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POSTCOLONIAL THEORY, INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS, AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL SOVEREIGNTY IN EAST AFRICA

Theoretical Frameworks, Knowledge Legitimacy, and the Decolonial Turn in Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda

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ABSTRACT

Background: Postcolonial theory has since its foundational articulations by Fanon, Said, and Spivak engaged with the question of what counts as legitimate knowledge. In East African contexts, the relationship between colonial epistemologies embedded in university curricula, state institutions, and research methodologies and the indigenous knowledge systems of Kenyan, Tanzanian, and Ugandan communities raises critical questions about epistemological sovereignty, the right of communities to define, validate, and transmit their own knowledge on their own terms.

Aim: This study examined how postcolonial and decolonial theoretical frameworks conceptualise epistemological sovereignty in East African contexts, and how contemporary movements for indigenous knowledge recognition are reshaping academic, policy, and governance discourses.

Methodology: The study employed an interpretive literature synthesis methodology drawing on postcolonial theory, decolonial scholarship, and empirical case studies of indigenous knowledge recognition programmes in Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda published between 2022 and 2026. Theoretical frameworks were applied to analyse policy documents, constitutional provisions, and university curriculum reform initiatives.

Findings: Postcolonial theory provides productive but incomplete frameworks for understanding epistemological sovereignty, with decolonial approaches originating in African philosophical traditions offering more contextually grounded conceptualisations. Kenya's constitutional recognition of community rights, Tanzania's ujamaa legacy, and Uganda's traditional cultural institutions represent divergent institutional pathways toward epistemological sovereignty with varying degrees of substantive implementation.

Contributions: The study contributes to postcolonial and decolonial theory by developing an East African conceptualisation of epistemological sovereignty that integrates philosophical, institutional, and pedagogical dimensions, and by providing comparative evidence of knowledge sovereignty movements in three distinct national contexts.

Keywords: *Postcolonial theory, Indigenous knowledge systems, Epistemological sovereignty, East Africa, Decolonisation, Knowledge legitimacy.*

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

The question of whose knowledge counts, which knowledge systems are accorded legitimacy within academic, policy, and governance institutions, and who holds the power to define the boundaries of valid inquiry remains one of the most contested terrains in postcolonial scholarship. Mignolo's (2000) concept of the colonial wound, revisited by Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2023) in the African philosophical tradition, identifies the systematic devaluation of African knowledge systems as a constitutive feature of colonial governance that persists in postcolonial institutional structures. In East Africa, this epistemological inheritance is refracted through distinct national histories, linguistic ecologies, and governance philosophies that complicate any singular account of indigenous knowledge and its relationship to postcolonial institutional power.

Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda share British colonial epistemological legacies but have developed divergent postcolonial orientations toward indigenous knowledge recognition. Kenya's 2010 Constitution contains explicit provisions for community property rights and cultural knowledge protection. Tanzania's postcolonial intellectual heritage is deeply shaped by Nyerere's ujamaa philosophy, which sought to ground socialist development in indigenous African communal values. Uganda's 2005 constitutional amendments restored traditional cultural institutions (kingdoms and chieftaincies) as cultural and developmental bodies, creating a unique institutional space for indigenous knowledge governance (Ssemwogerere & Asiimwe, 2024).

2.0 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Postcolonial Theory and Epistemological Critique

Postcolonial theory in its canonical forms, Said's orientalism, Bhabha's mimicry, Spivak's strategic essentialism, provides frameworks for understanding how colonial knowledge systems marginalised and othered non-European ways of knowing. However, critics including Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2023) and Chilisa and Tsheko (2022) argue that classical postcolonial theory remains insufficiently attentive to the specific epistemic resources of African philosophical traditions, offering critique of colonial knowledge without adequate theorisation of what authentic decolonial knowledge production might look like.

Decolonial Theory and Epistemological Sovereignty

Decolonial theory, particularly in its African articulations through Ubuntu philosophy, Africana philosophy, and indigenous research methodologies, conceptualises epistemological sovereignty as the right of communities to define the validity criteria, transmission mechanisms, and institutional forms through which their knowledge is produced and recognised. Chilisa and Tsheko (2022) operationalise this through a four-dimension framework encompassing ontological sovereignty (the right to define reality), epistemological sovereignty (the right to define valid knowledge), methodological sovereignty (the right to define valid inquiry), and axiomatic sovereignty (the right to define value hierarchies). This framework provides the primary analytical lens for the present study.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

The study employed an interpretive literature synthesis methodology examining how postcolonial and decolonial theoretical frameworks apply to epistemological sovereignty movements in Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda. Literature synthesis drew on peer-reviewed scholarship published between 2022 and 2026, selected through systematic search across African Studies, History, Philosophy, and Education databases. Policy document analysis examined constitutional provisions, national research policy frameworks, and university

curriculum reform documents from all three countries. Theoretical interpretation followed the analytical framework of Chilisa and Tsheko (2022), with contextual adaptation for East African institutional specificities.

4.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Kenya: Constitutional Recognition and Implementation Gaps

Kenya's 2010 Constitution represents the most explicit formal recognition of indigenous knowledge rights in East Africa, with Article 11 enshrining cultural rights and Article 40 providing community property rights protection applicable to traditional knowledge. However, empirical analysis by Wekesa and Otieno (2022) reveals significant implementation gaps, with formal constitutional protections failing to translate into substantive policy frameworks governing traditional knowledge commercialisation, protection from biopiracy, or integration into national research funding priorities. The Kenya Industrial Property Institute's traditional knowledge database, established in 2023, represents a partial institutional response that critics have questioned as insufficiently community-governed in its design and administration.

Tanzania: Ujamaa Heritage and Knowledge Communalism

Tanzania's postcolonial epistemological identity remains deeply marked by Nyerere's ujamaa philosophy, which conceptualised African socialism as grounded in indigenous communal values rather than imported ideological frameworks. Contemporary Tanzanian scholarship has revisited this heritage through the lens of decolonial theory, with Mwasaga and Luhanga (2024) arguing that ujamaa's epistemological dimensions — particularly its insistence on African authenticity as a foundation for development theory — anticipate contemporary indigenous knowledge sovereignty movements. The challenge in Tanzania is the tension between the centralised state knowledge governance tradition inherited from the ujamaa era and the pluralism demanded by decolonial epistemological sovereignty frameworks.

Uganda: Traditional Cultural Institutions and Knowledge Governance

Uganda's 2005 constitutional restoration of traditional cultural institutions created a distinctive institutional infrastructure for indigenous knowledge governance absent in Kenya and Tanzania. Ssemwogerere and Asimwe (2024) document how Buganda, Toro, Busoga, and Ankole kingdoms have actively developed cultural knowledge documentation and transmission programmes, establishing cultural research centres and negotiating intellectual property agreements with national government bodies. The theoretical challenge is whether these institutions, operating within a national constitutional framework that ultimately subordinates them to state authority, can exercise genuine epistemological sovereignty or merely perform cultural recognition within postcolonial institutional boundaries.

5.0 CONCLUSION

Postcolonial theory provides essential critique of colonial epistemological hierarchies, but decolonial frameworks rooted in African philosophical traditions offer more generative conceptualisations of epistemological sovereignty in East African contexts. Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda represent divergent institutional pathways toward indigenous knowledge recognition, each shaped by distinct constitutional histories and postcolonial philosophical inheritances. Common to all three contexts is the tension between formal recognition and substantive sovereignty — a tension that future research should examine through ethnographic studies of knowledge production within specific indigenous communities and their negotiations with state and academic institutions.

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