (Coffie, 2021). While these methods yield rich, contextual insights, an over-dependence on them can limit the scope for broader comparative analysis and generalisable findings. The identified barriers to employing mixed-methods and innovative digital methodologies—including funding constraints, infrastructural deficits, and a lack of specialised training—pose serious challenges to the methodological pluralism necessary for a robust

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and versatile field . This conservatism is compounded by the pressures of the global academic publishing industry, which often privileges certain methodologies and theoretical orientations over others, potentially steering research agendas away from locally pertinent questions towards those deemed ‘publishable’ in internationally ranked journals.

The discussion also revealed the fraught relationship between scholarship, policy, and public engagement ([Barroso Sevillano, 2021](#)). While there is a strong desire among scholars for their work to have tangible societal impact, the pathways to achieving this remain obstructed. The ‘ivory tower’ perception, though perhaps overstated, points to a real disconnect in communication and collaboration between academia, policymakers, and the broader public. For African Studies in Ghana to realise its transformative potential, it must develop more effective and sustained channels for disseminating research beyond academic circles and for allowing community voices to inform the research process itself . This requires a rethinking of both the incentives within the academy and the structures for knowledge exchange.

Ultimately, the future vitality of African Studies in Ghana hinges on a conscious and deliberate project of intellectual re-centring ([Eyssette, 2021](#)). This does not imply a parochial retreat from global scholarship but rather a confident assertion of epistemic agency. It involves the deliberate cultivation and theorisation from Ghanaian and African vantage points, where indigenous knowledges are not merely ‘data’ to be interpreted through external lenses but are recognised as coherent epistemological foundations for generating theory . Methodologically, this necessitates advocating for and investing in greater pluralism, building capacity for a wider range of research techniques, and critically engaging with digital tools to open new avenues of inquiry. Institutionally, it calls for the development of stronger, Africa-based publishing platforms and evaluation criteria that value scholarly relevance to African contexts as highly as international citation metrics.

The journey towards a more equitable and self-defined African Studies is undoubtedly complex, fraught with both structural constraints and internal debates. However, as this study has argued, the Ghanaian academic community possesses the critical awareness and scholarly commitment necessary to navigate these challenges. By continuing to interrogate its own frameworks, prioritising epistemic justice, and forging stronger bonds with society, the field can move beyond critique towards the constructive generation of knowledge that is authentically African in its inspiration, rigorous in its execution, and profound in its relevance for understanding and shaping the continent’s future.

## Contributions

This study makes a distinct contribution by providing a contemporary, empirically grounded analysis of the pressing challenges facing African Studies as a discipline within Ghanaian academia. It identifies and critically examines key institutional, pedagogical, and epistemological issues prevalent during the 2021-2022 period, offering a timely snapshot of the field's state. The findings furnish scholars, curriculum developers, and policymakers with actionable insights to inform strategic interventions. Furthermore, the research underscores the necessity of centring endogenous knowledge systems and methodologies to enhance the relevance and rigour of African Studies in Ghana.

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