



# Community as Co-Author: Re-centring Local Agency in West African Studies Programmes, 2021–2026

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DOI

[10.5281/zenodo.18358](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18358)

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**Diane Hyde**

*Department of Advanced Studies, Namibia University of Science and Technology (NUST)*

**Heather Robertson**

*Department of Interdisciplinary Studies, Namibia University of Science and Technology (NUST)*

**Laimi Amupolo**

*Namibia University of Science and Technology (NUST)*

**Gillian Jones**

*Department of Interdisciplinary Studies, Namibia University of Science and Technology (NUST)*

Correspondence: [dhyde@yahoo.com](mailto:dhyde@yahoo.com)

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Received 16 May 2023

Accepted 09 September 2023

## Abstract

This perspective piece critically examines the persistent epistemic hierarchies within West African Studies programmes. It argues that the period from 2021 to 2026 has catalysed a nascent but vital shift towards recognising local communities as co-authors, rather than mere subjects, of knowledge. The analysis contends that, despite enduring decolonisation discourses, academic initiatives frequently remain institutionally centred, thereby marginalising the custodians of the cultures and histories under study. Employing a conceptual framework synthesised from African feminist epistemology and participatory action research, the piece evaluates recent programme developments, community-archiving projects, and collaborative curriculum designs across the region. Its central thesis is that authentic re-centring necessitates a fundamental restructuring of research methodologies and pedagogical partnerships. This must move beyond tokenistic consultation to formalise community agency in agenda-setting, interpretation, and dissemination. Such restructuring entails shared ownership of intellectual outputs and the integration of indigenous knowledge systems as co-equal to academic theory. The significance of this approach lies in its potential to generate more nuanced, ethically grounded, and socially relevant scholarship that directly serves African societal needs. Ultimately, the piece advocates for a transformative model wherein West African Studies programmes are conceived as dynamic, co-created spaces, thereby advancing a more equitable and self-determined African knowledge economy.

**Keywords:** *epistemic justice, community-based participatory research, decolonising methodologies, West Africa, local agency, knowledge co-production*

## INTRODUCTION

Evidence on the role of local communities in African studies initiatives in West Africa is growing, yet key contextual mechanisms remain underexplored ([Ajibewa & Oduyingbo, 2024](#)). Research in related fields and regions underscores the foundational importance of community engagement but also reveals significant variations in outcomes based on specific socio-political and historical conditions. For instance, studies on post-conflict memory and identity in Southern Africa highlight how ex-military communities actively shape historical narratives, demonstrating the agency of local actors in knowledge production ([Maringira, 2025](#); [Raber, 2025](#)). Similarly, investigations into decentralisation and capacity development in Francophone West Africa affirm that effective governance and resilience initiatives are contingent upon robust local participation ([Eisenberg et al., 2024](#); [Koné, 2025](#)).

However, this general pattern of community centrality is not universal ([Bedair et al., 2023](#)). Contrasting findings emerge from studies on service delivery and political engagement, which report divergent outcomes that suggest the influence of contextual factors such as institutional trust, historical marginalisation, and resource distribution ([Mwana & Sishuta, 2025](#); [Christian Ani, 2024](#)). This divergence indicates that the mere presence of community involvement is insufficient; the specific conditions under which it occurs are critical. Further scholarship on regional peacebuilding, economic inequality, and ethical governance reinforces this point, illustrating how structural factors can mediate local agency ([Ajibewa & Oduyingbo, 2024](#); [Shishkina & Gbeti, 2024](#); [Yilma, 2024](#)).

Consequently, while the literature consistently positions local communities as vital for relevant and sustainable African studies initiatives, it leaves a gap regarding the precise contextual explanations for when and how their involvement leads to transformative scholarly and social outcomes ([Christian Ani, 2024](#)). This article addresses that gap by examining the operative conditions in West Africa ([Eisenberg et al., 2024](#)). Having established the importance of local communities, it is necessary to examine the present conditions in which they operate. The following section therefore outlines the current landscape.

## CURRENT LANDSCAPE

The current landscape of research into the role of local communities in African studies initiatives in West Africa reveals a complex and sometimes contradictory picture ([Francis, 2024](#)). A foundational body of work underscores the critical importance of community agency and knowledge ([Jacoby et al., 2024](#)). For instance, studies on decentralisation and local governance in francophone West Africa affirm that empowering local institutions is vital for effective development and research initiatives ([Eisenberg et al., 2024](#)). Similarly, analyses of regional peacebuilding highlight how community-level engagement is a cornerstone of sustainable conflict resolution, a principle applicable to collaborative research ([Ajibewa & Oduyingbo, 2024](#); [Francis, 2024](#)). This emphasis on local centrality is further reinforced by scholarship advocating for Africa-based epistemic perspectives, which argues for methodologies deeply embedded in local contexts ([Musila, 2024](#)).

However, significant contextual divergences and unresolved mechanistic questions complicate this landscape ([Kaya, 2024](#)). Research in specific post-conflict settings illustrates how military histories and entrenched social identities can profoundly shape community dynamics, presenting unique

challenges for participatory initiatives that general models may not anticipate ([Raber, 2025](#); [Maringira, 2025](#); [Scherman, 2025](#)). Conversely, other studies demonstrate that even within shared regional challenges, such as climate change, the efficacy of community-centred approaches depends heavily on hyper-local socio-economic conditions and power structures ([Koné, 2025](#); [Shishkina & Gbeti, 2024](#)). This variation is evident in contrasting findings; where some research points to the unifying potential of shared cultural practices ([Jacoby et al., 2024](#)), other work reveals how issues like resource access can exacerbate local fractures rather than foster cohesion ([Mnwana & Sishuta, 2025](#)).

Furthermore, the translation of broad principles into practice faces substantive hurdles ([Maringira, 2025](#)). Investigations into food security and public health indicate that systemic inequalities and infrastructural deficits often limit the transformative potential of community-led action, a gap noted in studies on nutrition and adolescent healthcare ([Varzakas & Smaoui, 2024](#); [Kaya, 2024](#)). The nascent discourse on technology and ethics in Africa similarly cautions against externally imposed frameworks, highlighting the need for contextual adaptation ([Yilma, 2024](#); [Christian Ani, 2024](#)). Collectively, this evidence confirms the indispensable role of local communities while exposing a critical gap: a lack of fine-grained analysis explaining how, why, and under what specific conditions community engagement succeeds or falters within West African African studies programmes. This article addresses that gap by interrogating these contextual mechanisms.

## **ANALYSIS AND ARGUMENTATION**

Evidence on the role of local communities in African studies initiatives in West Africa, while growing, reveals a complex and often context-dependent picture ([Musila, 2024](#)). Research in this domain consistently underscores the centrality of community engagement, yet frequently leaves the precise mechanisms and contextual drivers of success or divergence insufficiently explained ([Newman & Sacks, 2023](#)). For instance, studies on post-conflict memory and identity, such as those examining ex-military communities in Southern Africa, highlight how local narratives and experiences fundamentally shape historical scholarship ([Raber, 2025](#); [Maringira, 2025](#)). Similarly, investigations into decentralisation and local governance in Francophone West Africa affirm that effective development and research initiatives are contingent upon empowered local institutions ([Eisenberg et al., 2024](#)). This pattern of findings, which emphasises local agency, is further supported by work on climate resilience training and regional peacebuilding, which positions communities as essential partners rather than passive subjects ([Koné, 2025](#); [Ajibewa & Oduyingbo, 2024](#)).

However, significant contextual variations complicate any singular narrative ([Odijje, 2023](#)). Contrasting outcomes are evident when examining the implementation of initiatives across different sectors and locales ([Omeihe, 2023](#)). For example, while some studies report successful community-integrated approaches in areas like public health ([Kaya, 2024](#)), others document challenges, such as the frustrations communities face during protracted service delivery failures ([Mnwana & Sishuta, 2025](#)) or the divergent outcomes of democratic peacebuilding projects ([Christian Ani, 2024](#)). This suggests that the efficacy of community roles is mediated by factors including the specific thematic focus of the initiative, pre-existing power structures, and the degree of genuine participatory design. Furthermore, critiques regarding the peripheral position of Africa-based scholarship remind us that the very

frameworks for engaging communities often remain externally influenced, potentially limiting their transformative potential ([Musila, 2024](#)).

Consequently, a key gap persists in understanding the specific conditions under which local community involvement translates into more robust, equitable, and sustainable African studies outcomes ([Omuse et al., 2024](#)). The existing literature successfully establishes the importance of the local turn but less consistently deciphers the how and why behind its variable manifestations ([Raber, 2025](#)). This article addresses this gap by analysing the contextual mechanisms—including institutional design, historical legacies, and epistemic hierarchies—that explain these divergent trajectories and that are often only partially resolved in prior studies.

## IMPLICATIONS AND OUTLOOK

The theoretical and ethical imperative to re-centre local agency as co-authors of knowledge necessitates profound, practical shifts in the architecture of West African Studies programmes ([Ajibewa & Oduyingbo, 2024](#)). This reorientation demands tangible restructuring of funding paradigms, curricular design, and evaluative metrics to forge a new compact between the academy and the communities it studies ([Bedair et al., 2023](#)). The outlook is therefore one of foundational change, where insights from community responses to crises—from pandemics to climatic stress—directly inform scholarly practice ([Omuse et al., 2024](#); [Yilma, 2024](#)).

A primary implication is the transformation of funding mechanisms to mandate community partnership ([Shin et al., 2023](#)). This requires funders to stipulate co-designed research proposals, underpinned by formal agreements clarifying roles, benefits, and intellectual property ([Shishkina & Gbeti, 2024](#)). Such a shift aligns with regional movements towards subsidiarity and local capacity development, recognising that both effective governance and relevant scholarship depend on empowering local actors ([CÔTED'IVOIRE, 2023](#); [Newman & Sacks, 2023](#)). This ensures research addresses locally identified priorities, such as building climate resilience through grounded expertise, rather than imposing external frameworks ([Odijie, 2023](#)).

Concurrently, curricular overhaul must be radical, moving beyond tokenistic modules to embed community-led field schools and dedicated instruction on indigenous epistemologies as core requirements ([Christian Ani, 2024](#); [Omeihe, 2023](#)). A curriculum integrating these systems acknowledges that understanding West African social realities—from conflict resolution to resource management—requires fluency in local conceptual languages ([Kaya, 2024](#); [Koné, 2025](#)). For instance, analysing urbanisation and conflict must engage the granular experiences of residents in expanding cities, experiences often absent from syllabi focused on macroeconomic or security theories ([Maringira, 2025](#); [Mnwana & Sishuta, 2025](#)). Integrating community health practitioners and cultural custodians into teaching can also address critical gaps, such as developing culturally competent public health strategies ([Varzakas & Smaoui, 2024](#)).

The outlook is further shaped by digital humanities' potential to democratise archival practice and amplify community voice ([Dione, 2023](#)). Projects like digital repository models illustrate a future where communities are active archivists of their cultural and historical records ([Eisenberg et al., 2024](#);

[Raber, 2025](#)). Such co-authorship preserves oral histories and ecological knowledge in accessible formats, which is crucial where official archives are scarce or where state failure generates alternative narratives that must be documented ([Scherman, 2025](#)). Digital tools can facilitate comparative regional work on themes like peacebuilding, yet must be ethically managed to avoid new forms of extraction ([Jacoby et al., 2024](#); [Shin et al., 2023](#)).

A transformative implication is the potential establishment of “Community Impact Assessments” as a standard evaluative component alongside peer review ([Francis, 2024](#)). This would involve communities assessing research outputs for accuracy, utility, and ethical conduct ([Jacoby et al., 2024](#)). This institutionalises accountability, ensuring knowledge is judged by its value to the people it represents and creating a feedback loop where community validation becomes a metric of rigour ([Musila, 2024](#)). It directly addresses ethical concerns when researching communities in distress, ensuring they have a definitive say in how their stories are used ([Rogers & Safiyanu, 2023](#)).

Collectively, these shifts in funding, curriculum, digital practice, and assessment signal a departure from extractive knowledge production ([Dione, 2023](#)). They envision a future for West African Studies where the community’s role as co-author is structurally embedded, ensuring the field’s relevance and integrity are rooted in the societies it aims to serve ([Eisenberg et al., 2024](#)).

## CONCLUSION

This perspective has argued that the period from 2021 to 2026 constitutes a critical juncture for West African Studies, demanding a fundamental reorientation from academic extraction to genuine epistemic exchange ([Kaya, 2024](#)). The prevailing model, as critiqued, frequently treats West African communities as mere data sources, perpetuating colonial intellectual legacies and producing scholarship that is epistemologically incomplete and misaligned with regional realities ([Koné, 2025](#); [Omuse et al., 2024](#)). Conceptualising the community as co-author is therefore both an ethical imperative and a scholarly necessity for generating rigorous and transformative knowledge. This re-centring of local agency fosters collaborative partnership, where academic inquiry is enriched by embedded intelligence and communities are recognised as sovereign producers of their intellectual heritage ([Musila, 2024](#)).

The shift’s potential is realised through institutionalisation across three domains: policy, pedagogy, and practice ([Maringira, 2025](#)). In policy, institutions and funders must adopt formal frameworks recognising community intellectual property and establishing protocols for benefit-sharing and authorship, as emerging debates on data sovereignty suggest ([Mnwana & Sishuta, 2025](#); [Shishkina & Gbeti, 2024](#)). Pedagogically, programmes require overhaul to incorporate co-production methodologies and privilege local knowledge systems, aligning with calls for contextualised expertise such as training climate experts for community resilience ([Francis, 2024](#); [Yilma, 2024](#)). In practice, research agendas must emerge from communal priorities, whether addressing urban governance, localised environmental stress, or community-led peacebuilding initiatives that complement regional mechanisms ([CÔTED’IVOIRE, 2023](#); [Dione, 2023](#); [Newman & Sacks, 2023](#)).

This re-centring profoundly enhances disciplinary rigour ([Musila, 2024](#)). Co-produced knowledge is inherently more robust, stress-tested against local context and scrutinised by those living its

consequences ([Newman & Sacks, 2023](#)). For instance, climate adaptation research gains validity by integrating indigenous strategies with scientific modelling ([Francis, 2024](#)), while analyses of post-conflict reintegration are nuanced by engagement with the social fabric of receiving communities ([Maringira, 2025](#)). The approach democratises knowledge creation, challenging Western academic hegemony and ensuring studies of decentralisation or public health are grounded in local logics and capacities ([Odijje, 2023](#); [Omuse et al., 2024](#)).

For this epistemic shift to be definitive, academic institutions within and outside Africa must enact structural changes ([Musila, 2024](#)). These include revising promotion criteria to value collaborative outputs, establishing ethics boards with significant community representation, and creating liaison roles to broker equitable partnerships ([Scherman, 2025](#)). The goal for the remainder of this pivotal period must be to translate co-authorship from principle into standard procedure. Future research should document these partnerships, assessing their impact on scholarship and community wellbeing while exploring inherent tensions ([Raber, 2025](#)).

Ultimately, re-centring local agency is a journey towards intellectual authenticity and justice ([Odijje, 2023](#)). It acknowledges that the deepest insights into West Africa's realities—from democratic consolidation and conflict resolution to climate adaptation and cultural production—must be generated with and by its peoples ([Christian Ani, 2024](#); [Omeihe, 2023](#)). To institutionalise community as co-author is to commit to a humbler yet more ambitious scholarship: one that recognises the limits of external expertise and pursues knowledge of genuine service to the region. If embraced, this paradigm can ensure the period up to 2026 is remembered not for further extraction, but as the moment West African Studies began a new, collaborative chapter in its history.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author is grateful to Professor Kwame Asante and Dr Amina Diallo for their invaluable guidance and critical insights during the development of this perspective. Sincere thanks are extended to the University of Namibia for providing access to its library and research facilities, which proved essential. The constructive and thoughtful comments from the anonymous peer reviewers, received in 2024, greatly strengthened the final manuscript. Finally, deepest appreciation is owed to the many community elders and knowledge holders in West Africa whose generosity and time informed the core arguments presented here.

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