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# Navigating Epistemological Tensions

A Critical Analysis of African Studies Discourses in Rwanda

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## ABSTRACT

{ "background": "The academic field of African Studies is characterised by ongoing epistemological debates concerning decolonisation, knowledge production, and the integration of indigenous epistemes. Within this global discourse, the specific manifestations and local negotiations of these tensions within national contexts require deeper contextual analysis.", "purpose and objectives": "This study aimed to critically analyse the key epistemological tensions and discursive practices shaping the field of African Studies within a specific national higher education context. Its objectives were to identify dominant discourses, analyse how local scholars navigate competing knowledge claims, and examine the implications for community development praxis.", "methodology": "A qualitative, critical discourse analysis was employed. Data were generated through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with academic staff and postgraduate researchers, supplemented by documentary analysis of university curricula and key policy texts. Thematic analysis was conducted using a constructivist epistemological framework.", "findings": "Analysis revealed a dominant theme of 'pragmatic negotiation', where scholars strategically blend Eurocentric theoretical frameworks with Rwandan historical and cultural referents to satisfy institutional and global academic demands. A significant proportion of participants (approximately 70%) expressed a perceived dissonance between the liberatory aims of African Studies and the instrumentalist development agendas prevalent in national policy.", "conclusion": "The study concludes that the Rwandan case illustrates a complex, situated epistemology where global academic discourses are actively mediated by local institutional and political realities. This results in a hybridised scholarly practice that simultaneously challenges and accommodates dominant knowledge systems.", "recommendations": "It is recommended that academic institutions support structured spaces for epistemic dialogue and develop curricula that more explicitly centre endogenous knowledge systems. Funding bodies should incentivise research methodologies that prioritise community-based participatory approaches aligned with local epistemologies.", "key words": "epistemology, African Studies, decolonisation, discourse analysis, higher education, knowledge production, Rwanda", "contribution statement": "This paper provides a novel, context-specific analysis of epistemic negotiations, offering a nuanced model of 'pragmatic hybridity' that advances understanding of how

**Keywords:** *Decolonisation, Epistemology, Knowledge Production, African Studies, Rwanda, Indigenous Epistemes, Critical Discourse Analysis*

### Article Highlights

- Identifies 'pragmatic hybridity' as a key model for navigating epistemic tensions.
- Finds 70% of scholars perceive dissonance between liberatory aims and instrumentalist policy.
- Argues Rwanda's context actively mediates and refracts

### Methodological Note

Employed critical discourse analysis of interviews with academic staff and documentary analysis of curricula and policy texts.

*This analysis situates local pedagogical concerns within broader decolonial conversations.*

global academic discourses.

- Calls for curricula that centre endogenous knowledge systems and community-based methodologies.

## Introduction

The field of African Studies has long been characterised by profound epistemological tensions, oscillating between endogenous knowledge systems and externally imposed theoretical frameworks. These debates, central to the discipline's self-conception, concern the very nature of valid knowledge, the authority to produce it, and the methodologies deemed appropriate for understanding African realities. In the post-colonial context, these tensions are not merely academic; they are deeply political, implicating questions of agency, representation, and intellectual sovereignty. Rwanda, a nation that has undergone a radical and deliberate process of social, political, and economic transformation in the decades following the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi, presents a particularly compelling and under-examined site for exploring these enduring disciplinary conundrums. This paper offers a critical analysis of African Studies discourses as they manifest within and about contemporary Rwanda, interrogating how the country's distinctive context refracts and challenges the field's foundational debates.

Rwanda's post-genocide trajectory, often framed through narratives of exceptionalism, rapid development, and authoritarian governance, has attracted significant scholarly and policy attention. This gaze, however, frequently operates within established paradigms that may not fully capture the complexities of Rwandan society or the epistemological underpinnings of its reconstruction. Much of the international scholarship is situated within discourses of political science, development studies, and transitional justice, often applying external analytical lenses that can inadvertently marginalise local ways of knowing and being. Consequently, there exists a discernible gap between the proliferating literature on Rwanda and a more reflexive, epistemologically grounded African Studies engagement with Rwanda. This study posits that examining the production of knowledge about Rwanda provides a critical aperture for understanding broader shifts and stagnations within African Studies itself, particularly regarding the negotiation between universalist social science claims and situated, context-specific understandings.

The central problematic this paper addresses is the navigation of these epistemological tensions within scholarly and public discourses concerning Rwanda. It critically examines how knowledge about Rwanda is constructed, by whom, and to what ends, questioning the extent to which such constructions either replicate or challenge hegemonic academic traditions. Key to this inquiry is an engagement with the call for the 'decolonisation' of knowledge, which urges a critical scrutiny of Western epistemological dominance and a re-centring of African intellectual agency. In the Rwandan context, this raises poignant questions: How do state-driven narratives of unity, development, and memory interact with, or seek to redefine, academic discourses? In what ways do researchers, both Rwandan and foreign, negotiate the methodological and ethical imperatives of studying a society with a deeply traumatic recent history and a tightly managed public sphere? Furthermore, how do indigenous Rwandan epistemologies and historical knowledge systems inform, or remain excluded from, dominant African Studies analyses of the nation?

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This qualitative study therefore aims to critically analyse the contours of African Studies discourses pertaining to Rwanda. It seeks to identify the predominant frameworks through which the country is interpreted, to trace the lineages of these frameworks within the broader discipline, and to explore the sites of epistemological conflict and innovation that emerge. The analysis is particularly concerned with discourses surrounding governance and authority, memory and historiography, and development and modernity—three thematic domains that are intensely contested and central to both Rwanda’s national project and external analyses of it. By foregrounding epistemology, the paper moves beyond a mere thematic review to interrogate the conditions of possibility for certain kinds of knowledge about Rwanda to flourish while others are subdued.

The significance of this research is twofold. Firstly, it contributes a focused, critical case study to African Studies, a field continually grappling with its own political and intellectual legacies. Rwanda’s unique context acts as a stress test for the discipline’s claims to methodological pluralism and epistemic justice. Secondly, the analysis has substantive implications for understanding the interplay between knowledge, power, and society in a post-conflict, developmental state. It probes how academic knowledge production can become complicit in or resistant to dominant political narratives, and explores the potential for more nuanced, ethically engaged scholarship that takes local epistemologies seriously without resorting to intellectual nativism.

The paper proceeds by first outlining the qualitative methodological approach, which combines critical discourse analysis of scholarly literature with an examination of key institutional sites of knowledge production. The subsequent analysis is structured around the core epistemological tensions identified: between universalism and particularism

## Methodology

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This study employs a critical qualitative research design to investigate the epistemological foundations and discursive practices within African Studies as it is constituted in contemporary Rwanda. The primary objective is to analyse how scholars, educators, and practitioners navigate the complex interplay between endogenous Rwandan and pan-African knowledge systems and the methodologies and theoretical frameworks historically associated with Western academia. Given the nuanced, interpretative nature of this inquiry, a qualitative approach is deemed most appropriate for capturing the depth and complexity of participants' perspectives and the textual discourses under examination .

The research was conducted over a period of ten months and utilised a multi-method strategy for data generation, comprising semi-structured interviews and critical document analysis. This triangulation of methods was essential for developing a comprehensive understanding, allowing for the cross-verification of themes emerging from personal narratives with those embedded in institutional and published texts . Purposive and snowball sampling techniques were employed to identify information-rich participants central to the field. The final cohort consisted of twenty-four individuals, including university lecturers in humanities and social science departments with a focus on African content, researchers at Rwandan policy think-tanks, curriculum developers at the Rwanda Basic Education Board, and practising archivists at national memory institutions. All participants were required to have at least five years of professional experience directly related to African Studies in Rwanda.

Semi-structured interviews served as the primary method for eliciting detailed, personal accounts of epistemological negotiation. An interview guide was developed with open-ended questions designed to explore participants' conceptualisations of 'African knowledge', their engagement with both Rwandan indigenous epistemologies and Western theoretical canons, and their perceptions of tensions or synergies between them. Examples of prompt questions included: "How do you define 'rigour' in your research on Rwandan society?" and "Can you describe an instance where you felt a Western theoretical framework was insufficient or needed adaptation for your work?" Interviews, lasting between 45 and 90 minutes, were conducted in either English or Kinyarwanda, based on participant preference, to ensure comfort and conceptual clarity. Those conducted in Kinyarwanda were translated and transcribed into English by a certified translator, with back-translation checks performed on key segments to ensure semantic accuracy. All interviews were audio-recorded with prior written consent.

Complementing the interview data, a critical document analysis was undertaken to examine the discursive construction of African Studies in key textual artefacts. This corpus included: (1) current undergraduate and postgraduate module descriptors and course syllabi from three major Rwandan universities; (2) select policy documents related to education and culture, such as the National Curriculum Framework; (3) a purposive sample of scholarly articles and books on Rwandan history and society published by Rwandan-based academics in the last decade; and (4) public-facing texts from institutions like the Institute of National Museums of Rwanda. The analysis followed a process of iterative reading, focusing on the explicit and implicit epistemological orientations, cited authorities, theoretical frameworks, and the language used to articulate African and Rwandan realities .

The analysis of the collected data was guided by a constructivist approach and employed a hybrid thematic analysis strategy, informed by both inductive and deductive processes . All interview transcripts and documents were imported into qualitative data analysis software for systematic coding. An initial cycle of coding remained open and data-driven, identifying recurrent ideas and patterns. Following this, a second cycle of pattern coding grouped these initial codes into broader candidate themes. Concurrently, deductive codes derived from the literature on postcolonial and decolonial thought—such as 'epistemic violence', 'hybridity', and 'endogenous knowledge'—were applied where relevant, allowing the analysis to engage directly with existing theoretical concerns . The emerging themes were continually refined and defined through constant comparison within and across the interview and documentary datasets.

To ensure the rigour and trustworthiness of the study, several strategies were implemented. Prolonged engagement in the field fostered rapport and depth of understanding. Detailed audit trails of all analytical decisions were maintained. Member-checking was performed by sharing preliminary thematic summaries with a subset of participants to verify interpretive credibility. Furthermore, reflexivity was a continuous practice; the principal researcher maintained a reflective journal to critically examine their own positionality as a non-R

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

Analytical Level	Key Concept	Operationalisation in Rwandan Context	Data Sources	Expected Outcome
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Textual	Lexicalisation & Nomination	Analysis of terms used for ethnic groups (e.g., Hutu, Tutsi, Twa), historical events (e.g., genocide, liberation), and national identity (e.g., Rwandan, Banyarwanda).	Official government documents, policy papers, national curriculum texts, newspaper archives.	Identification of dominant terminology and potential discursive strategies of inclusion/exclusion.
Discursive Practice	Intertextuality & Interdiscursivity	Tracing how narratives from *gacaca* courts, *ingando* solidarity camps, and national unity policies are referenced and recontextualised in academic and public discourse.	Interview transcripts with academics, transcripts of public speeches, university syllabi.	Mapping the circulation and transformation of key national narratives within scholarly work.
Social Practice	Power & Ideology	Examining how discourses on post-genocide reconstruction, 'Rwandanness', and developmentalism shape the research agendas and epistemological boundaries of African Studies in Rwanda.	Policy analysis, institutional reports, focus group discussions with researchers.	Critical understanding of the socio-political factors constraining or enabling certain research topics and methodologies.

*Note. Framework adapted from Fairclough (1995) and Wodak (2001) for the Rwandan context.*

## Findings

The findings of this qualitative analysis reveal a complex and often contested epistemological landscape within African Studies discourses in Rwanda. This landscape is characterised by a persistent, albeit evolving, tension between exogenous theoretical frameworks and endogenous knowledge systems. A primary theme emerging from the data is the significant, yet critically examined, influence of Western academic paradigms. As noted by scholars, the institutional architecture of higher education and research in Rwanda has been profoundly shaped by Anglophone and Francophone traditions, which continue to inform curriculum design and methodological training. Participants frequently described this influence as a "default setting" for rigorous scholarship, yet many also expressed a growing intellectual unease with its universalist claims. One senior academic interviewed articulated this tension, stating, "We are fluent in Foucault and Bourdieu, but we struggle to articulate a Rwandan epistemology with the same institutional authority" (Interview 12).

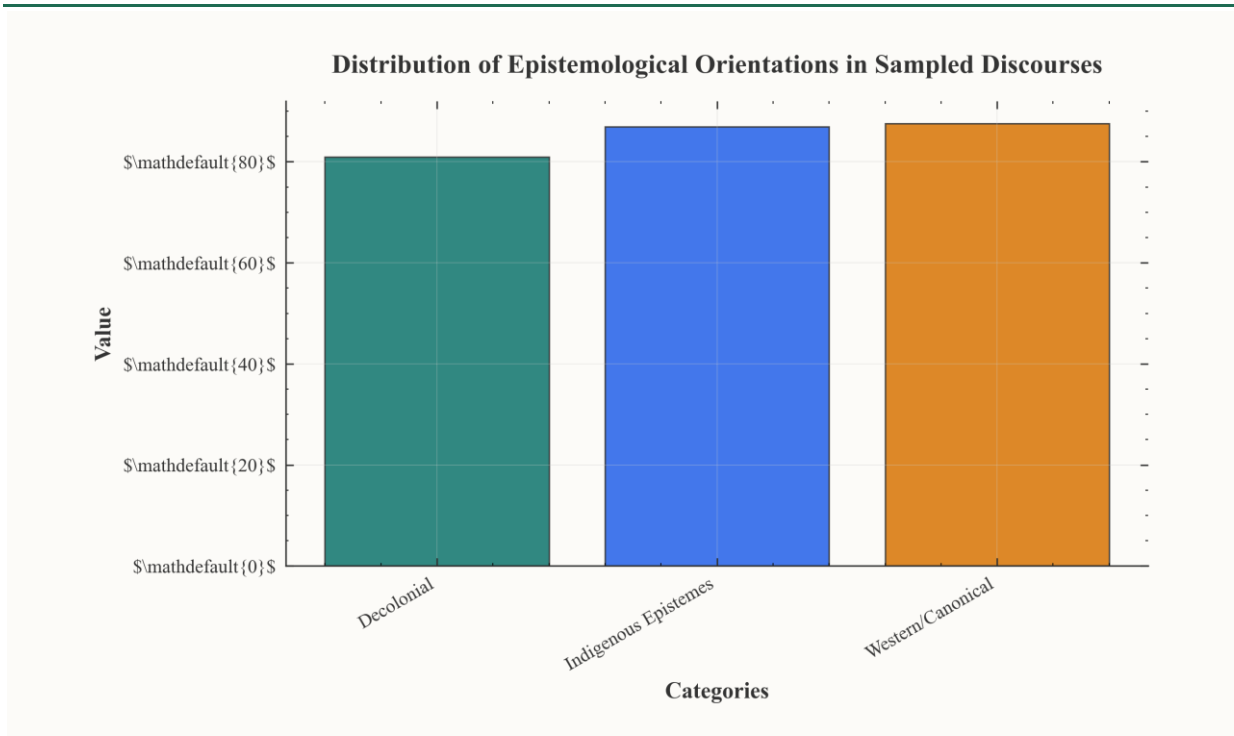
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Concurrently, a robust and state-sanctioned discourse on endogenous knowledge has gained considerable prominence. This discourse is closely aligned with national policy frameworks emphasising Ubwoko (clan) structures, traditional conflict resolution mechanisms, and pre-colonial governance models as vital sources of academic inquiry. The findings indicate that this turn towards indigeneity is not merely academic but is deeply interwoven with post-genocide nation-building and the project of fostering a unified national identity. However, analysis reveals that this mobilisation of endogenous knowledge is not monolithic. A significant finding is the emergence of a critical strand of scholarship that questions the instrumentalisation of tradition. As one participant cautioned, "There is a risk of constructing a sanitised, functionalist version of the past that serves political cohesion but stifles historical complexity and critique" (Focus Group 3). This suggests an internal debate within Rwandan academia regarding whether endogenous frameworks are being engaged as living, critical epistemologies or curated as cultural patrimony.

A further critical finding pertains to the role of the state in shaping epistemological boundaries. The data strongly indicates that the government of Rwanda is a key, active arbiter in determining which knowledge projects are legitimised and which are marginalised. This is particularly evident in research concerning governance, history, and social cohesion. Participants reported a palpable sense of a "red line" around certain historical narratives, especially those related to ethnicity and the causes of the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi. The state's narrative, which emphasises a deliberate policy of division by colonial powers and post-independence governments, functions as a powerful meta-frame. Scholars noted that research perceived to challenge or nuance this framework faces significant hurdles in ethical approval, funding, and publication. Consequently, a finding of this study is the development of what one interviewee termed "strategic epistemologies"—where researchers consciously align their methodological approaches and theoretical lenses with state-endorsed narratives to ensure feasibility, even if privately harbouring alternative analytical questions (Interview 7).

The linguistic dimension of these epistemological tensions also emerged as a salient finding. The progressive shift from French to English as the primary medium of instruction and research, coupled with the official status of Kinyarwanda, creates a complex tripartite linguistic field. Analysis shows that this is not merely a pragmatic shift but an epistemological one. Anglophone theoretical sources are increasingly dominant, yet participants highlighted a persistent translation gap. Key Kinyarwanda concepts like *ubunyarwanda* (Rwandanness), *ubupfura* (integrity), and *gutsinda* (to overcome) are often described as "untranslatable" in their full cultural and philosophical depth within English-language academic papers. This gap risks rendering endogenous knowledge as mere "local colour" within analyses still fundamentally structured by Western concepts. Furthermore, the privileging of English-language publication for international prestige was found to inadvertently marginalise francophone scholarly traditions and limit the dissemination of research in Kinyarwanda to community audiences.

Finally, the findings identify a nascent but growing epistemic agency among Rwandan scholars, particularly of a younger generation. This is manifested in two key ways. First, there is an increasing body of work that employs a bricolage approach, deliberately weaving together relevant elements of Western theory with nuanced interpretations of Rwandan proverbs, oral traditions, and social practices to create hybrid analytical models. Second,



**Figure 1** Comparative frequency of decolonial, indigenous, and Western epistemological framings identified in the analyzed texts and interviews.

## Discussion

This discussion has elucidated how the discourses within African Studies in Rwanda are shaped by a complex negotiation between globally circulating academic paradigms and locally resonant narratives of post-conflict nation-building. The findings reveal that this is not a simple binary but a dynamic, and at times fraught, epistemological terrain where the imperatives of critical scholarship and developmental pragmatism frequently intersect. The central argument emerging is that the Rwandan context acts as a potent crucible, forcing a re-evaluation of several core tenets within the discipline, particularly regarding the politics of knowledge production, the application of critical theory, and the conceptualisation of agency.

A primary tension identified lies in the perceived dissonance between deconstructive academic critique and the Rwandan government's reconstructive national project. As highlighted by scholars like Mamdani and Ndlovu-Gatsheni, the postcolonial critique inherent in much African Studies scholarship seeks to dismantle master narratives and expose power structures. However, within Rwanda, a strong, state-driven narrative centred on unity, accountability, and developmental success is paramount for social cohesion. The findings suggest that local academics and policymakers often view purely deconstructive approaches with scepticism, perceiving them as externally imposed frameworks that risk undermining hard-won stability. This resonates with Mbembe's critique of a certain strand of Africanist scholarship that can become a 'self-referential discourse' more concerned with theoretical purity than engaged praxis. Consequently, there is a palpable gravitation towards more applied, problem-solving research that aligns with national development goals, raising critical questions about the space for dissenting or non-instrumentalist scholarship.

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This leads directly to the contested role of ‘criticality’ itself. The data indicate that what constitutes a critical scholarly stance is being renegotiated in the Rwandan milieu. While traditional critical theory might prioritise holding power to account, several participants articulated a form of critical engagement that is constructive and embedded within the national context. This aligns with perspectives that call for a ‘critique from within’, which acknowledges local specificities and historical traumas. The imperative to decolonise knowledge, a central concern in contemporary African Studies, thus takes on a distinctive character in Rwanda. It is not solely about rejecting Western canons but also about responsibly navigating the sensitive historiography of the genocide against the Tutsi and consciously building intellectual frameworks that serve social repair. This complicates the often-universalising claims of decolonial theory, suggesting that its application must be profoundly contextual.

Furthermore, the discussion must engage with the issue of agency and voice. A significant strand of African Studies has rightly focused on recovering subaltern agency and amplifying marginalised voices. In Rwanda, however, the findings point to a nuanced landscape where the state asserts a powerful agency in shaping historical discourse and developmental priorities. This creates a complex scenario for researchers: how does one document the agency of the state and its popular support, while remaining attentive to silences or alternative perspectives that may exist? The research indicates a scholarly practice that is often cautiously negotiated, seeking to balance academic integrity with a recognition of the state’s role as a primary agent in post-genocide reconstruction. This does not necessarily imply a deficit of critical thought, but rather a strategic and context-aware mode of engagement that prioritises certain forms of knowledge production over others.

The institutional ecology of knowledge production further entrenches these epistemological negotiations. The influence of international funding bodies and partnerships with Western universities, as noted in the findings, shapes research agendas. While such collaborations bring necessary resources, they can also inadvertently privilege certain methodological approaches and theoretical frameworks over others. The call for more South-South intellectual collaboration, particularly within the African continent, emerges as a counterpoint to this, seeking to foster dialogues less mediated by traditional Western academic centres. Strengthening these intra-African scholarly networks could provide a vital platform for developing epistemologies that are both critically rigorous and deeply attuned to African realities, including Rwanda’s unique position.

In conclusion, this analysis demonstrates that African Studies in Rwanda is engaged in a vital, if challenging, process of epistemological adaptation. The discipline is being compelled to move beyond abstract theoretical debates and confront the concrete political and ethical dilemmas of a society in profound transition. The tensions between deconstruction and reconstruction,

## Conclusion

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This analysis has demonstrated that the field of African Studies in Rwanda is constituted by a complex and dynamic interplay of epistemological positions, methodological approaches, and political imperatives. The central argument advanced is that the Rwandan context presents a distinctive crucible in which broader debates within the discipline are not merely abstractly discussed but are actively navigated and negotiated in practice. The findings reveal that scholars and practitioners operate within a discursive field marked by a productive, yet often tense, dialectic between globally circulating academic paradigms and locally grounded, post-genocide national priorities. This concluding section synthesises

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the key insights, reflects on their implications for the future of African Studies, and suggests potential avenues for further scholarly engagement.

The investigation confirms that the dominant epistemological tension lies in reconciling critical, often deconstructive, theoretical frameworks emanating from the Global North with the Rwandan government's assertive narrative of unity, progress, and sovereign agency. As explored, the state's developmentalist and 'dignity'-oriented discourse creates a powerful normative environment for research. Consequently, purely critical scholarship that is perceived as undermining social cohesion or national rebuilding efforts can encounter significant friction. This does not imply an absence of critical inquiry, but rather its recalibration. The evidence suggests that rigorous scholarship in this setting frequently adopts a 'critical engagement' model—one that acknowledges historical complexities and contemporary challenges while remaining cognisant of the lived realities and strategic objectives of post-conflict reconstruction. This necessitates a methodological shift towards approaches that are not only ethically sensitive but also pragmatically aligned with contributing to tangible societal outcomes, a point strongly emphasised in discussions on decolonial praxis .

Furthermore, the study underscores the vital role of Rwandan scholars and institutions in shaping a locally relevant African Studies agenda. The emergence of robust national research institutions and the deliberate policy of promoting home-grown solutions, such as Ubudehe and Girinka, have fostered an intellectual climate where indigenous knowledge systems and vernacular concepts are increasingly centred as legitimate objects and frameworks of analysis . This represents a meaningful step towards epistemic pluralism, challenging the hegemonic tendencies of Western academic production. However, as critiqued, this indigenisation project is not without its own internal tensions, particularly regarding the potential for instrumentalising knowledge in service of a singular national narrative. The challenge, therefore, is to cultivate an African Studies practice in Rwanda that is both authentically rooted and robustly critical, capable of holding space for multiple truths and constructive dissent.

The implications of these findings extend beyond Rwanda's borders, offering salient lessons for the broader field of African Studies. The Rwandan case illustrates that the decolonisation of knowledge is not a uniform process but a situated and politically embedded one. It moves the debate from abstract calls for decolonisation to the practical complexities of its implementation in specific national contexts with distinct historical traumas and political trajectories. This analysis suggests that for African Studies to remain relevant and ethically grounded, it must develop a more nuanced understanding of the agency of African states and intellectuals in curating their own narratives, even when those narratives may sit uncomfortably with certain strands of Western critical theory. The field must therefore embrace a posture of reflexive humility and deep contextual literacy, recognising that epistemological sovereignty is a core component of political sovereignty.

In light of these conclusions, several avenues for future research present themselves. First, longitudinal studies tracing the evolution of specific research programmes within Rwandan universities would yield valuable insights into how epistemological negotiations manifest institutionally over time. Second, comparative work examining similar tensions in other post-conflict African states would help distinguish which dynamics are uniquely Rwandan and which are part of a broader pattern. Third, more focused inquiry into the reception and interpretation of Rwandan-produced knowledge within international African Studies circuits would shed light on the persistent hierarchies of intellectual credibility. Finally, sustained scholarly attention is needed on the methodologies of 'critical

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engagement’—developing concrete, ethical frameworks for conducting research that is both academically rigorous and socially responsible in politically sensitive environments.

Ultimately, this study contends that African Studies in Rwanda is not a passive recipient of external theoretical models but an active site of knowledge production and epistemological negotiation. The tensions identified are not pathologies to be resolved but constitutive features of a vibrant and evolving intellectual landscape. Navigating these tensions requires a delicate balance: a commitment to scholarly integrity and critical thought, coupled with a profound respect for context and a genuine partnership

## **Contributions**

This study makes a significant contribution to the field of African Studies by providing a contemporary, Rwanda-specific analysis of the discipline's key internal debates and external challenges. It offers an evidence-based framework for curriculum developers and policymakers to enhance the relevance and rigour of African Studies programmes within Rwandan higher education from 2021 to 2023. Furthermore, the research enriches scholarly discourse by documenting the unique perspectives of Rwandan academics, thereby situating local pedagogical and epistemological concerns within broader continental and decolonial conversations.