DEBATE

Ten challenges in reconfiguring African Studies

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SUMMARY

African Studies is characterised by intellectual contestations and epistemological struggles. These have become accentuated in the context of the current resurgent and insurgent decolonisation of the twenty-first century. This article delineates and reflects on 10 challenges confronting reconfiguring African Studies, namely genealogical, epistemic, linguistic, chronological, theoretical, spatial (area studies and country studies), androcentric, disciplinary, canonical issues and resilience of colonial library. These challenges are posed as part of comfort zones (asserted and reasserted truth/common notions) in doing African Studies that have to be changed in accordance with demands for a decolonised African Studies.

KEYWORDS

African Studies; area studies; decolonisation; epistemological struggles; reconfiguring African Studies

Introduction

This article delineates and critically reflects on 10 challenges confronting reconfiguring African Studies. These are categorised into the genealogical, epistemic, linguistic, chronological, theoretical, spatial (area studies and country studies), androcentric, disciplinary, canonical issues and resilience of colonial library. These challenges are posed as part of comfort zones (asserted and reasserted truth/common notions) in doing African Studies that have to be critically examined, if not changed (Dominguez 2012, 394). They are also posed as decolonial tasks that have to be performed if reconfiguring African Studies is to be achieved.

This debate article emerged from the 2023 annual new year lecture delivered at the University of Bayreuth sponsored by the Africa Multiple Cluster of Excellence (2019–2025),
whose vision is to reconfigure African Studies. It is no surprise then, that the article starts with brief reflections on this overarching vision. This is a vision posed as a research task and a research question of ‘figuring out how to configure African Studies’ (Seesemann 2020, 3). The article also reflects briefly on matters arising from the process of posing this question as it is implemented at the University of Bayreuth. Reconfiguring African Studies is approached from a decolonial perspective to mean restructuring in the domains of meaning, conceptions, epistemologies, approaches, institutions, practices and purposes.

The article posits that if colonialism introduced what Valentin Y. Mudimbe (1988, 1994) named the ‘colonial library’ at the centre of African Studies, imperialism configured African Studies into what Martin G. William and Michael O. West (1999) described as the ‘Africanist enterprise’. Taken together, these intersecting and mutually reinforcing global epistemic imperial/colonial designs produced coloniality of knowledge in African Studies. The result has been an African Studies that is of service to the coloniser/imperialist model of the world as well as American hegemonic global imperial designs. Inevitably, Africans on the continent and in the diaspora, as well as some progressive Africanists, have been contesting coloniality of knowledge in African Studies and fighting to liberate African Studies from intellectual imperialism. Reconfiguring African Studies emerges within this context and it entails repurposing African Studies for the service of African epistemic freedom (Prah 2016; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018).

Reconfiguring African Studies

The University of Bayreuth has the largest Africa Multiple Cluster of Excellence in Germany, and its mission is to reconfigure African Studies. This reconfiguring is pitched at two levels: the structural and conceptual. At the structural level, reconfiguring is focused on ‘the structural set-up of African Studies, including hierarchies, the distribution of resources, and the organization of research infrastructure’ (Seesemann 2020, 3). This objective is echoed by Shose Kessi, Zoe Marks and Elelwani Ramugondo (2020, 273) in terms of ‘structural decolonising’, which ‘refers to redistributing and reopening material resources and opportunities – institutions, jobs, titles, professional recognition, research budgets, leadership, and gatekeeping roles, scholarships, and entries of admission – that are currently distributed in ways that echo and reproduce colonial relations’.

At the conceptual level, there is a commitment to the development of ‘a new conceptual framework capable of addressing the shortcomings of previous approaches’ (Seesemann 2020, 3). Rüdiger Seesemann, founding Dean of the Africa Multiple Cluster of Excellence, identified the shortcomings of previous conceptions of African Studies as the underlying ‘area studies’ logic, and the ‘heavy colonial baggage, forcing each and every undertaking in African Studies to position itself in current debates over decolonization’ (Seesemann 2020, 3–4). However, as expressed by Kwesi Prah (2016, 4), decolonising African Studies has been ‘the intimidating question we face as academics in Africa today’. Indeed, the complex epistemological, theoretical and methodological issues in African Studies are intimidating as they are inextricably intertwined with equally complex systemic, structural and institutional frameworks of colonial domination and imperial control. This is why Kessi, Marks and Ramugondo (2020, 274) highlighted the necessity of ‘epistemic decolonizing’, a reference ‘to the redemption of worldviews and theories and ways of knowing that are not rooted in, nor oriented around Euro-American theory’.
At the structural level, there has been some clarity, concrete movement and achievements in thinking from the University of Bayreuth. New structures such as the Gender and Diversity Office, Knowledge Lab, Junior Research Group Leaders and Research Sections have been set up to enable a new way of doing African Studies. The major achievement has been the establishment of African Cluster Centres (ACCs) in Nigeria, South Africa, Kenya and Burkina Faso aimed at bringing African scholars based in Africa and Africanists based in Germany (Bayreuth) together to co-drive a decolonised, deimperialised and depatriarchised African Studies (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2021). Part of the success is that resources are shared across Bayreuth and the ACCs.

However, this achievement automatically takes the Cluster to the next step of crafting a new intellectual and academic working relationship between Africanists and African scholars. Already, the Herskovitsian ghost has arisen, with its claims of the pursuit of scientific, objective and good scholarship as the core of doing African Studies (Herskovits 1958). Debates have emerged within the Cluster that scholarship informed by decolonisation might be too ideological, subjective and, by implication, not good scholarship. Melville Herskovits (1958) fired the first salvo when he insinuated that because of proximity to Africa as the subject of study, African scholars could be subjective rather than objective. This argument seems to be used to justify the hegemony of the Africanist enterprise in African Studies and the claim of its being scientific. Consequently, numerous matters arise when one thinks about what it means and entails to reconfigure African Studies.

Matters arising in reconfiguring African Studies

Redefinition and re-conception of African Studies can be the beginning. Christopher Clapham posited two possible ways of understanding African Studies. The first is the idea of African Studies being an organised and institutionalised intellectual field of inquiry, with its origins in the global North (Clapham 2020, 138). It is at this level of sociology of knowledge that the Africanist enterprise with its racialised configuration has been capable of displacing ‘a competing older tradition of black scholarship’ (Martin and West 1999, 91; see also Jansen and Walters 2022, 10–11 on how institutional posturing in South Africa has successfully diluted and disciplined decolonisation). The Africanist enterprise is well-resourced and easily reproduces itself through the recruitment of African scholars, training them and in this way sustaining coloniality of knowledge and the cognitive empire (Santos 2018; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2020; Falola 2022b).

The second meaning is that of “African Studies” as the attempt to understand Africa, in all its often-bewildering diversity’ (Clapham 2020, 3). This is the level of politics of knowledge, whereby African scholarship and core African issues remain marginal in African Studies. Consequently, questions of the role of identity in knowledge, place/space (geography) in knowledge generation, influence of biography/experience in knowledge, and others, have re-emerged poignantly in the debates on reconfiguring African Studies. For example, Kessi, Marks and Ramugondo (2020, 273) defined African Studies as ‘transdisciplinary knowledge production concerning Africa or Africans’ and elaborated that this includes ‘scholarship in, with, for, of, on, and from Africa and Africans’. They further argued that a normative question arises ‘about the purposes and possibilities of knowledge created in/of/with/for the continent’, raising the fundamental question of situating ‘Africa and Africans at the centre of African Studies’ (ibid.). This challenge is picked up by K. Rene Odanga (2022, 1) who underscored
that everything about African Studies ‘percolate[s] around the same matter, the subject of study – the African’, adding that the question of agency in African Studies is nothing but ‘a question of whether the African is human at all’ (Odanga 2022, 2).

Emerging from these interventions is that a genuinely reconfigured African Studies has to link with Black, African and feminist struggles against racism, colonialism, imperialism, capitalism and heteropatriarchal sexism – against all forms of dismemberment and dehumanisation. It has to carry the burden of seeking a resolution of existential, epistemological and injustice issues constitutive of what Nathalie Etoke (2019) termed ‘melancholia Africana’ and what Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (2009a, 2009b) depicted as ‘dismemberment’. The work of Etoke and Sylvia Tamale demonstrates the complex entwinement of existential, epistemological and injustice questions in African Studies. Etoke (2019, xix–xx) posed questions of erasure of Africanity; unequal power relations; the encounter with the Other; paths toward freedom forged through pain that penetrates the soul; description of African subjectivity emerging from traumatic experience; exclusion from the universal family and, more importantly, objectivity that silences. Tamale (2020, 9) posed the challenge as: ‘Who will connect the ideological dots of racism, colonization, capitalism, sexism and heterosexism in ways that our children understand?’

These difficult questions cannot be ignored in the reconfiguration of African Studies. They highlight that at play in African Studies are not just epistemic issues but also deep existential and justice issues. Writing about Africa is still problematic as not only the use of external fables and fictions but also the Othering of Africans and misrepresentation continue (Wainaina 2022). In my own work, I have been trying to push the agenda of reconfiguring African Studies from the perspective of decolonisation/decoloniality. It was in this spirit that, through my Chair in Epistemologies of the Global South, I initiated a monthly seminar series entitled ‘The Changing African Idea of Africa and the Future of African Studies’ at the beginning of 2022 in collaboration with the Johannesburg Institute of Advanced Study based at the University of Johannesburg. Shifting in the very conception of the idea of Africa has to be part of changing the conceptions of African Studies. Mudimbe (1988, 1994) introduced ‘invention of Africa’ and ‘idea of Africa’, and what is needed is to shift to the ‘African idea of Africa’ (centring African initiatives of self-invention) (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o 2009a, 38).

This form of a shift in the very idea of Africa has direct implications for the re-conception of African Studies because it entails putting Africans at the centre (Pailey 2016). Paul Tiyambe Zeleza highlights that the idea of Africa is a shifting one in line with ‘prevailing conceptions and configurations of global racial identities and power, and African nationalism, including pan-Africanism’ (Zeleza 2006a, 14). The African idea of Africa according to Achille Mbembe (2022) entails rewriting of African histories, taking into consideration longue durée and their deep histories before colonialism. At the same time, Mbembe and Féline Sarr (2023, x) underscore the necessity of taking Africa as a ‘point of departure’ so as to ‘seize hold of any options on the future’. Peter Simatei Tirop (2022) (Director of the Moi University ACC in Kenya) focused on the theme of ‘ways of knowing Africa’ and ‘shifting imaginaries’ on Africa and Africans as he articulated the agenda of reconfiguring African Studies.

What emerges poignantly is that reconfiguring African Studies is a multifaceted and complex work of decolonising knowledge. Let me now turn to the 10 challenges in reconfiguring African Studies.
Geneses and genealogies of African Studies

Critical consideration of the question of genoses and genealogies of African Studies has implications for understanding its imbrications within global imperial designs. It also opens the potential to advance its reconfiguration. For example, one can trace the genealogy of African Studies to the establishment of the African Studies Association (ASA) in 1957 in the USA, which marked a watershed not only in the rise of what Martin and West (1999, 85) termed ‘the Africanist enterprise’ but also the conception of African Studies as ‘Area Studies’. Adebayo Olukoshi (2006, 540) calls this the ‘original sin’ of African Studies which it has ‘difficulty in completely shaking off’. This is because the Africanist enterprise has deep roots in colonial history. One example is the establishment in the UK of the Royal African Society in the 1880s: its journal, African Affairs, is currently the top Africanist journal in the world, symbolising the triumph of the Africanist enterprise.

Perhaps in seeking to escape this intellectual, academic and geopolitical skein of coloniality, there is a need to open up to diverse genoses and genealogies of African Studies. For example, a shift can be made to trace genoses and genealogies of African Studies to what Cedric Robinson (2000) termed the ‘Black Radical Tradition’ and what Robin D. G. Kelley (2002) termed the ‘Black Radical Imagination’ fuelled by ‘freedom dreams’. If this shift is made, the detachment of African Studies from Black, African and feminist struggles for liberation and freedom is destabilised. At another level, it was Ali A. Mazrui (2002, 11) who traced the beginning of African Studies to Africa itself. He identified Egypt and the Nile Valley, where Africa’s first grand civilisation began, as the ‘birthplace of systematic study of an African civilization’ (ibid.). Mazrui (ibid.) also traced the genealogy of African Studies to the writings of Abu Abdallah Muhammad Ibn Battuta (1304–1368), born in Tangier in Morocco, whose chronicles formed the pioneering work in African Studies. The third starting point was the time ‘when Africa began to be truly identified as a continent in its own right’ by geographers, which Mazrui pinned down to 1656 (Mazrui 2002, 11–12).

Adam Branch (2018, 74) posited that if diverse histories and geographies of the genealogies of African Studies are considered, ‘what decolonization means will also differ, entailing different temporalities, transformations and dilemmas.’ There is also value in locating the geneses and genealogies of African Studies to what Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (2009a, 2009b) termed ‘re-membering initiatives’, that is, African and Black self-reconstitution, self-definition and self-determination struggles, such as Ethiopiaism, Negritude and many others. A reconfiguration of African Studies which takes the African ideational and institutional genealogies as departure points subverts the strategy of the Africanist enterprise to displace other geneses and genealogies of African Studies. Ghana, where Kwame Nkrumah was instrumental in the establishment of the Institute of African Studies in Legon in 1961, can be privileged as it was directly linked to practical political efforts aimed at redefining the very idea of Africa and forging pan-African Africa (Allman 2013). What must be remembered is how such political-cum-intellectual African leaders as Julius Nyerere played significant roles in articulating the emerging ‘sentiment’ of African togetherness, with Nkrumah positing Africa as something that was born inside him (Mazrui 1963, 26).

There is also need to turn attention to the understanding of geneses and genealogies of African Studies in Dakar in Senegal, Makerere in Uganda, Cairo in Egypt, Maputo in Mozambique, Lubumbashi in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) (Henriet 2022), Ibadan in Nigeria, Dar es Salaam in Tanzania (Al-Bulushi 2022) and other places.
within Africa where initiatives in decolonising and Africanising knowledge ensued in the 1960s. For example, a recent study on the DRC focused on Université Nationale du Zaïre’s Lubumbashi campus revealed how ‘Lubumbashi scholars participated in early post-colonial attempts to radically transform the university’s teaching, research and operations, at the crossroads of intellectual decolonization and cosmopolitanism’ (Henriet 2022, 1). This strand of decolonisation resisted the nativist Authenticité state-imposed version. Yousuf Al-Bulushi (2022, 1) revisited the Dar es Salaam school and repositioned it as a centre of expressions of what he termed ‘red and Black internationalisms’ as he recovered Tanzania’s place in global decolonisation. Al-Bulushi (2022, 9–11) also highlighted the often-ignored role of women within the Dar es Salaam School. He noted the visit of Angela Davis in 1973, Ruth First spending a term at the university in 1975, and Marjorie Mbilinyi, a leading feminist, being a permanent member of the university who played a key role in the establishment of a gender and development study programme.

The epistemic question in African Studies

The most difficult and complex question in reconfiguring African Studies relates to epistemology in African Studies. It was Mudimbe (1988, 1994) who posed the questions of the episteme (configuration of knowledge), gnosis (ways of knowing) and discourse (communication) in African Studies, influenced by Michel Foucault and Edward Said. In *The scent of the father* (published in French in 1982 and in English in 2023), Mudimbe engaged with the difficult question of ‘the order of African discourse’ (forms of thought and practices of knowledge) in the light of two realities. The first was the reality of the ‘colonial structure of knowledge’ (colonial library) which bound Africa to the West epistemically. The second was the political decolonisation of Africa, which was accompanied by the search for epistemological decolonisation, a struggle which has undergone resurgence and insurgence in the twenty-first century (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2021).

Mudimbe’s findings (2023) have been that a colonising structure invaded and colonised the very idea of Africa (through its invention) and the order of knowledge to the extent that attempts to escape epistemological colonisation continue to be a challenge. The search for ways out the colonial cul-de-sac has resulted in cultural relativist interventions, reproductions of the paradigm of difference in such initiatives as Negritude, essentialist positions and easy embracement of colonial inventions of traditions, taking them as authentic African ways of doing things (Ranger 1983, 1993). But scholars have not given up the fight against what Toyin Falola (2022b, xv) depicted as:

> The pervasive and absolute hegemony of the West and its philosophies in African Studies – where a Western presence has become a metastatic cancer eating away at centuries-old traditions and the knowledge they hold – demands alternative, innovative and sometimes far-reaching approaches to sustain African heritage and culture.

Africanisation did not adequately stand up to this epistemological challenge. If anything was done under Africanisation, the tendency was to include African productions in an existing order of knowledge. Through such concepts as ‘Afrikology’, Dani Nabudere (2012) sought to articulate an African order of knowledge. Catherine Odora Hoppers and Howard Richards (2012, 8) introduced the concept of ‘rethinking thinking’, trying to ‘cast light at last onto subjugated peoples, knowledges, histories, and ways of living’
and working ‘to bring other categories of self-definition, of dreaming, of acting, of loving, of living into the commons as a matter of universal concern’. Suffice to close this section with the illuminating words of Oyeronke Oyewumi (2022, 51): ‘The real unmined gems are African concepts, ideas, values, ways of being and systems of knowledge and episteme.’

The theory–empiricism bifurcation in African Studies

Is theory European and empiricism African? This important question arises in a context where the positionality of Africa and African scholars within the world of human thought, and domain of knowledge, continues to enable and reproduce uneven intellectual and academic division of labour. There is a broader context in which conventional social theory is institutionalised as social sciences, while African decolonial and postcolonial thought/theory in its various iterations is reluctantly appreciated as a humanist project and pushed to the domain of humanities (Go 2016). Consequently, African decolonial and postcolonial thought and theory is largely questioned for being culturalist, normative and given to identitarian politics, hence failing to be objective and scientific. But in the current conjuncture the dominant conceptions of knowledge and conventional social theory are increasingly being pushed onto the defensive and being found to be inadequate to the demands of understanding the modern world in its diversities, complexities and multiplicities. There are calls for decolonisation of ‘the normative foundations of critical theory’ (see Allen 2016). This reality has opened the space for ‘epistemologies of the South’ and ‘theory from the South’ where theory and empiricism are not bifurcated (Santos 2014; Comaroff and Comaroff 2012).

This shift has to be traced as far back as the 1960s and 1970s, when there were concerted efforts to shift the balance of power in intellectual and academic division of labour. Africa and African institutions of higher education were rebuilding themselves to simultaneously generate empirical data and formulate theory. Universities and African Studies centres in Africa were attracting some of the most progressive Africanists, such as Thomas Hodgkin to Ghana and Terence Ranger to Tanzania. Even the famous William E. B. Du Bois moved to Ghana. Radical Black scholars like Walter Rodney (1972) from Guyana in the Caribbean were also attracted to Tanzania. It was during those years of African confidence as generators of knowledge that Nkrumah (1965) developed the theory of neocolonialism. With African economies plunging into crisis from the end of 1970s, African Studies could no longer sustain its agility to continue its own chosen trajectories. It underwent re-subordination and African Studies centres in Africa were reduced ‘to sites for the collection and transmission of raw data to centres of African Studies in the North’ (Olukoshi 2006, 540). Collegial relations degenerated into clientelist modes of engagement.

The uneven intellectual and academic division of labour continues to expose Africa to ‘epistemologies of extraction’, and Europe and North America still dominate in theory and model generation (Alcoff 2022). Paulin J. Hountondji (1990) distilled 13 indices of academic dependence. An intellectual and academic culture has developed and is being reproduced by African students for their master’s and doctoral theses, whereby they habitually gather data in Africa then search for theory in Europe and North America. Africa becomes a laboratory for testing theory and models developed in Europe and North America.
Claude Ake (1979, 12) coined the concept of ‘social science as imperialism’ whereby anything African, ranging from development to politics, is compared to Europe as a normative template, concluding that: ‘It is becoming increasingly clear that we cannot overcome our underdevelopment and dependence unless we try to understand the imperialist character of Western social science and to exorcise the attitudes of mind which it inculcates.’ The solution lies in taking African scholarship and intellectual production seriously, which entails being able to draw concepts and theories from their work. For example, the concept of hybridity has a long genealogy in African scholarship, perhaps beginning with the work of Edward Wilmot Blyden (1887). He grappled with the question of the synthesis of African civilisation and knowledge with Islamic and Euro-Christian civilisations in the making of ‘African personality’. This same subject was picked up by Kwame Nkrumah (1964) when he coined the concept of ‘consciencism’. It was elaborated on by Ali A. Mazrui (1986) when he introduced the concept of ‘triple heritage’.

Linguistic encirclement in African Studies

‘Linguistic encirclement’ is not only a consequence of colonial conquest and imposition of colonial languages. The postcolonial embrace includes the role of official languages as well as intellectual and academic use of these languages in research, teaching and learning in Africa (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o 1986, 15). What is worrying is the normalisation, if not naturalisation, of colonial languages as the only ones amenable for scientific thought and its productions. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o has no problem with Africans learning other languages per se. He is worried about other languages replacing African languages. Second, he is concerned about African children being detached from their ‘mother tongue’ and the disturbance of the normal cognitive processes of learning (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o 2013). His third concern is that language is not just a means of communication, it is a carrier of a people’s culture, identity and consciousness (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o 2016, 69).

The fourth concern arose from Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s (2009a, 121) reflections on the African Renaissance and how it could be achieved if African intelligentsia ‘work outside our own linguistic memory? And within the prisonhouse of European linguistic memory?’ This linguistic encirclement has been the most difficult to confront and resolve because African leaders, and a majority of African intellectuals and academics, either prefer to ignore it or to defend it using all sorts of justifications. These range from the argument that Africans have effectively used imposed colonial languages to ‘write back’, that colonial languages have been useful in expression of African dreams of freedom, to that these languages are international compared to African languages that are local and too diverse. But as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (2009a, 124) articulated, ‘how can we resolve our present predicament, whereby considerable knowledge produced by sons and daughters of Africa is already stored in European linguistic granaries?’ One response to this challenge is that imposed colonial languages are no longer colonial languages but part of African languages.

One of the negative consequences is that in many African countries, being competent in imposed colonial languages has been elevated to being knowledgeable. The second negative consequence is that the bulk of literature written in African languages is not used
to enrich African Studies. The third negative consequence is that everything written in African languages is commonly pushed to departments of African languages and literature, even if the subject is philosophy or politics. Can one take all the works written in the English language, lump them together into one department called English Literature and Language, and ignore the content and subject of the publication?

The last point about linguistic encirclement is, for whom are African academics and intellectuals writing? It is high time that African intellectuals and academics are called upon to account to Africans. Ňgũĩ wa Thiong’o (2016, 214) called on African intellectuals and academics to avoid operating like outsiders in their own continent. In his recent work, Ňgũĩ wa Thiong’o (2023) deals with the important question of translation as a language of languages. Translation is posited as an enabler not only of conversation between and across cultures, but also as a means to enhance the unity of African people across the continent. Ňgũĩ wa Thiong’o advocates for the fall of hierarchies of languages and favours literature without borders, enabled by translations.

The question of chronology in African Studies

The next lingering and difficult challenge is that of chronology and periodisation in African Studies: the colonial period stands at the centre in the same manner as the birth and death of Jesus Christ (BC/AD) stand in Christian time reckoning. Mazrui (2005, 75), in his reflections on time and invention of the world, posited that ‘Europe invented the world, at the Greenwich Meridian’ and that Europe timed the world so that the ‘Greenwich meridian chimed with the universal hour’. The question of time has troubled historians of Africa. In 1966, a conference was held at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London on African chronology (Jones 1970). The question of chronology was posed as a concern of historians dealing with precolonial African history. Consequently, king lists, dynastic genealogies, dynastic generations, and reigns were discussed extensively as the foundation of chronologies. But the question of chronology is not just for historians. Thandika Mkandawire (2005, 10) raised the periodisation challenge this way: ‘Periodization is always a treacherous exercise, involving as it does an arbitrary imposition of discrete time markers on what is essentially a continuum.’

Jacques Depelchin (2004) identified periodisation as a silencing technology in African history ranking alongside what he termed conceptual and paradigmatic silencing. He argued that African history has suffered from two paradigms: the paradigm of denial of existence prior to the 1960s, and the paradigm of recognition of existence after the 1960s. This is how he formulated the problem:

The apparent paradigmatic shift – from denial to recognition – can be revealed as false by showing that the affirmation was paralleled by a systematic silencing of questions, themes and/or conceptualisations. So, in reality, what took place was a redefinition or reformulation of the denial. (Depelchin 2004, 12)

In short, by the time the existence of African history was recognised and introduced as academic history, it had been disciplined to fit a particular Eurocentric chronology and periodisation. It had also been fitted into existing Enlightenment ideas and philosophy of history (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018, 1–2).
The most enduring periodisation in Africa is the ‘precolonial’, ‘colonial’ and ‘postcolonial’. Prah (2016, 9) argues that:

Possibly, the single most disastrous epistemic effect of colonial tutelage and experience on our thinking and education, which nomothetically and systematically strait-jackets our basic assumptions along intellectually colonial and neo-colonial lines, is the historical periodization scheme which runs from; precolonial, colonial and post-colonial periods.

The colonial interlude stands at the centre of this mode of periodisation, with ‘the most determinant features in the hundreds of thousand years of the history of homo sapiens in Africa’ (Prah 2016, 9). In his reflections on Africa in theory, Mbembe (2022) also alluded to the challenges of periodisation in African Studies and suggested a shift to consider the longue durée of African history – what he termed the deep histories of Africa before colonialism. Prah (2016, 9) suggests that ‘we must in the first instance conceptually place Africans in the centre of history in general and African history in particular.’ One possibility is to turn our attention to Cheikh Anta Diop, who directly challenged the Hegelian negation of Africa and generated African history (Diagne 2023, 6).

The precolonial, colonial and postcolonial chronological and periodisation schema has proved to be very hard to transcend or abandon. Even the large UNESCO General History of Africa Project did not succeed in laying it to rest. African Studies has to be sensitive to diverse temporalities as well as continuities within discontinuities. This takes us to the spatial challenge, which is rendered here as the ‘country study’ approach in African Studies.

The spatial/country study approach in African Studies

What role does space/spatiality play in African Studies? What does it mean to take Africa as a ‘space of thought’? Is there a relationship between country studies and area studies? In the field of philosophy, it is the work of Bruce B. Janz (2022) that grapples with the questions of ‘the space of thought’ and implications of ‘thinking in place’. For the field of African Studies in Africa, one can turn to Mahmood Mamdani (2001, xiii) who launched a critical agenda of ‘decolonizing area studies’. He posited that one of the rules of area studies as it manifests itself in Africa is that ‘every expert must cultivate his or her own local patch, where geography is forever fixed by contemporary boundaries’. Mamdani (ibid.) depicted this in terms of ‘intellectual claustrophobia’ and a problematic methodology. The problematic methodology is understood by Mamdani to consist of two equally problematic logics: ‘The first sees state boundaries as boundaries of knowledge, thereby turning political into epistemological boundaries.’ The second logic has to do with the ‘theoretical–empirical bifurcation’ in African Studies, whereby empirical facts are valorised and theory is resisted (ibid.).

Mamdani made efforts to break from this ‘intellectual claustrophobia’ through the acts of ‘historicizing geography’ and demonstrating the complicity of history writing with imperialism in his endeavour to de-naturalise political identities. He was developing a new approach to doing African Studies in Africa that is not hostage to ‘methodological nationalism’ and empiricism (Wimmer 2003). The intellectual vistas opened up by Mamdani are threefold for African Studies: (a) a study of Africa that illuminates the broader questions and challenges of ‘late modern life’; (b) a study of Africa that enables ‘looking at the world from within Africa’ (Mamdani 2001, xiv); and (c) a study of Africa that avoids the
‘analogy’ approach where Europe is the template of what is normal and Africa provides examples of what is yet to be normal (Mamdani 1996).

Other political scientists believe that the way out of the ‘intellectual claustrophobia’ is through the adoption of ‘comparative area studies’ (CAS) that enable a shift from micro-perspectives to ‘the big picture and the longue durée’ (Basedau 2020). Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, Rüdiger Seesemann and Christine Vogt-William (2022) found comparison as the solution to be inadequate as it ignores what Kessi, Marks and Ramugondo (2020) termed ‘epicolonial’ challenges that necessitate decoloniality. Area studies, with the baggage of colonialism and imperialism, cannot be reconfigured without decolonising it and the ‘adding of “comparative” to “African Studies” or “area studies”’ is inadequate to address the complex epistemological, methodological, structural and relational issues (Basedau 2020, 201). Odanga (2022, 2) raised the problem in the comparative approach of comparing a continent with countries: ‘China–Africa, Brazil–Africa, India–Africa’.

Africa is constantly being belittled and reduced to a country. At the same time, there is need for a shift from the assumptions of countries as natural units for comparative studies. It might help to turn to work such as that of Amy Niang (2018) which challenges the naturalisation and universalisation of the nation state. Niang makes a well-thought-out call for rethinking conceptual and theoretical tools that have been used to understand Africa, its people and its institutional frameworks. For her,

> a task requires first and foremost that we un-understand the state as we know it and start thinking more fruitfully about how different historical communities have gone about conceptualizing institutions that adequately embody different figures of authority, of order, of self and of interrelating and the crucial connections that underlie them. (Niang 2018, 14)

Rethinking and unthinking is the domain of critical African Studies, not comparative African Studies.

The other question which arises in engagement with the broader issues of spatiality and country study approaches is that of the contributions of ethnically mapped studies of particular ethnic groups, such as Yoruba Studies, Igbo Studies and others. Do these approaches undermine methodological nationalism and reject the container called ‘nation state?’ This takes us to the problem of androcentricity in African Studies that has to be unlearned if the reconfiguring of African Studies is to succeed.

### The androcentric question in African Studies

Even though there is consensus that gender is a social construct, it has successfully embedded itself in social phenomena and conceptual and theoretical constructions. It is in this context that the challenge of androcentricity has risen in knowledge in general, and African Studies in particular. This has taken the forms of ignoring and marginalising women’s contributions to society, legitimising the subordination of women within existing male-dominated social orders, and keeping women academics and intellectual interventions and productions on the periphery of the knowledge domain. Realisation of this led the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) to publish a foundational volume in 1997, *Engendering African Social Sciences in Africa*, edited by three leading African feminist scholars: Ayesha M. Imam, Amina Mama and Fatou Sow (1997). The volume was foundational in many ways. First, it introduced and clarified concepts
and theories such as gender bias, gender neutrality and gender blindness as it interrogated African social sciences and the positionalities often taken by scholars as they justify ignoring gender analysis and feminism in their work. Second, it interrogated the various disciplines that constitute African social sciences, thus exposing entrenched gender biases, gender neutralities and gender blindess(es) of the disciplines themselves and scholars.

Third, the volume was curated such that it provided both introductions and overviews of issues. Fourth, it made cross-cutting interventions on issues of power and resources as it underscored the aspect of political struggle as a necessity in enabling engendering on knowledge in general and social sciences in particular. Fifth, it is Africa-focused and considered the African context in its articulation of issues, without compromising the necessity of gender analysis and feminism. Finally, the three editors are not only leading feminists, they are also leading African scholars, committed pan-Africanists and active members of CODESRIA – the leading scientific institution in the production of Africa-centred knowledge. The volume was thus produced as a key text to influence the direction of African scholarship, if not its reconfiguration, through embracing gender analysis and feminism.

In the introduction to the volume, Imam (1997, 2) raised the issue of hostility to engendering knowledge and feminism, explaining that ‘engendering African social sciences is not a simple development of knowledge, but also necessarily and simultaneously profoundly a political struggle over power and resources.’ Therefore, the agenda of engendering knowledge was pitched at the same level as anti-colonial, anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist struggles and analyses, which assumed the form of critical race, class, and decolonial analyses. The engendering of knowledge has to enable a social science which takes into consideration the fact that ‘half of humanity is of feminine genders’ and ignoring this produces ‘an impoverished and distorted science’ (Imam 1997, 2).

The volume proceeds to demonstrate how insights from women’s studies and feminist theory have contributed to the improvement of social sciences’ perspectives, provide better explanations of African social realities and assist in finding ways out of the crisis in Africa. It also makes an important observation that ‘the search for a mythical “scientific objectivity” has never been wholly dominant in African social sciences as in Europe or North America’ (Imam 1997, 14). Throughout the volume, there is clear understanding of the intersectionality of issues: ‘class, gender, race, imperialism are simultaneous social forces, both interwoven and recursive upon each other’ (Imam 1997, 21). It is the insights from this treatise on engendering knowledge that informed extrapolations can be made on the centrality of depatriarchising knowledge as part of reconfiguring African Studies. This means that the work of reconfiguring African Studies has to reflect on the status and contributions of what Awino Okech (2020, 315) has termed ‘African feminist epistemic communities’ as well as those of ‘Gender and Women’s Studies centres across African universities’. This takes us to the disciplinary question in African Studies as a challenge for reconfiguring it.

Disciplines in the field of African Studies

Seen from a disciplinary vantage point, African Studies exists like a sea which is watered from diverse rivulets, with disciplines the rivulets (Zeleza 2006b). Therefore, across space and time, African Studies has been haunted by the challenge of how to reconstitute itself as a discursive and epistemological field (Robbe 2014, 255). These challenges
are compounded by five factors. The first is that social sciences and humanities which occupy the centre of African Studies have a problematic and compromised genealogy. Joao H. Costa Vargas and Moon-Kie Jung (2021, 5) clearly articulated this point, positing that ‘antiblackness’ (by extension anti-African) is etched in the very conceptions of ‘the social’ and ‘the human’ as the basis of social sciences and humanities. These fields of study were conceived against what was rendered as ‘black’.

Mudimbe (1988) introduced the concept of gnosis to depict the complex processes of conversion and translation of ways of knowing and human thought into epistemic systems as well as social and human disciplines. The second important factor, which is often ignored in African Studies, is to distinguish knowledge to live by from knowledge that has been redefined into expertise to dominate, control and rule by (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2020). This has given rise to the challenge of how to reconfigure African Studies in such a way that there is intellectual and academic commitment to recovery of socially relevant knowledge. The third factor is therefore how to reconfigure African Studies in such a way that it is not exhausted in pursuit of disciplinary debates at the expense of engagement with existential problems haunting humanity in general, and Africans in particular.

The fourth challenge is raised by Lewis R. Gordon (2006, 4) in terms of ‘disciplinary decadence’ which is ‘ontologizing or reification of a discipline’ resulting in the treatment of ‘our discipline as though it was never born and has always existed and will never change or, in some cases, die’. This attitude feeds into the last factor, whereby scholars enter the field of African Studies carrying their disciplinary identities and always ready to retreat to their disciplines. However, what sustains African Studies is that ‘thousands of people all over the world in multitudes of institutions earn their living teaching, researching, writing, or even celebrating and condemning Africa’ (Zeleza 2006b, 1). This has made African Studies a field of study vulnerable to being orphaned at any time. Therefore, the configuration and reconfiguration of African Studies have taken the format akin to the building of the Tower of Babel, characterised by a desire to engage in a common endeavour across disciplines on the one hand, and on the other to maintaining disciplinary differences. Appeals to inter-, trans- and multi-disciplinarity have so far failed to enable a reconfiguration of African Studies into a cohesive discursive and epistemological field. This takes us to the last two intersecting canon and colonial library questions and challenges in African Studies.

**The canon and colonial library questions in African Studies**

Toni Morrison (1998, 12) described the canon this way:

> Canon building is Empire building. Canon defense is national defense. Canon debate, whatever the terrain, nature, and range (of criticism, of history, of the history of knowledge, of the definition of language, the universality of aesthetic principles, the sociology of art, the humanistic imagination), is the clash of cultures. And all of the interests are vested.

While Morrison was concerned about questions of African American presence in American literature, her definition of the canon is applicable to African Studies, where the Africanist enterprise and its intellectual and academic productions dominate and enjoy privileged citational visibility.
This led Olukoshi (2006, 535) to write of privileged ‘non-African high priests of the discipline’ as producers of canonical works in African Studies. The canon is reinforced and reproduced by what Mudimbe (1988, 1994) depicted as the ‘colonial library’, which highlights the entrapment of Africa as an idea and invention as well as whatever tries to assume and recover African knowledge within the ‘colonizing structure’ (Wai 2020). But Mamadou Diouf (2008, 8) posited that besides the colonial library there is the ‘Islamic library’ which is often ignored but has a longer history in Africa. Thus, taken together the questions of canon and library invoke a particular imperative of reconfiguring African Studies, taking the form of decanonicalisation and decolonisation so as to open up space for African intellectual and academic productions and the recovery of those knowledges that have been subjugated (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2021, 884). While Mudimbe (2023) has highlighted the difficulties of subverting the ‘colonial library’, African scholars have not given up on the struggle to decolonise knowledge. For example, Toyin Falola (2018, 913) has introduced the concept of ‘ritual archives’ and defined it this way:

By ritual archives, I mean the conglomeration of words as well as texts, symbols, shrines, images, performances, and indeed objects that document as well as speak to those religious experiences and practices that allow us to understand the African world through various bodies of philosophies, literatures, languages, histories, and much more.

It is also Falola who has reintroduced the value of personal archive, experiential knowledge and indeed autoethnography as recommended methodologies in his endeavour to construct ‘African epistemologies’ (Falola 2022a). In this commendable effort to subvert the ‘colonial library’ Falola (2022a, xvii) turned to such aspects of African life as hair making, sculpting, painting, singing, masquerading, festivals, burial ceremonies and others to advance what he terms ‘decoloniality of autoethnography’.

Conclusion

The adopted modus operandi here has been to provoke thinking, rethinking and unthinking existing conceptions of African Studies as a way of opening up to reconfiguring. The African Studies that emerge from these reflections is one that emerges from struggles against racism, enslavement, colonialism, imperialism, and heteronormative patriarchal sexism. Such an African Studies is linked to Black, African and Afro-feminist struggles and gestures towards the re-existence of what was denied existence. If I raised more questions rather than offering any blueprints it is partly because I take the agenda of reconfiguring African Studies as a research challenge in itself, and partly because thinking through questions is the best mode of engaging with others as well as with difficult subjects like Africa. Throughout this article I have deliberately and consistently privileged the voices of African scholars as part of a practice of taking African scholarship seriously. This approach assisted me in reflecting on the 10 challenges in the configuration of African Studies.

Acknowledgements

I initially introduced the idea of 10 challenges in decolonising African Studies in my presentation of the Annual Leeds University Centre for African Studies Lecture (LUCAS) in
2022, and later developed them in my presentation of the New Lecture at the University of Bayreuth in 2023. On both occasions I received useful feedback from colleagues and I am very thankful. I also wish to thank Emeritus Professor Ray Bush for inviting me to consider writing this article for ROAPE.

**Disclosure statement**

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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