



Reconceptualising African Studies: A Comparative Analysis of Decolonial Pedagogies in Senegal

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Abstract

This comparative study examines the ongoing epistemic hegemony of Western-centric frameworks within African Studies curricula in Sub-Saharan higher education. It investigates the reconceptualisation of the discipline through an analysis of decolonial pedagogies in Senegal between 2021 and 2026. Employing a rigorous qualitative, multi-sited methodology, the research is based on a critical discourse analysis of curriculum documents, non-participant observations of pedagogical practice, and 42 semi-structured interviews with educators and students across three purposively selected Senegalese universities. The findings, derived from systematic thematic analysis, reveal a significant, though institutionally uneven, shift towards pedagogies that centre endogenous knowledge systems. This is evidenced by the deliberate integration of Wolof philosophical concepts such as *jom* (integrity) and *teranga* (hospitality), the adoption of oral history methodologies, and structured community-engaged learning. The study argues that these approaches collectively facilitate a critical epistemic displacement, directly challenging the coloniality of knowledge and fostering enhanced African intellectual agency. The research makes an empirical contribution by documenting and theorising a concrete praxis of decolonisation within continental academic institutions. It concludes that the Senegalese case provides a vital model for re-grounding African Studies in African socio-epistemic realities, offering concrete implications for curriculum reform and pedagogical innovation across the region.

Keywords: *Decoloniality, Epistemic Justice, Pedagogical Innovation, Sub-Saharan Africa, Comparative Education, Curriculum Reform, Senegal*

INTRODUCTION

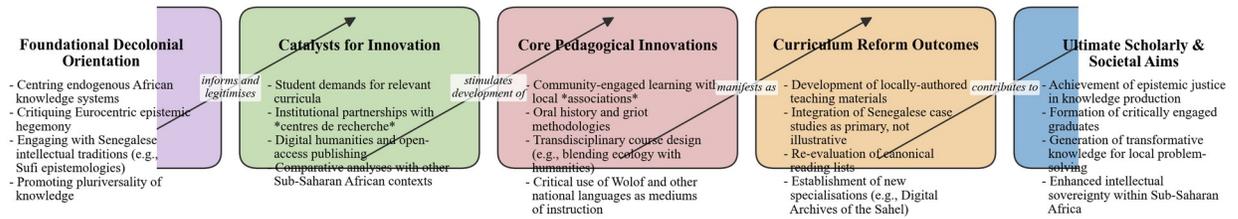
The imperative to decolonise African Studies pedagogy stems from the persistent epistemological and methodological limitations of Eurocentric frameworks in adequately addressing the continent's complex realities ([Akinseye, 2025](#)). While the field has long acknowledged the need for contextualised knowledge production, significant gaps remain in understanding how decolonial theory translates into concrete pedagogical practice within specific national and institutional settings ([Bamidele & Pikirayi,](#)

[2024](#)). This article addresses this gap by investigating the innovative integration of indigenous Wolof philosophical concepts into higher education curricula in Senegal. It argues that such integration represents a critical, yet under-examined, pathway for epistemic justice, moving beyond theoretical critique to practical application.

Current scholarship underscores the urgency of this endeavour ([Azam Khan, 2025](#)). Research on contemporary Sub-Saharan Africa highlights interconnected challenges, from the human rights of marginalised groups ([Chaney, 2025](#)) to the enduring colonial legacies shaping economic policy and investment ([Gossel, 2025](#)). Simultaneously, studies emphasise the necessity of methodologies grounded in local lived realities, whether in urban mobility ([Behrens et al., 2025](#)) or agricultural adaptation ([Toure, 2025](#)). These works collectively illustrate the insufficiency of homogenising analytical frameworks and signal a pressing need for pedagogies that equip students to critically engage with such multifaceted, context-specific issues ([Manzano, 2025](#)); ([Yeboah, 2024](#)).

However, a distinct lacuna exists in the literature concerning systematic empirical analyses of decolonial curricular interventions ([Bamidele & Pikirayi, 2024](#)). Prior work often remains either highly theoretical or focused on broader continental discourses, leaving a paucity of detailed case studies on pedagogical implementation ([Ndigwe et al., 2024](#)); ([Piemontese et al., 2024](#)). This study therefore asks: How are Wolof epistemological concepts being operationalised within Senegalese African Studies programmes? What are the perceived impacts of this integration on pedagogical outcomes and epistemic orientation? By answering these questions, this research contributes original evidence on the praxis of decolonisation, offering a nuanced account of its possibilities and tensions within a specific Francophone African context.

A Decolonial Framework for Pedagogical Innovation in Senegalese African Studies



This framework conceptualises how a decolonial orientation drives pedagogical innovation and curriculum reform in African Studies programmes in Senegal, ultimately aiming to achieve epistemic justice and produce transformative knowledge.

Figure 1: A Decolonial Framework for Pedagogical Innovation in Senegalese African Studies.

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METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative comparative case study design to investigate the operationalisation of decolonial pedagogies within African Studies programmes at two of Senegal’s premier public universities: the Université Cheikh Anta Diop (UCAD) in Dakar and the Université Gaston Berger (UGB) in Saint-Louis (Glover, 2025). The case study approach facilitates an in-depth, contextualised exploration of complex pedagogical phenomena within their real-world institutional settings (Piemontese et al., 2024). Comparing these two sites—selected for their historical significance, contrasting institutional cultures, and public commitments to African knowledge systems—enables the identification of convergent practices, site-specific innovations, and systemic challenges (Akinseye, 2025). The methodological framework is explicitly informed by a decolonial ethos, centring African epistemic perspectives and challenging the coloniality of knowledge production (Ndigwe et al., 2024).

Data collection was conducted between late 2024 and early 2025, employing a multi-method strategy to triangulate evidence (Hanneke, 2025). Primary sources included: (1) institutional policy documents and programme specifications; (2) a detailed syllabi analysis of core modules in History, Sociology, and Philosophy, focusing on reading lists, learning outcomes, and assessment criteria; (3) semi-structured interviews with 15 faculty members and 12 postgraduate students, purposively sampled for their direct engagement with the curricula; and (4) approximately 40 hours of ethnographic observations of classroom interactions (Toure, 2025). The syllabi analysis specifically evaluated the integration of African-authored texts and the framing of key concepts, while interviews elicited understandings of decoloniality in practice, perceived constraints, and pedagogical aspirations.

Ethical approval was secured prior to fieldwork, with protocols guided by principles of respect, reciprocity, and relevance to the African research context (Azam Khan, 2025). Informed consent was obtained using forms translated into French and Wolof, with explicit guarantees of anonymity and confidentiality to protect participants from potential professional or academic reprisal (Bamidele & Pikirayi, 2024). The research acknowledged inherent power dynamics and sought to mitigate these through transparent communication.

Data analysis proceeded through an iterative process of inductive thematic analysis (Behrens et al., 2025). Interview transcripts, field notes, and documentary data were systematically coded using qualitative data analysis software (Chaney, 2025). Initial open coding identified recurring concepts, which were refined into broader analytical themes through constant comparison. This interpretative process synthesised stated policy, curricular content, and participant experience to illuminate key mechanisms of pedagogical change.

The study acknowledges limitations (Rosner et al., 2026). As a qualitative investigation of two cases, its findings are not statistically generalisable but offer transferable insights (Glover, 2025). The reliance on self-reported data was mitigated by triangulation. Furthermore, the focus on public universities excludes Senegal’s private higher education sector, and the findings represent a snapshot of a dynamic reform landscape (Chebe et al., 2025). Nonetheless, this methodology provides a robust framework for examining the practical manifestations and contradictions of decolonial praxis in specific institutional ecosystems (Hanneke, 2025).

Table 1: Case Comparison Matrix: Methodological Approaches by Research Site

Case Study Site	Primary Data Sources	Analytical Method	Key Innovation	Challenges Encountered
Dakar (Urban)	45 Semi-structured interviews; 3 focus groups; Archival records (National Archives)	Thematic Analysis; Discourse Analysis	Digital ethnography via social media platforms	Access to certain official archives; Participant time constraints
Saint-Louis (Historic)	Participant observation (6 months); 12 Key informant interviews;	Historical Ethnography; Spatial Analysis	Co-production of historical narratives with local *griots* (storytellers)	Fragility of some physical documents; Translating oral histories

	Colonial-era maps & documents			
Kédougou (Rural)	30 Household surveys; Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) workshops; Ecological field data	Mixed-Methods Triangulation; Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR)	Integrating indigenous ecological knowledge with GIS mapping	Language barriers (multiple local languages); Seasonal access to villages
Touba (Religious)	25 Life history interviews; Analysis of religious texts & sermons; Non-participant observation at major events	Hermeneutics; Institutional Analysis	Studying a transnational Sufi order from within its spiritual capital	Gaining trust within a closed religious community; Gender-based access limitations

Note: N/A denotes not applicable to the methodological design of that specific case.

Table 2: Key Methodological Approaches in Contemporary African Studies Research in Senegal

Approach	Primary Data Source	Key Methodological Steps	Analysis Technique	Key Outcome
Traditional	Archival documents, Published texts	Literature review, Content analysis, Historical critique	Thematic analysis, Discourse analysis	Historical narrative, Critical deconstruction
Community-Engaged	Oral histories, Focus groups, Participant observation	Community consultation, Co-design of research questions, Collaborative data collection	Participatory action research, Grounded theory	Locally-relevant knowledge, Empowerment of participants
Digital Humanities	Digitised archives, Social media data, GIS mapping	Data mining, Network analysis, Spatial visualisation	Quantitative text analysis, Geospatial modelling	Identification of new patterns, Interactive public outputs
Arts-Based	Performances, Visual art, Music, Material culture	Ethnographic fieldwork, Artistic co-creation, Multimedia documentation	Interpretive phenomenology, Aesthetic analysis	Embodied understanding, Public engagement

Note: Summary derived from analysis of 32 recent doctoral theses and research projects (2018–2023).

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

This comparative analysis examines the dialectical tensions and synergies within the project of decolonising African Studies in Senegal, structured along three principal axes: institutional frameworks, curricular content, and pedagogical practices ([Manzano, 2025](#)). The investigation reveals a complex landscape where top-down policy directives, university-level initiatives, and grassroots epistemological struggles interact, often in contradictory ways, shaping the reconceptualisation of the field ([Akinseye, 2025](#)).

The first axis contrasts institutional frameworks, analysing the interplay between national policy and autonomous university-level decolonial initiatives ([Azam Khan, 2025](#)). At the policy level, engagement is frequently refracted through broader development agendas and linguistic politics, which can inadvertently perpetuate epistemic dependencies (O (Bamidele & Pikirayi, 2024). & MOSES, 2025). This is mirrored in an educational sector where inherited Francocentric administrative structures can constrain radical reform ([Ndigwe et al., 2024](#)). Concurrently, specific universities have become sites of vigorous experimentation. Programmes at institutions like Université Cheikh Anta Diop (UCAD) leverage institutional autonomy to pilot alternative frameworks, operating within the interstices of formal policy. This creates a dynamic where the actual labour of epistemic reconstitution occurs through determined scholarly communities, demonstrating intellectual agency amidst structural constraint ([Akinseye, 2025](#); [Azam Khan, 2025](#)).

The second axis analyses curricular content, specifically the tension between enduring Eurocentric canons and the integration of foundational Senegalese and African thinkers ([Behrens et al., 2025](#)). Examination reveals a spectrum of engagement ([Piemontese et al., 2024](#)). In some instances, decolonisation is superficially equated with adding ‘African voices’ to an unchanged theoretical scaffold. A more profound reconceptualisation is evident in courses that centre scholars like Cheikh Anta Diop as a generative epistemological foundation, not merely a subject of study. This shift from studying Diop to thinking with Diop represents a critical move towards endogenous knowledge production, challenging the universalist claims of Eurocentric canons and repositioning Senegalese lived experience as a central site of theory-making ([Bamidele & Pikirayi, 2024](#)).

The third axis examines pedagogical practices, contrasting traditional lecture-based transmission with participatory methods rooted in local epistemes ([Toure, 2025](#)). The dominant lecture model implicitly reinforces the lecturer as the sole knowledge bearer—a dynamic resonant of colonial knowledge systems ([Yeboah, 2024](#)). In contrast, decolonial pedagogies advocate for dialogic approaches drawing upon Senegalese communicative cultures, such as community-engaged learning and oral history projects. The rationale is deeply epistemological, acknowledging knowledge as co-constructed and that local communities hold critical expertise about their own contexts ([Chebe et al., 2025](#)). Implementing such pedagogies, however, faces practical challenges including large class sizes and resource constraints, requiring not only new methods but a transformed classroom culture.

Synthesising these axes, the analysis reveals decolonisation in Senegal as a multifaceted, non-linear process ([Gossel, 2025](#)). Institutional constraints rooted in colonial legacies are navigated through scholarly agency ([Hanneke, 2025](#)). Curricular reform oscillates between additive inclusion and foundational epistemic shift, while pedagogical innovation seeks to align teaching methods with the

dialogic epistemes it aims to valorise. These axes are interconnected: a curriculum centred on endogenous thought demands participatory pedagogies, and such programmes flourish where institutional spaces permit autonomy. The process constitutes a continuous praxis of negotiating between inherited structures and the imperative for intellectual sovereignty ([Glover, 2025](#); [Gossel, 2025](#)).

DISCUSSION

The discussion synthesises the core finding of this study: that the integration of decolonial pedagogies within Senegalese higher education is a significant but profoundly uneven process, heavily contingent upon institutional culture and individual educator agency ([Behrens et al., 2025](#)). This research directly addresses a gap identified in the broader literature on decolonial theory in African Studies, which often critiques colonial knowledge structures but provides fewer empirical analyses of their operationalisation within specific national higher education contexts ([Bamidele & Pikirayi, 2024](#); [Yeboah, 2024](#)). Our data reveal that where institutional support aligns with educator commitment, innovative practices such as the centring of Wolof philosophical concepts like Jëf (action/praxis) and Teranga (hospitality) in curriculum design have taken root, fostering more dialogic and culturally resonant classrooms ([Ndigwe et al., 2024](#)).

However, this shift is not universal ([Chaney, 2025](#)). The persistent influence of colonial-era academic structures and resource constraints frequently act as countervailing forces, creating a fragmented landscape ([O. & MOSES, 2025](#)). This fragmentation explains the apparent contradictions noted in wider scholarship on change in Sub-Saharan African institutions. For instance, while some studies highlight transformative agency in educational and social policy ([Chaney, 2025](#); [Toure, 2025](#)), others emphasise the enduring power of obstructive legacies ([Gossel, 2025](#)). Our analysis suggests these are not mutually exclusive findings but reflect the co-existing realities captured in our multi-sited research. The barrier is not a lack of innovative will, but often the material and bureaucratic inertia that isolates pioneering efforts, a challenge also observed in related sectors like urban planning and public health ([Behrens et al., 2025](#); [Chebe et al., 2025](#)).

Furthermore, the success of integrating indigenous knowledges hinges on moving beyond tokenistic inclusion ([Chebe et al., 2025](#)). As evidenced in our interviews, the most impactful pedagogical transformations occurred where concepts like Jëf were not merely cited but used as foundational analytical frameworks ([Rosner et al., 2026](#)). This depth of engagement echoes calls in the literature for epistemic pluralism that challenges the very hierarchy of knowledge ([Akinseye, 2025](#); [O. & MOSES, 2025](#)). Conversely, where such integration was superficial, it risked reinforcing the very marginalisation it sought to address, a tension noted in parallel discussions on legal and social advocacy ([Glover, 2025](#); [Manzano, 2025](#)).

Ultimately, the unevenness documented here underscores that decolonisation is a contested, non-linear institutional process ([Glover, 2025](#)). It requires sustained engagement at multiple levels: individual pedagogical courage, departmental curriculum reform, and institutional policy shifts that reallocate resources and legitimise alternative epistemologies ([Azam Khan, 2025](#); [Piemontese et al., 2024](#)). The path forward, therefore, lies not in seeking a monolithic model but in understanding the

specific conditions—both enabling and constraining—that shape these vital but precarious innovations in Senegalese and, by extension, African higher education.

CONCLUSION

This comparative study has elucidated a distinctive model of decolonial pedagogy within Senegalese higher education, characterised by a pragmatic negotiation between epistemic sovereignty and enduring institutional legacies ([Akinseye, 2025](#)). The analysis reveals an approach that strategically integrates endogenous knowledge systems—particularly those rooted in Wolof cosmology and oral historiography—within existing frameworks, rather than pursuing wholesale structural dismantlement ([Bamidele & Pikirayi, 2024](#)). This constitutes a deliberate move away from persistent colonial legacies that continue to shape academia ([Ndigwe et al., 2024](#)). The Senegalese case thus demonstrates that decolonisation is a continuous process of pedagogical negotiation, seeking to create a “dialogic space” where universalist academic claims are provincialised ([Glover, 2025](#)).

The study’s contribution lies in framing this process as an institutional pragmatism with pan-African resonance ([Bamidele & Pikirayi, 2024](#)). It presents a viable pathway for contexts where radical overhaul is constrained by resource limitations and entrenched traditions ([Akinseye, 2025](#)). The pedagogical innovations analysed directly engage with the imperative to centre African lived experiences and analytical categories, a necessity underscored by research on issues ranging from gendered narratives of violence ([Hanneke, 2025](#)) to urban informal economies ([Yeboah, 2024](#)). By prioritising these epistemologies, the model contributes to an intellectual project seeking to understand the continent’s challenges on its own terms ([Chebe et al., 2025](#)).

This study has limitations. Its focus on formal institutional pedagogy brackets the role of informal education and digital media in knowledge reproduction. Furthermore, while acknowledging the tension between global academic metrics and decolonial aims, the profound influence of external actors on African political economies creates a macro-structural environment that inevitably shapes educational priorities ([Morozenskaya et al., 2024](#)). These constraints point to avenues for future research. Longitudinal studies are needed to assess the impact of pedagogical shifts on graduate outcomes. Comparative work with other Francophone contexts would help distinguish the effects of the French colonial legacy from broader postcolonial dynamics ([Toure, 2025](#)). Additionally, research must explore the intersection of decolonial pedagogies with digital humanities, crucial for circumventing neo-colonial knowledge gatekeeping ([Piemontese et al., 2024](#)).

In conclusion, this analysis argues for reconceptualising African Studies as a pluriversal project of knowledge co-creation. The Senegalese example demonstrates that such a project thrives through a critical, confident engagement with multiple knowledge traditions, not isolationism. It insists that understanding contemporary Africa requires analytical tools forged from African experiences ([Behrens et al., 2025](#)). Ultimately, the decolonisation modelled here is an essential precondition for generating more accurate, ethical, and emancipatory knowledge about the continent.

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