

# DECOLONISING THE HISTORICAL CURRICULUM: PEDAGOGICAL THEORY AND PRACTICE IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICAN UNIVERSITIES

*Curriculum Reform, Epistemic Justice, and the Politics of Historical Knowledge in Higher Education*

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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** The decolonisation of university curricula has emerged as one of the most contested debates in contemporary African higher education. For history departments in Sub-Saharan Africa, decolonisation involves confronting the Eurocentric periodisation, source hierarchies, and theoretical frameworks inherited from colonial and early postcolonial curriculum design, and replacing them with epistemologically pluralist, Afrocentric, and community-engaged alternatives that more adequately reflect the diversity and complexity of African historical experience.

**Aim:** This study examined the theoretical frameworks and practical curriculum reform approaches employed by history departments in Nigerian, Ethiopian, and South African universities to decolonise historical education, and assessed the institutional, pedagogical, and political challenges encountered in implementation.

**Methodology:** A mixed qualitative methodology combining document analysis of curriculum reform frameworks, semi-structured interviews with 36 history academics across six universities, and case study analysis of three decolonisation reform initiatives was employed. Data were collected in 2025 and analysed using thematic analysis guided by epistemic justice theory.

**Findings:** Curriculum reform efforts vary significantly in theoretical depth and institutional scope. South African universities show the most institutionally structured reform processes, informed by the RhodesMustFall movement's intellectual legacy. Nigerian and Ethiopian contexts exhibit more fragmented reform efforts constrained by resource limitations, institutional conservatism, and contested definitions of what decolonisation requires. Shared challenges include faculty resistance, assessment framework inflexibility, and the absence of adequate Africanist pedagogical resources.

**Contributions:** The study contributes to decolonial education theory and African higher education research by providing comparative empirical evidence of curriculum decolonisation processes in three national contexts and identifying the structural conditions that enable or constrain substantive curriculum transformation.

**Keywords:** *Curriculum decolonisation, African higher education, Epistemic justice, History education, Afrocentrism, Pedagogical reform.*

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

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The call to decolonise the university has animated African higher education discourse since at least the era of independence, most famously articulated in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's 1968 petition for the abolition of the English department at the University of Nairobi and its replacement by a Department of African Literature and Languages. The RhodesMustFall movement at the University of Cape Town in 2015 and its rapid spread across South African campuses and, subsequently, British universities represented a renewed and more institutionally disruptive iteration of this demand, giving decolonisation discourse renewed urgency and political visibility in the 2020s (Heleta & Bhambra, 2022).

For history departments specifically, decolonisation is not a novel aspiration. African historians from the 1960s onward actively contested Eurocentric periodisation, the privileging of documentary over oral evidence, and the marginalisation of African agency in historical narratives (Falola & Hahonou, 2023; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2023). Yet empirical research consistently documents the persistence of Eurocentric content and pedagogical approaches in African university history curricula, suggesting that discursive commitments to decolonisation have not translated into systematic curriculum transformation (Osei-Bonsu & Acheampong, 2024). This gap between aspiration and implementation provides the motivating problem for the present study.

## 2.0 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

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### *Epistemic Justice and Curriculum*

Miranda Fricker's concept of epistemic injustice, particularly testimonial injustice (the failure to credit speakers as reliable knowers) and hermeneutical injustice (the failure to provide adequate conceptual resources for understanding marginalised experience), provides a productive framework for analysing the curriculum dimensions of decolonisation. Applied to history curricula by Heleta and Bhambra (2022), epistemic justice theory predicts that genuinely decolonised curricula must not only add African content but restructure the epistemological foundations of historical knowledge production — changing whose questions count as historically significant, whose sources are treated as evidentially adequate, and whose interpretive frameworks are taught as theoretically legitimate.

### *Afrocentric Curriculum Theory*

Afrocentric curriculum theory, associated with Asante's foundational framework and extended to African higher education contexts by Kaya and Seleti (2022), proposes that Africa and African experience should function as the primary reference point for curriculum design, repositioning African knowledge systems as normative rather than supplementary. This framework provides a more radical decolonisation mandate than additive approaches that supplement Eurocentric curricula with African content modules, demanding instead a fundamental reorientation of the curriculum's epistemological centre of gravity.

## 3.0 METHODOLOGY

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A mixed qualitative methodology was employed combining document analysis, semi-structured interviews, and case study analysis. Document analysis examined curriculum reform frameworks, department mission statements, and assessment rubrics from six history departments across Nigeria (University of Nigeria, Nsukka; Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife), Ethiopia (Addis Ababa University; Mekelle University), and South Africa (University of Cape Town; University of KwaZulu-Natal). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 36 history academics (six per institution) in 2025, exploring experiences of curriculum reform, theoretical orientations, and institutional challenges. Case study analysis

examined three documented decolonisation reform initiatives, one per country, using process documentation and participant accounts. Thematic analysis was guided by epistemic justice theory and Afrocentric curriculum frameworks.

## 4.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

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### *South Africa: Structured Reform with Contested Depth*

South African history departments present the most institutionally structured decolonisation reform processes, reflecting the RhodesMustFall movement's institutional legacy and the South African government's curriculum transformation policy framework. The University of Cape Town's history department has undergone a documented curriculum review process resulting in mandatory Africanist historiography modules, revised source assessment guidelines that treat oral and material sources as primary rather than supplementary evidence, and revised periodisation that deconstructs colonial temporal frameworks (Osei-Bonsu & Acheampong, 2024). However, interview data reveal significant academic staff disagreement about the depth of transformation achieved, with several respondents characterising reforms as additive rather than epistemologically transformative in the sense demanded by Afrocentric curriculum theory.

### *Nigeria: Fragmented Reform and Resource Constraints*

Nigerian history departments exhibit more fragmented decolonisation reform processes, shaped by resource constraints, recurring faculty industrial actions, and contested institutional priorities. Obafemi Awolowo University's history curriculum retains a significant proportion of British imperial history content despite ongoing faculty discussions about reform, largely because adequate Africanist pedagogical resources and assessment frameworks are not available at the scale required for wholesale curriculum replacement. Respondents at both Nigerian institutions identified the absence of adequate Africana history textbooks and the mismatch between reformed content and standardised external examination frameworks as the most significant structural barriers to decolonisation.

### *Ethiopia: Independence Historiography and Decolonial Tensions*

Ethiopia's distinct position as a country that was never formally colonised (except for the brief Italian occupation of 1935 to 1941) creates a unique decolonisation context. Ethiopian historiography has historically emphasised national independence and the Adwa victory (1896) as foundational historical reference points, generating a national history tradition with a different relationship to Eurocentric frameworks than its colonised neighbours. Bekele and Tadesse (2025) document how Addis Ababa University's history curriculum combines robust Ethiopian historical content with persistent adoption of European theoretical frameworks in historiographical methodology modules, creating a distinctive partial decolonisation in which content is Africanised while epistemological frameworks remain largely Eurocentric.

## 5.0 CONCLUSION

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Decolonisation of history curricula in Sub-Saharan African universities remains an unfinished project characterised by significant national variation in institutional scope, theoretical depth, and implementation progress. South African universities exhibit the most structured reform processes, but substantive epistemological transformation remains contested. Nigerian institutions face resource and structural barriers that constrain reform implementation. Ethiopia presents a distinctive decolonisation context shaped by its unique anti-colonial historical identity. Common across all three contexts is the need for epistemologically transformative rather than merely additive curriculum reform — a transformation that restructures not only

content but the foundational frameworks through which historical knowledge is produced and validated. Future research should develop practical curriculum design tools for implementing epistemic justice frameworks in African history departments and evaluate the long-term impact of curriculum reform on graduate historical consciousness and professional identity.

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