



Rethinking African Studies in a Globalised World: Decolonising Methodologies and New Direction

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Abstract- The field of African Studies emerged during the colonial period, profoundly shaped by Western imperial interests and epistemologies that sought to classify, control, and exploit African societies. Over the 19th and 20th centuries, academic institutions across Europe and North America formalized African Studies as a field, often driven by anthropological, ethnographic, and sociological methods that reinforced racial hierarchies and justified colonial rule. Despite independence movements and the subsequent wave of postcolonial critique in the mid-20th century, African Studies remains marked by colonial-era legacies that continue to influence methodological choices and scholarly priorities. This paper examines the ongoing impact of these colonial foundations on African Studies, interrogating how these origins have been both perpetuated and challenged in modern scholarship. Through the lens of decolonial and postcolonial theories, this study critically engages with the movement to decolonise African Studies, emphasizing the necessity of an epistemological shift that centers African voices, indigenous knowledge systems, and culturally rooted methodologies. The paper proposes new directions for African Studies that reflect the complexities and realities of African societies in a globalised world, ultimately calling for an academic reformation that honors Africa's historical and intellectual heritage.

Keywords- African Studies, colonialism, decolonisation, historiography, globalisation.

I. Introduction

The academic field of African Studies was born from a complex and often troubling history, emerging in the 19th century as European colonial powers extended their reach across the African continent. Western knowledge systems were from the outset,



instrumental in shaping colonial authority, as European scholars many of whom operated in anthropology, sociology, and ethnography constructed knowledge about Africa that justified and facilitated imperial control. Early studies on African societies were typically conducted by European researchers who, operating under the assumptions of Western superiority, often framed Africa as a "primitive" and "exotic" place. Such portrayals not only served colonial governance but also reinforced a global hierarchy of knowledge in which African voices and perspectives were systematically marginalized or silenced.¹

Following the decolonization movements of the mid-20th century, a wave of African independence reshaped both the political landscape of the continent and the academic study of Africa. As African nations gained sovereignty, intellectuals and scholars from across the continent and the global South called for a re-evaluation of the methodologies and narratives that dominated African Studies. Postcolonial theorists such as Frantz Fanon and Chinua Achebe critiqued the deeply embedded Eurocentrism in academia, arguing for an intellectual decolonization that would reclaim African identity from colonial narratives.² Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's seminal work, "Decolonising the Mind", underscored the role of language and education as instruments of both colonial oppression and potential liberation, highlighting the need for African intellectuals to assert their own cultural frameworks and reclaim Africa's diverse intellectual traditions.³ These critiques laid the groundwork for ongoing debates within African Studies on how to decolonise research practices and establish an academic field that respects Africa's epistemological and cultural heritage.

Despite these transformative movements, African Studies continues to grapple with the legacies of colonialism, as Western methodologies, theoretical models, and language often retain a central place in scholarship on Africa. Achille Mbembe, in his influential essay "Decolonising Knowledge and the Question of the Archive," addresses the biases in archival practices and knowledge production, arguing that African Studies must transcend its colonial origins by embracing African epistemologies and questioning what counts as "legitimate" knowledge.⁴ Decolonial theorists, such as Walter D. Mignolo, have furthered this argument by advocating for a radical shift away from Eurocentric academic norms, urging scholars to recognize the validity of local knowledge systems that have been historically suppressed.⁵

In the present era of globalisation, African Studies is at a crossroads, while new interdisciplinary and digital approaches offer exciting opportunities to re-imagine the field, they also risk imposing new forms of cultural hegemony if not grounded in African realities. This paper critically examines the historical continuities and discontinuities in African Studies, addressing how colonial methodologies persist in



current research and what is required to truly decolonise the field. Drawing on interdisciplinary case studies and the latest decolonial scholarship, the paper seeks to contribute to an ongoing reformation of African Studies, advocating for a field that honors Africa's diverse cultures, values indigenous knowledge systems, and recognizes African agency in the production of knowledge.

II. Literature Review

1. Historical Origins of African Studies

African Studies developed largely within the context of European colonialism, which heavily influenced its epistemological foundation. Early works in the field often framed Africa as an "exotic" or "primitive" region, largely defined through European narratives. Pioneering colonial anthropologists, such as E.E. Evans-Pritchard, focused on African societies primarily to aid colonial administrators, frequently reducing complex social structures to simplistic, ethnocentric interpretations. Evans-Pritchard's studies on the Nuer, for instance, illustrate how African societies were often treated as "static" and "pre-modern," reinforcing colonial ideologies of African inferiority and Western superiority.⁶ Historians like Philip Curtin, in 'The Image of Africa', reveal that these early studies were not merely descriptive but shaped by power dynamics that served colonial agendas.⁷ This legacy established a methodological foundation that remained pervasive even after the formal end of colonialism.

2. Postcolonial Critiques and the Call for Decolonization

In response to these entrenched colonial biases, African intellectuals and postcolonial scholars began advocating for a paradigm shift in African Studies. Chinua Achebe and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, for instance, were critical of the colonial frameworks that dominated literature and academic research, asserting the need for African voices to redefine Africa's image. Ngũgĩ's 'Decolonising the Mind' is pivotal in this discourse, arguing that colonial language policies alienated Africans from their identities and cultural heritage.⁸ According to Ngũgĩ, linguistic decolonization is fundamental to reclaiming African narratives and cultural agency. This call has been echoed in scholarship advocating for "decoloniality," a theoretical approach articulated by Walter D. Mignolo that emphasizes the necessity of dismantling Western-centric knowledge structures in order to embrace non-Western epistemologies.⁹

III. Contemporary Approaches in Decolonising Methodologies

Building on these critiques, contemporary scholars have expanded the discourse on decolonising methodologies in African Studies. Achille Mbembe's essay



"Decolonising Knowledge and the Question of the Archive" emphasizes the need for African epistemologies to be central to academic research about Africa. Mbembe asserts that the "archive" itself what is preserved, accessed, and legitimized is historically biased toward colonial narratives, necessitating an overhaul in archival practices.¹⁰ In 'The Darker Side of Western Modernity', Mignolo critiques the Western model of modernity that prioritizes European intellectual traditions over indigenous knowledge systems.¹¹ These perspectives challenge the methodological dominance of Western historiographical practices in African Studies, urging scholars to adopt frameworks that are more reflective of African realities.

IV. African Epistemologies and Local Knowledge Systems

The call for decolonization in African Studies is closely tied to the affirmation of indigenous knowledge systems and African epistemologies. Kwasi Wiredu's "Cultural Universals and Particulars: An African Perspective" highlights the need to recognize cultural relativism within philosophical and academic discourses, advocating for African conceptual frameworks as legitimate lenses for interpreting African realities.¹² Similarly, Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí's work on gender in African societies deconstructs the Western-centric assumptions embedded in academic discourses, illustrating how indigenous African perspectives on gender differ fundamentally from Western ones. Oyèwùmí argues that employing African epistemologies allows scholars to transcend colonial frameworks that have historically marginalized these perspectives.¹³

V. Interdisciplinary and Global Dimensions of African Studies

In an increasingly globalised world, African Studies is at a crossroads, where it must navigate both the challenges and opportunities presented by interdisciplinary research. Scholars like Sarah Nuttall emphasize the role of interdisciplinary methodologies in reconceptualizing African Studies within a global context. Nuttall advocates for "entangled" scholarship that integrates perspectives from history, environmental studies, and global health to provide a comprehensive understanding of African societies in a globalised world.¹⁴ This interdisciplinary approach allows African Studies to adapt to contemporary global challenges, while grounding research in African contexts and rejecting hegemonic Western paradigms.

The literature reveals a consensus among scholars that decolonising African Studies requires an epistemological shift that privileges African perspectives, methodologies, and languages. By dismantling colonial frameworks, researchers can move toward a more authentic, equitable, and holistic representation of Africa. This review highlights



key debates and methodological challenges within the field, underscoring the need for continued critical engagement with the legacy of colonialism in African Studies.

VI. Methodology

This study adopts an interpretive historical methodology, incorporating critical discourse analysis to interrogate the historiographical practices within African Studies. Key texts in the field are analyzed to reveal underlying Eurocentric assumptions. Additionally, this study includes case studies of recent scholarship that adopts decolonised methodologies, comparing their approach to traditional studies to assess the efficacy and ethical dimensions of African-centered research practices.

VII. Colonial Continuities in African Studies

Power Dynamics and Methodological Constraints from a historical standpoint, colonialism's impact on African Studies was not merely incidental but foundational. Early researchers adopted Eurocentric paradigms that were deeply embedded in the structures of colonial domination. This section examines the continuities in African Studies where colonial-era methodologies persist. Many academic institutions worldwide, for instance, still privilege Western theoretical frameworks, relegating African intellectual traditions to the margins of scholarship. This has implications for African voices and the validity of African perspectives in research continuities that remain obstacles to an authentic representation of Africa's past and present.¹⁵

VIII. Decolonising African Studies; Centering African Epistemologies and Knowledge Systems

Decolonising African Studies entails rethinking not only the methods of study but also the sources and frameworks considered legitimate. The traditional reliance on Western languages as primary academic tools limits the accessibility and authenticity of African scholarship. African-centered historiographies and indigenous knowledge systems provide an alternative, allowing African scholars and communities to frame their narratives in terms reflective of their experiences and values. Works by Kwasi Wiredu and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o emphasize that decolonization is also an intellectual liberation, seeking to realign African Studies with African realities.¹⁶

The Globalisation of African Studies: Navigating Interdisciplinary and Transnational Dimensions, African Studies is now situated within a globalised academic landscape, wherein African realities intersect with global forces, from economic development to



environmental concerns. Globalisation offers both challenges and opportunities for the field. On one hand, it risks imposing a homogenized, globalised perspective that can obscure local specificities; on the other, it would facilitates interdisciplinary collaboration, bringing African Studies into dialogue with global health, environmental studies, and economics.¹⁷ The paper additionally explores the potential of interdisciplinary research grounded in African perspectives to transcend Eurocentric paradigms while addressing global issues with locally grounded solutions.

IX. New Directions: Embracing African Realities and Reframing Methodologies

Moving forward, African Studies must adopt new methodologies that honor African epistemologies while being open to interdisciplinary innovations. Scholars advocate for the use of local languages in research, participatory approaches, and collaborative methods that involve African communities as co-researchers rather than subjects. This approach realigns African Studies with Africa itself, positioning African societies as agents of knowledge and change. Furthermore, by embracing digital humanities and African digital archives, the field can foster a more accessible and equitable platform for African scholarship.¹⁸

X. Conclusion

The field of African Studies has traveled a long and complex road, from its colonial inception to its present-day efforts at intellectual and methodological transformation. Established in the 19th and early 20th centuries as a tool of empire, African Studies was originally shaped by European anthropologists, sociologists, and historians whose work often depicted Africa as a static, a historical landscape. This portrayal not only served to reinforce colonial ideologies of European superiority but also marginalized African voices, perspectives, and agency within the academic narrative.¹⁹ The colonial origins of African Studies left an indelible mark on the field, embedding Eurocentric methodologies and assumptions that, even decades after decolonization, continue to influence research and teaching practices.

The postcolonial era marked a turning point, as African scholars and thinkers began to contest the dominance of Western frameworks and to call for reclamation of African agency in academic discourse. Intellectual giants such as Chinua Achebe, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, and Frantz Fanon exposed the profound consequences of colonial influence on African identity, language, and self-perception.²⁰ Their work highlighted the urgency of decolonising African Studies, not only by challenging Western paradigms



but by centering African epistemologies, languages, and cultural histories as foundational elements of the discipline. Through these critiques, a generation of postcolonial and decolonial scholars advocated for a transformative shift in the field, urging a methodological decolonization that would honor Africa's rich intellectual heritage and foster a more authentic representation of its societies.

Today, African Studies stands at a critical juncture. While postcolonial theory has made significant strides in dismantling some of the overt colonial legacies within the field, deeper structural and epistemological challenges remain. Contemporary decolonial theorists such as Achille Mbembe and Walter D. Mignolo remind us that true decolonization requires more than the critique of colonial frameworks; it demands an epistemological revolution that embraces indigenous knowledge systems, validates local perspectives, and redefines what constitutes legitimate knowledge in African Studies.²¹ This decolonial approach underscores the importance of African agency in producing knowledge about Africa, resisting both old and new forms of intellectual hegemony.

Furthermore, as globalisation accelerates, African Studies faces the dual challenge of engaging with global issues while maintaining a grounded, locally relevant approach to African realities. The interdisciplinary and digital advances in research today offer unprecedented opportunities to broaden the scope of African Studies, yet they also risk reinforcing a homogenizing narrative if not applied critically. To honor Africa's diverse cultures, histories, and intellectual traditions, the field must remain vigilant against both historical colonial legacies and emerging forms of epistemic dominance.

In conclusion, the evolution of African Studies from a colonial endeavor to a decolonial project reflects a broader historical struggle for intellectual sovereignty and justice. This paper underscores that the decolonization of African Studies is not simply an academic exercise but a profound commitment to justice, equity, and respect for African knowledge systems and histories. For African Studies to thrive in the 21st century, it must not only critique its colonial past but actively construct a future rooted in the cultural, intellectual, and historical realities of Africa itself. Only by fully embracing this transformation can African Studies serve as a platform for meaningful scholarship that genuinely reflects the complexity and dynamism of the African continent.

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