

Review

Transforming Academic Literacy: Centering Indigenous Identities in the Classroom

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Abstract: This article explores the transformational potential of centering indigenous identities and heritage within academic literacy instruction in higher education. The dominance of Eurocentric pedagogies in higher education has often marginalized African epistemologies and cultural narratives, limiting students' engagement and sense of belonging. Drawing on examples such as the Ma'at and Tewahedo traditions, this work argues that academic literacy should embrace Indigenous Knowledge Systems and the cultural capital students bring to the classroom. By integrating indigenous identities into disciplinary discourses, educators can create more inclusive learning environments that challenge historical power dynamics and elevate marginalized voices. This analysis highlights practical strategies for educators to foster critical thinking, reading, and writing while affirming students' identities. Ultimately, this article demonstrates that activating Indigenous Knowledge Systems can create classrooms that are inclusive and reflective of African identities.

Keywords: indigenous identities; academic literacy; higher education; Eurocentrism

1. Introduction

Eurocentric theories remain dominant in shaping the structure and theoretical foundations of academic literacy programs within South African higher education. These paradigms, including the technical constructs of academic literacy, devalue students' and staff's indigenous identities, worldviews, and knowledge systems. According to [Chilisa \(2024\)](#), the main challenge for African scholars today lies in the fact that their pedagogic methods are heavily influenced by Western paradigms, worldviews, and methodologies. Eurocentricity prioritizes the Global North's historical and analytical perspectives, often minimizing the role of African epistemologies in the development of contemporary academic literacies ([Lal 2012](#)). This issue is persistent across institutions, including former English-medium institutions, but is particularly pronounced in institutions that were historically Afrikaans medium.

Eurocentric models treat literacy as a neutral, universal set of technical skills, disconnected from social and cultural contexts. Unlike Indigenous, pre-colonial modes of knowledge production that integrated communities' epistemologies into communication, such approaches often privilege Global North norms and practices, presenting reading, writing, and other literacies in these contexts as superior or standard while neglecting the cultural and contextual diversity of literacy practices worldwide ([Sparks 2024](#)). Neutral skill ideology in South African universities justifies discriminatory, monolingual multiple-choice tests, such as ICELDA, which hinder students from demonstrating the mastery of disciplinary genres, or using diverse tools for knowledge production, marginalizing



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their identities, ability to navigate education within their worldviews, and cultural modes of expression.

In the South African context, the dominance of autonomous—or locally termed “technical”—models of literacy may contribute to the ongoing crisis of student attrition. Annually, a high number of Black African students drop out of universities because of factors such as alienation, a weak sense of belonging, and struggles to engage with the epistemologies and discourses of their disciplines. The average dropout rate for these students is approximately 25% (Otu and Mkhize 2018). According to Statistics South Africa’s (2024, p. 15) 2022 report, Black Africans had the highest rate of “no schooling”, the lowest rates of “completed secondary” education, and the lowest rates for having completed a tertiary level qualification. In contrast, Statistics South Africa (2024) reports that white South Africans had among the highest completion rates across domains, including the tertiary level. These data indicate that apartheid-era patterns of unequal educational access persist in post-democratic era. This current article argues that Western literacy models, coupled with the influence of “technical” literacy constructs, has significant implications for student success in South African higher education.

While academic literacy programs are not solely responsible for the decades-long attrition crisis in South Africa, the prevalence of autonomous models (see Larson 1996) across institutions suggests that they fail to develop students’ literacies in ways that cultivate a meaningful grasp of mainstream disciplinary knowledge and disciplinary identities. For example, academic literacy practices in higher education are deeply influenced by the cultures and power dynamics within these communities. Hlatshwayo (2020) argues that this can lead to Black students experiencing discursive struggles characterized by alienation, identity marginalization, and a sense of their voices being silenced. Hence, Eurocentric and technically oriented approaches to academic literacy not only fail to adequately prepare students for success in their disciplines but also contribute to a sense of alienation and disengagement, particularly for students from marginalized backgrounds.

This article also underscores the dehumanizing effects of autonomous and technical literacy models, which forego “meaning based language arts education” (Larson 1996, p. 440). This model falsely claims to have ideological neutrality (Street 2006). Such approaches echo South Africa’s long history of systemic educational oppression—beginning with missionary schools and extending through the apartheid-era Bantu education system—which viewed Global North ideologies of literacies and languages as civilizing projects (Ndimande 2013). Today, these autonomous constructs of literacy continue to marginalize African students and fail to address their disciplinary needs and safeguard their identities. This analysis argues for a shift towards alternative frameworks of academic literacy that recognize the social, cultural, and political dimensions of learning. Here, reference is made to pedagogic models that are more culturally sensitive, community-orientated and Afrocentric. These academic literacy models value multimodality and the sociocultural features of communication within disciplines. Alternative pedagogical frameworks, grounded in Indigenous Knowledge Systems and the New Literacies Movement, offer a more holistic and equitable approach to literacy education.

The current analysis not only critiques the autonomous model of academic literacy in higher education systems but also addresses a significant knowledge gap. It demonstrates how integrating African students’ cultures and identities into education can be achieved through alternative, socially constructed frameworks of academic literacy. An example is Mahlangu and Garutsa’s (2019) transdisciplinary model, which deliberately integrates local community perspectives, experiences, and needs into the curriculum. These alternative frameworks, grounded in the New Literacies Movement, and Indigenous Knowledge Systems, highlight that literacy is deeply embedded in social and cultural contexts (The

[New London Group 1996](#); [Eybers 2024](#)). Literacy, from this perspective, is not a neutral or technical skill but a set of practices that both shape and are shaped by social relationships and identities. This investigation, therefore, critiques the limitations of the autonomous model of academic literacy but also addresses a critical knowledge gap. It demonstrates how integrating African students' identities and cultures into education can be achieved through indigenous frameworks of education.

Sociocultural perspectives on academic literacy development, such as the Ubuntu model (see [Eybers and Paulet 2022](#)), challenge reductionist views of academic literacy as merely a technical skill. Ubuntu pedagogic models emphasize the relational and context-dependent nature of literacies, recognizing their deep entanglements with disciplinary identities, genres, and scholarly interactions ([Street 1984](#); [Rahman et al. 2024](#)). In contrast to neutral and technical models, Ubuntu and sociocultural models acknowledge that literacy is intrinsically linked to social values, identities, power, authority, and individual agency ([Lea and Street 2006](#)). By situating academic literacy within these broader sociocultural, and disciplinary dimensions, these alternative frameworks offer more nuanced understandings of how students' identities as emerging scholars develop in higher education.

This study's focus on centering marginalized identities and epistemologies in South African academic literacy development necessitates a critical examination of the link between academic literacies, culture, and identity. Historically in Africa, particularly during the pre-colonial era, literacies served as vital tools for preserving cultures, identities, and for transmitting essential knowledge and skills necessary for community survival ([Ayittey 2006](#)). This perspective aligns with [Street's \(1984\)](#) concept of the ideological model of literacy—where literacy practices are intertwined with specific social and cultural interests. By recognizing the social, cultural, and political dimensions of academic literacy development in higher education, educators can create more equitable and inclusive learning environments that empower all students, regardless of their background, to thrive in higher education.

When viewed within a historical continuum encompassing the pre-colonial, colonial, and present eras, it becomes evident that academic literacy as a shaper of individual and collective identities has been inextricably linked to power dynamics. In pre-colonial Africa, literacies were tools for fostering knowledge, skills, and communal identities within frameworks such as Ma'at, Tewahedo, and Ubuntu, emphasizing a sense of communal belonging. In contrast, the colonial era saw literacy repurposed as a tool of oppression, suppressing African identities, indigenous pedagogies, epistemologies, and dividing communities ([Mazrui 2007](#)). This involved imposing European languages and ideologies, often accompanied by autonomous, technical literacy models. These models, which emphasized individual skill acquisition in disciplinarily decontextualized course structures inadvertently contributed to the marginalization of indigenous African modes of social organization, literacies, and identities from their ancient roles of maintaining communal unity and harmony.

This ideological legacy of power imbalances persists in academic contexts, manifesting through ostensibly neutral, skill-based literacy models that inadvertently reinforce the unequal identity racial order established by coloniality. These models often privilege Eurocentric frameworks, such as unimodal, multiple-choice tests, marginalizing multimodal African epistemes, cultural literacies, and identities. Such technical skills models deny the legitimacy of Africa's diverse identities and epistemologies in universities, perpetuating systemic and epistemic inequities reminiscent of the apartheid era. Addressing these entrenched norms demands a critical re-evaluation of institutional academic literacy models. To reiterate: In pre-colonial cultural, pedagogical models, literacies were embedded in expert and communal domains. However, because of colonially inherited, technical

approaches to literacy development, academic literacy instructors are often stripped of opportunities to meaningfully engage with mainstream, disciplinary cultures, contrasting with indigenous modes of social organization.

2. Problem Statement

In South African higher education, Eurocentric academic literacy models marginalize African epistemologies, fostering student alienation and high drop out rates.

3. Research Question

How can academic literacy programs in higher education integrate indigenous identities and knowledge systems to create inclusive learning environments and enhance African students' success?

4. Research Objective

This article aims to demonstrate how integrating indigenous identities into academic literacy can transform higher education in South Africa. It critically evaluates the limitations of Eurocentric literacy models and provides a model for curriculum re-design and implementation. This article also provides recommendations to promote culturally responsive academic literacy that safeguards students' identities and wellbeing.

5. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative approach to explore the integration of indigenous identities, heritage, and knowledge systems into academic literacy programs in higher education. Qualitative research enables access to meaningful experiences by exploring the depth and complexity of human perspectives, emotions, and interactions, providing rich, detailed insights that quantitative methods might overlook (Nassaji 2020). The research methods include a systemic literature review and model building. Model building aligns with grounded theory by aiming to create a framework that can be utilized for future applications (Guest et al. 2020). The systemic literature review involves a comprehensive analysis of academic literacy, Eurocentric pedagogies, and Afrocentric educational strategies. This methodology ensures a thorough integration of current academic discourses and identifies gaps that this study aims to address.

6. Literature Review

Academic literacies—encompassing diverse communication practices that underpin higher education—permeate all scholarly activities, from writing research papers and lab reports, to participating in discussions and presentations. As articulated by the New London Group (The New London Group 1996), academic literacies integrate disciplinary and cultural contexts and accommodate an expanding range of text types, including multimedia and digital technologies. These practices are essential for fostering critical thinking and communication skills, as students are required to engage with and produce complex texts, demonstrating their understanding. By effectively navigating these literacies, students gain epistemological access to disciplines through the analysis, interpretation, and communication of complex ideas (Collett et al. 2024; Geisler 1994).

Globally, novice scholars need academic literacies to access disciplinary epistemologies, a phenomenon affecting both first- and additional-medium speakers. In Sweden, Svensson (2022) discovered that students value study workshops, teachers' feedback, and literacy practices that support epistemological access. In South Africa, where English predominates as the medium of instruction, and the majority of students are first-generation entrants into universities, it is agreed that students must master new methods of knowing,

understanding, interpreting, and organizing knowledge (Merisi and Mqgwashu 2022). To be academically literate in universities, therefore, involves more than the ability to read and write. It requires the ability to navigate and adapt to various disciplinary conventions and genres, reflecting an understanding that academic literacy is inherently contextual and shaped by social practices (Lea and Street 1998). Additionally, academic literacy requires the ability to engage critically with texts, employing strategies that allow for the evaluation and synthesis of complex information, a skill emphasized in disciplinary literacy frameworks (Shanahan and Shanahan 2012).

Multimodal literacies are increasingly recognized as essential, enabling learners to interpret and create meaning across various modes, including visual and digital formats, which are vital in contemporary academic disciplines (Cope and Kalantzis 2000). Multimodal literacies enable teachers to create spaces where students can negotiate and exert their socio-cultural agency while reconciling prior knowledge with new disciplinary expectations, a process supported by the academic literacies model (Lillis and Scott 2007; Lea and Street 2006). As is evident, the development of academic literacy is deeply intertwined with identity, as learners bring diverse cultural, linguistic, and socio-economic backgrounds to educational settings, shaping how they engage with and interpret academic practices. Identities influence the ways students make sense of disciplinary norms, with academic literacies acting as spaces where learners negotiate their personal histories and social realities within institutional frameworks (Lea and Street 1998). This negotiation is particularly evident in the process of adapting to disciplinary environments, where students must reconcile their existing literacies with the expectations of their academic communities, often re-defining their self-perceptions in the process (Lillis and Scott 2007).

The reliance on technical, neutral models of literacy in educational settings, in contrast, actively suppresses identities and cultural expressions, reducing literacy to a set of decontextualized, universal skills that ignore the lived realities of diverse learners. Such approaches, often focused on grammar, spelling, and standardized assessments, assume that literacy can be taught in a culturally and disciplinarily isolated environment, thereby marginalizing Indigenous African students whose identities and experiences do not align with dominant, Eurocentric norms (Street 1984). Moreover, the push for measurable outcomes in literacy, such as high stakes testing, often prioritizes conformity over creativity, discouraging students from drawing on their unique cultural linguistic heritages or cultural narratives (Shanahan and Shanahan 2012).

In South Africa, the 2016 #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall protests, at times marked by violence, arose from suppressed students' narratives and marginalized cultural identities. These movements exposed student resistance against perceived institutional racism, Eurocentrism, and colonial legacies (Nyamojah 2017). Nyamojah (2017) argues that activism is a necessary response to this pedagogical and cultural alienation. Within academic literacy development, this activism requires critical engagement with social issues, empowering students to challenge and transform inequitable systems. Wingate (2019) emphasizes that academic literacies encompass not only reading and writing but also the influence of policies and the evolution of institutions.

Despite students' demands for decolonized education since 2016, transformation in academic literacy remains limited. In former Afrikaans-medium institutions, students often encounter monolingual proficiency tests (e.g., ICELDA) that adhere to neutral, technical standards, neglecting African identities and knowledge systems, hindering access to disciplinary knowledge. Furthermore, the restriction of these tests to pencil- and-paper-formats in the digital age exacerbates these constraints, failing to adequately assess students' 21st century skills, hindering their academic and professional development. Furthermore, the restriction of these tests to pencil-and-paper formats in the digital age exacerbates these

limitations. As such, the imposition of Western writing models in academic literacy units by Black and light scholars erases local literacies and marginalizes indigenous and cultural modes of expression. ICELDA (2025) literacy tests continue this erasure by prioritizing Western literacy standards, raising significant concerns for social justice and equity in education. This restriction also undermines the importance of multimodality and multi-literacies, which are central to the educational identities of Ma'at in ancient Kemet and Tewahedo in Ethiopia.

The question arises: How can we move beyond the colonial and apartheid manipulation of technical and neutral skill models? The #RhodesMustFall movement highlighted the inevitability of students' rejection of powerful knowledge systems. Technical and neutral skill models can also be targeted if identified as oppressive in the future. Moreover, high attrition rates among Black, African students suggest ongoing alienation and cultural dislocation in higher education. Fortunately, case studies demonstrate the potential of pedagogic practices that activate academic literacies as inclusive, cultural tools, which preserve African identities. One of the compelling examples of the integration of African identities and cultural heritage with academic literacy can be found in the pre-colonial era. Contrary to the pervasive myth that Africa's knowledge systems were solely oral, the continent boasts some of the world's oldest traditions of writing, visual, spatial, and embodied literacies. These rich and diverse literacies were not only tools for communication but also vital for preserving cultural identities, transmitting essential knowledge, and fostering community cohesion.

Pre-colonial academic literacies in Africa fulfilled multiple systemic functions while being deeply rooted in the epistemologies (knowledge systems) and ontologies (constructs of reality) of cultural communities. For instance, in ancient Kemet—modern Egypt—hieroglyphics, dating back to 3200 B.C., reflected Ma'at epistemology (Nicolaidis and Steyn 2023). In Ethiopia, the Tewahedo epistemology contributed to the development of Sabaeen and Ge'ez scripts (Mulualem et al. 2022). In West Africa, the Nsibidi script originated within Ekpe cultural traditions, while the Ajami script was used by the Hausa, Fulani, Wolof, and other groups in the same region (Akpan 2024; Ngom 2010). These scripts exemplify the ways in which Africa's epistemologies contributed to education, the preservation of communal identities, and culture.

In ancient Kemet, one of the first sites of writing, the interplay of literacy, culture, and identity is vividly illustrated. The Kemet term for writing “mdw. w-ntr”—meaning sacred or God's words—is the root of the Greek word, hieroglyph. According to Regulski (2015), writing facilitated record keeping, calendar creation, crop rotation and the scheduling of planting and harvesting. As early as 3200 B.C., mdw, w-ntr was integral to the physical and metaphysical activities of pre-colonial African societies. This rich history contrasts sharply with colonial propaganda, distributed by Global North media, missionaries, traders, and politicians, who depicted African identities as lacking intellectuality, and the capacities to be producers of humanity's original written texts.

Ma'at, the ancient Kemetian epistemology embodying truth, balance, and cosmic order, was deeply integrated into educational practices, shaping both knowledge and identities. In Kemet, education was not only about acquiring information but also about cultivating moral and ethical identities aligned with Ma'at. Students were taught to uphold justice and harmony, which became core aspects of their communal and personal epistemes. This integration ensured that education fostered not only intellectual growth but also the development of character and social responsibility. Temples, also known as pyramids, which served as educational centers, emphasized Ma'at in their teaching, ensuring that future leaders and scribes identified strongly with these precepts. This integrated approach to education helped maintain social order and shared identity in ancient Kemet.

In contrast, colonial writers significantly shaped perceptions of colonized Africans by portraying them through a Eurocentric lens, often emphasizing perceptions of Indigenous communities as 'exotic' and 'savage' in nature. [Smith \(2012\)](#) asserts that coloniality continues to harm, malign, and constantly reinvent itself. As a result, Indigenous scholars have had to confront, understand, and develop a shared discourse for counteracting the history, sociology, psychology, and politics of colonialism and imperialism ([Smith 2012](#)). Colonial representations of Africans were influenced by writers' positionalities, rooted in the power dynamics of colonialism, leading to biased and distorted depictions. These portrayals reinforced stereotypes of indigenous identities and justified colonial domination by depicting Africans as 'inferior' and in need of 'civilization.' The politics of representation have thus played a crucial role in entrenching stereotypes of African identities, which have had lasting impacts on post-colonial societies. Scholars like Edward [Said \(1978\)](#) and Homi [Bhabha \(1994\)](#) have critically examined these dynamics, highlighting the need to deconstruct and challenge these entrenched narratives and the accompanying servile identities they produced among conquered communities.

The simultaneity of systemic writing and social stratification in Kemet exemplifies how literacy, far from being a neutral skill, operates as a social practice embedded in specific cultural and political contexts. Hieroglyphics, for instance, not only facilitated agricultural management and theological documentation but also symbolized the authority of the ruling class, consolidating their control over resources and knowledge. [Regulski \(2015\)](#) argues that the craft of *mdw. w-ntr* was preserved for a small, elite group of priests, scribes, and administrators, all working near the monarchs. This is aligned with the academic literacy model, which views literacy as a means of negotiating power within institutional frameworks ([Lea and Street 2006](#)). Furthermore, the emergence of multiliteracies in Kemet, including *mdw. w-ntr* and diverse visual and spatial modes (see [Cope and Kalantzis 2015](#)), underscore interactions between literacies and the socio-economic, and political complexities of their time.

The maintenance of writing, as well as other power literacies in ancient Kemet, including architectural and agricultural mediums by an elite cluster of Africans, is significant to the analysis of identity in pre-colonial societies. There is a corresponding relationship between societal stratification and access to powerful literacies. Access to writing and other powerful literacies in ancient Kemet was closely tied to the societal roles that reinforced the status quo, the ruling class's philosophies, and identities aligned with positions near the monarch. In contrast, the masses of Kemet lacked access to these literacies and associated technologies, developing more subservient identities, shaped and subjected to the writings and ideologies of the elite. In this context, literacy, far from being a neutral technology, is inherently tied to the socio-political and economic dynamics in educational and broader societal contexts ([Lea and Street 1998](#)).

Africa offers compelling examples of the interplay between academic literacies and identities. [Eybers \(2024\)](#) highlights how the academic literacies of Kemet, shaped by hierarchical relationships between monarchs, priests, scribes, and merchants, produced epistemologies that continue to shape identities, whether in scholarship or governance. For instance, the scribes' control over knowledge production and record keeping entrenched their identity and ideologies within the power structure, mirroring how literacy often privileges elite groups. Crucially, this reinforces the argument that academic literacies, both past and present, have seldom been the domain of the broader populace, instead serving as instruments to consolidate power among societal elites ([Lea and Street 2006](#)).

Positioning Identities in Disciplinary Frameworks

Throughout history, from pre-colonial to colonial times, literacies have shaped identities by structuring social relationships, hierarchies, access to resources, and societal roles (Barton and Hamilton 1998). In the Old Kingdom of ancient Kemet (3200 B.C.), Regulski (2015) highlights that writing, controlled by approximately 1% of the population—primarily male scribes—served to reinforce the identities of social elites. Her findings indicate that some of the earliest written scripts were related to administration and economic organization, suggesting that merchants played a significant role in the development of early texts. Writing in ancient Kemet was not only focused on commerce. Regulski (2015) observes that Kemetian writing emerged within a social order deeply intertwined with sacred power and royal rituals. This context positioned writing as central to constructing and perpetuating the identities of rulers, embedding them in national ontologies. The identities of these rulers, framed by concepts such as divine kinship, became integral to societal cohesion and the ideological foundations of governance.

Pharaohs were considered living gods. Karenga (2006, p. 216) reasons that, within Ma'at epistemology, humans are the images of God, expressed as "snnw ntr". This divine identity established the pharaoh as the intermediary between the gods and the people, responsible for maintaining Ma'at, the cosmic order and balance (Karenga 2006). Additionally, the pharaoh's identity was central to maintaining the political and social hierarchy, legitimizing their absolute power, and helping maintain social order. Karenga (2006) reasons that the human aspects of pharaohs were equally important to Ma'at epistemology. Pharaohs were seen as preservers of culture and historical knowledge, with their achievements recorded in inscriptions and monuments. This recognition of their human identities was essential in understanding their role within the framework of Ma'at (Karenga 2006).

Drawing on Gee's (2015) Discourse theory, the identity of the pharaoh can be understood as 'Big D' Discourse, which, in ancient Kemet, encompassed language, action, interactions, beliefs, and values that define a social role. The pharaoh's identity was constructed and reinforced through rituals, writing, and architecture, which communicated their divine and political authority to the people. Similarly, in the disciplines of higher education, Discourses shaped the way that the scholars understand their own identities in relation to the authority, generating varying senses of social cohesion and collective identity. By participating in disciplines' rituals and acknowledging authority figures' status, as in ancient Kemet, present-day scholars continue to formulate their pedagogic philosophies within the frameworks of culture and authority.

7. Results

The findings on the identities of pharaohs in ancient Kemet offer valuable insights into how identity is constructed, reinforced, and transmitted lessons that resonate with academic literacy development in higher education. The pharaoh's divine identities, symbolized through monumental inscriptions and sacred rituals, positioned them as intermediaries who embodied the collective identity of their people while attempting to maintain cosmic balance (Ma'at). Similarly, academic disciplines function as cultural communities, shaping the ways that students construct new identities, meanings, while learning from senior instructors (Gee 2015; Barton and Hamilton 1998). These parallel processes highlight the role of authoritative figures and disciplinary literacies in fostering a sense of belonging, alienation, and identity within communities.

The pharaoh's role as a cultural and identity preserver, enacted through inscriptions and architectural literacies, mirrors how teachers in higher education shape disciplinary identities through the instruction of specific conventions, genres, and epistemologies. For instance, educators foster disciplinary identities by requiring students to engage with the

specialized languages, genres, and epistemologies of fields such as history or psychology. In this context, [Gee \(2015\)](#) reasons that Discourses are ways of being in the world. They are forms of life that integrate words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, and social identities ([Gee 2015](#)). This is tied closely to [Shanahan and Shanahan's \(2012\)](#) notion of disciplinary literacy, which highlights how the mastery of discipline-specific strategies enables students to participate in and acquire context-specific Discourses ([Gee 2015](#)).

In Ethiopia, as with Ma'at in Kemet, Tewahedo principles of unity and oneness were intricately woven into educational practices, shaping both communal knowledge and identities. From the outset, education focused not only on imparting information but also on instilling values of unity, faith, and community, which became integral to students' identities. This approach ensured that education promoted intellectual growth alongside character and social responsibility. Sacred sites, including Ethiopian pyramids, like those of Kemet, served as educational centers, emphasizing Tewahedo, ensuring future leaders and scholars were strongly associated with these principles. Multimodality and multiliteracies, such as written scripts, singing, oral recitation, and architecture, were central in connecting Tewahedo and Ma'at to educational practices. Obelisks are examples of Tewahedo spatial literacies.

The Tewahedo tradition in Ethiopia, much like the epistemological practices of ancient Kemet, integrates textual, visual, performative, and spatial literacies, as conceptualized in the framework of [Cope and Kalantzis \(2000\)](#). This multifaceted approach to the literacy tradition is exemplified in the Qeddase liturgical ceremony, where the communal recitation and interpretation of ancient texts reinforced the communal and cultural identities of various Ethiopian communities. Through these multiliteracies, Tewahedo elders have maintained a keen sense of identity and continuity, mirroring the role of academic literacies in consolidating power and identity among influential priests and scribes affiliated to the monarchs. Ethiopia's monarchical history is reflected in the Solomonic Order, which continues to be an integral part of and shapes the national identity of Ethiopia.

Central to liturgical Qeddase events is the practice of "tergwame," a Ge'ez term meaning "exegesis" or the critical interpretation of texts ([Cowley 1983](#)). Within Qeddase events, critical reading, orature, listening, and analytical engagement converge with visual symbols and architectural settings, fostering communal knowledge, or "tergwame". Such practices underscore the activities of communal identities and multiliteracies in Indigenous Knowledge Systems, resonating with the ideological model that situates literacies in socially embedded practices ([Street 1984](#); [Cope and Kalantzis 2000](#); [Ayittey 2006](#)). By leveraging tergwame as a critical academic literacy in disciplines, educators demonstrate what [Baptiste and Henderson \(2021, p. i\)](#) describe as "the important ways in which Indigenous Knowledges can be respectfully approached from various disciplinary foundations". That is, through teaching, learning, and assessment, educators can highlight differences between Indigenous, Afrocentric, and Eurocentric approaches to cultivating disciplinary identities and literacies.

The cases of ancient Kemet and pre-colonial Ethiopia illuminate how literacy and identity are deeply embedded within cultural and ideological frameworks. [Gee's \(2015\)](#) concept of Discourse reveals how societal roles and knowledge systems, such as Ma'at in Kemet and Tewahedo in Ethiopia, are constructed and perpetuated through languages, multiliteracies, and material culture. These epistemologies are not neutral but reflect [Street's \(1984\)](#) ideological model of literacy, which emphasizes how literacies are shaped by and reinforce dominant cultural values and power dynamics. The sacred ideologies of Ma'at and Tewahedo shaped the development of their respective writing systems, Ge'ez and hieroglyphics, which in turn served as tools for maintaining social hierarchies and defining collective identities.

The examples of Kemet and Tewahedo highlight the role of literacy as a cultural practice, aligning with [Lea and Street's \(1998\)](#) academic literacies model that views literacy not just as technologies, but as cultural tools situated within broader institutional and disciplinary contexts. In both Kemet and Ethiopia, cultural systems were integral to the production of sacred texts, architectural marvels, and liturgical practices, further embedding literacies into everyday life. These practices show how literacies were mediums for constructing and sustaining the identities of rulers, religious leaders, scribes, and broader societal groups, reinforcing a collective sense of belonging and continuity. Such insights affirm the intertwined relationship between literacies, cultures, and identity formation across historical and contemporary contexts.

The literature emphasizes that, in Africa's earliest disciplinary communities, the literature—written, read, performed, and cognitive—develops within sociocultural Discourses ([Boldyrev and Dubrovskaya 2016](#); [Gee 2015](#)). To reiterate, Discourse integrates identities, languages, and multiliteracies. Historical examples, such as the Ma'at and Tewahedo Discourses of Kemet and Ethiopia, illustrate how sociocultural systems shaped Africa's liturgical ceremonies, interpretive methods (exegesis), architectural achievements, and administrative traditions. Additionally, contemporary practices show that sociocultural systems—namely, culture, identity, Indigenous languages, and disciplinarity, continue to promote inclusive education. Building on the African traditions of liturgy, exegesis, multiliteracies, and textual production, as exemplified by Ma'at and Tewahedo, it is important to consider contemporary events, interpretative methods, diverse communicative practices, and the texts that teachers and students engage in higher education (see [Figure 1](#)). Through this analysis, educators can coherently re-shape the ways that they ensure cohesion between students' identities, academic literacy events, and practices.

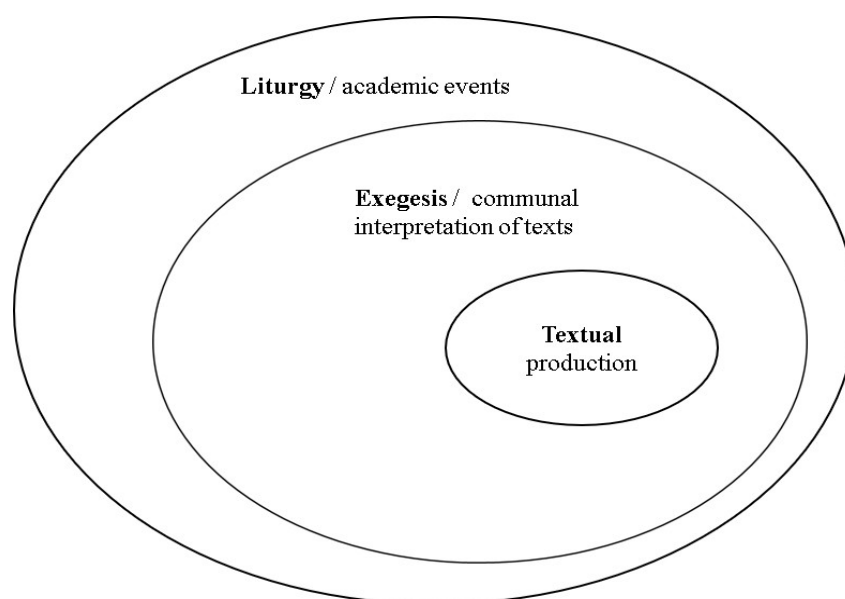


Figure 1. Tewahedo pedagogical model for literacy development.

Study groups in higher education operate as integral social and academic structures, functioning as literacy events that embody social practices, consistent with [Lea and Street's \(2006\)](#) academic literacy model. Within the framework of this article, study groups, composed of senior instructors and younger apprentices (see [Ayittey 2006](#)), mirror the purposes of liturgical and exegetical literacies of Ma'at and Tewahedo, where communal practices such as recitation and textual interpretation facilitate epistemic engagement. [Banda \(2007\)](#) observes that Xhosa-speaking students often struggle with the incomprehensibility and perceived irrelevance of course texts, a challenge exacerbated by language and epistemic

divides. To bridge these gaps, study groups serve as collaborative spaces where students navigate disciplinary content and foster shared understanding (Banda 2007). The outcomes of ancient study groups, which resonate with present-day education, were to cultivate the identities of younger community members, shaping them into skilled knowledge contributors essential for the survival and prosperity of their societies.

Banda (2007) highlights that study groups provide both psychological and pedagogical benefits by allowing students to engage as active participants in the learning–teaching process outside formal academic structures. Within these collaborative spaces, reflective of indigenous pedagogies, students reported using the sessions to better understand course material, clarify uncertainties, prepare for exams, and ultimately succeed in their academic pursuits (Banda 2007). Furthermore, Banda notes that, while exam settings often create experiences of isolation, study groups, in the tradition of Ubuntu and communal learning (see Ayittey 2006), counteract this by fostering social environments that encourage mutual reassurance and shared learning. Through the interpretation of difficult texts and collaborative knowledge construction, these groups align with the academic literacies model, which views literacy as a socially situated practice shaped by dialogue and interaction (Lea and Street 2006).

The collaborative learning practices inherent in Ma’at and Tewahedo traditions align with contemporary theories of academic literacy as a social practice, as articulated by Street (1984) and Lea and Street (1998). These traditions, characterized by communal liturgical events and exegetical interpretations, emphasize the co-construction of knowledge and the reinforcement of collective identity. Students’ leveraging of such indigenous modes of learning within contemporary educational contexts highlights the dual roles that they fulfill as social and pedagogical spaces. This approach resonates with Gee’s (2015) concept of Discourse, wherein shared language and practices form a community of learners. Study groups thus serve as sites of identity formation, enabling participants to engage in collaborative meaning making (Banda 2007). Banda (2007) claims that study groups operate as sites for interpreting difficult texts and navigating academic demands, mirroring the supportive environments cultivated by indigenous pedagogies, such as Ma’at and Tewahedo. These parallels suggest that leveraging Indigenous, communal pedagogy not only enriches academic literacies but also provides culturally affirming frameworks for disciplinary identity formation and knowledge sharing.

The risks of epistemic misalignment in unguided study groups, as noted by Banda, also resonate with the challenges of academic literacies in higher education. In particular, L1 isiXhosa speaking students often struggle with the demands of English as the academic medium, which can complicate interpretation in peer-led exegesis (Banda 2007). Lea and Street’s (1998) academic literacies model emphasizes that such issues are not merely linguistic and technical but reflect deeper tensions between students’ developing identities and disciplinary expectations. In this context, unstructured study group interactions may inadvertently prioritize peer interpretations rooted in diverse cultural frames, leading to potential divergence from lecturers’ conceptual and theoretical expectations. By recognizing the significance of students’ cultural backgrounds and epistemologies, we can create learning environments that not only support the development of academic literacies but also nurture students’ sense of identity and belonging within disciplinary knowledge systems.

Banda’s investigation into study groups is significant for academic literacy developers aiming to re-center students’ cultural identities into the curriculum and classroom for several reasons. It affirms that communal interpretation, as practiced within Indigenous Knowledge Systems such as Ma’at and Tewahedo, retains value in contemporary, disciplinary contexts, offering spaces of multilingual intellectual inquiry and reassurance for students as they cultivate disciplinary identities. Yet, deeper epistemological issues must be

addressed to ensure that out-of-class study groups align with course outcomes and the conceptual and theoretical aims of instructors. Furthermore, [Banda's \(2007\)](#) research highlights the importance of acknowledging the diverse knowledge systems that students bring to the learning process, recognizing that these mediums are not merely “alternative” but hold inherent value and can enrich the learning experience of all students. By understanding and leveraging African epistemologies, educators can create more inclusive and culturally responsive teaching, learning, and assessment practices that support the development of academic literacies.

[Banda \(2007\)](#) highlights that students' multilingual knowledge systems, such as those of L1 Xhosa speakers, may introduce alternative frames of understanding that diverge from instructors' pedagogical intentions, particularly when combined with limited access to course guidance. This aligns with [Lea and Street's \(1998\)](#) academic literacies model, which recognizes tensions between students' linguistic and cultural identities and institutional expectations, emphasizing the need for structured initiatives to reconcile these divergent epistemological approaches and support for effective assessment preparation. By drawing on the epistemological diversity inherent in Indigenous Knowledge Systems, educators can design inclusive assessment practices that validate and integrate students' cultural frames of reference. This approach not only bridges linguistic divides but also fosters environments where diverse identities, heritages, and ways of knowing are valued and mobilized to enrich disciplinary discourses.

In the contemporary age, educators and researchers increasingly recognize the importance of integrating Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKSs) in academic frameworks, emphasizing the communal and interpretive learning practices that underpin these systems. Such approaches align with calls for contextual and disciplinary literacies ([Eybers 2023](#)). Scholars like [Çali et al. \(2024\)](#) argue for a vital link between students' engagement—behavioral, cognitive, emotional—and their academic success, aligning with findings on disciplinary literacies' developmental impact on learning outcomes ([Shanahan and Shanahan 2012](#)). Therefore, it is advantageous for African educators to utilize the knowledge systems familiar to students within disciplinary settings. Such transformations in pedagogy have the potential to dismantle hierarchical epistemologies and nurture inclusive disciplinary cultures. Moreover, by aligning academic literacies with IKSs, educators can foster a sense of cultural ownership and pride, encouraging students to contribute their unique perspectives to disciplinary discourses.

[Nomlomo and Sosibo \(2016\)](#) implemented a literacy curriculum incorporating isiXhosa and isiZulu folktales and songs, emphasizing the role of cultural narratives in affirming students' identities. This approach fostered contextualized learning within Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKSs), offering cultural authenticity and interactive engagement that mirrored African ancestral traditions of community-orientated and multimodal education. They argue that such traditions not only enhance academic literacy but also support the development of students' identities by validating their cultural heritage and way of knowing, aligning with the view of literacy as a socially situated practice ([Street 1984; Lea and Street 1998](#)). By embedding African worldviews into the curriculum, this method nurtures empathy, appreciation, and the recognition of alternative literacies, including those practiced in local communities, empowering students to see their identities as integral to disciplinary growth ([Nomlomo and Sosibo 2016](#)). This approach aligns with the multiliteracies framework, which emphasizes the merit of incorporating diverse cultural and communicative practices to enrich learning and affirm students' identities ([Cope and Kalantzis 2015](#)). By engaging with IKSs, students not only enhance their academic literacy but also immerse themselves in a multiliteracies pedagogy that honors and weaves together African cultural narratives for deeper meaning making ([Cope and Kalantzis 2000](#)).

8. Discussion

These findings underscore the transformative relevance of integrating Indigenous Knowledge Systems, including identities, into the teaching, learning, and assessment of academic literacy. The Ma'at tradition of ancient Kemet and the Tewahedo tradition of Ethiopia exemplify how literacy practices are deeply embedded within cultural and ideological contexts, aligning with the academic literacies model recognition of communication in universities as socially situated and contested (Lea and Street 1998). Embedding academic literacy instruction within indigenous cultural frameworks enables higher education practitioners to acknowledge and address the alienation perpetuated by Eurocentric literacy models, such as technical and neutral constructs. This inclusive approach may foster a sense of belonging, validating African students' identities, and communal knowledge systems while enhancing their engagement and academic success.

This study advances the academic literacies model (Lea and Street 1998) by incorporating Afrocentric perspectives, which situate literacy as inherently cultural and social. The traditions of Ma'at and Tewahedo serve as vivid illustrations of Cope and Kalantzis's (2000, 2015) multiliteracies framework, highlighting the interplay of diverse communicative modes and cultural narratives in identity formation. These insights offer a critical counter-narrative to dominant technical approaches, underscoring the value of co-designing curricula with Indigenous communities. Such practices not only enhance cultural relevance but also address the institutional need for equitable and inclusive pedagogy. This research explores how academic literacy can integrate indigenous identities to foster inclusive educational environments. The findings demonstrate that aligning academic literacies with African epistemologies enhances student engagement while addressing systemic inequities. By embedding Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKSs) within disciplinary frameworks, universities can empower students to navigate powerful Discourses (Gee 2015) without sacrificing their cultural identities, thereby advancing educational equity.

While the historical case studies of Ma'at and Tewahedo provide a robust foundation for rethinking academic literacy, they may not fully address the complexities of contemporary, hybrid students' identities in higher education. Moreover, the systemic implementation of Afrocentric models necessitates significant institutional commitment and resources, posing practical challenges. Future research should explore the longitudinal impact of such initiatives, considering their scalability across diverse educational contexts. By proposing strategies for embedding Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKSs), such as African languages and communal modes of textual interpretation, this research contributes practical solutions to the broader struggle for epistemic inclusivity and cultural relevance in African higher education.

Academic literacy developers and educators can adapt strategies such as integrating Indigenous languages and cultural narratives into instruction, resonating with the contextualized learning approaches highlighted by Cope and Kalantzis (2000). Redesigning assessments to prioritize critical and creative engagement over technical precision aligns with the principles of multiliteracies, supporting diverse epistemologies. Institutional support, including faculty training and community collaboration, is vital to the success of these initiatives.

9. Conclusions

This study highlights the transformative role of integrating African epistemologies into academic literacy practices, positioning African identities and heritage as central to creating inclusive and culturally responsive education. The traditions of Ma'at and Tewahedo exemplify how embedding African cultural and ideological frameworks within literacy education challenges the dominance of Eurocentric paradigms. This approach fosters a

sense of belonging and engagement among African students by affirming their cultural identities and validating their lived experiences, thereby preserving their rich histories.

Re-envisioning higher education through the lens of African identities and heritages requires curricula that are co-designed with local African communities, ensuring that they reflect the continent's rich and diverse knowledge systems. Educators must be equipped to adopt pedagogies that emphasize African cultural narratives, languages, and epistemologies, enabling students to navigate disciplinary contexts while maintaining strong connections to their roots. These strategies bridge the gap between institutional frameworks and the lived realities of African students, fostering environments where critical thinking and creativity thrive, where indigenous identities are integrated, and local communities' heritages are celebrated.

Despite students' demands for transformed education, progress in academic literacy remains limited in South Africa. In former Afrikaans-medium universities, multilingual students often encounter monolingual proficiency tests (e.g., ICELDA) that adhere to colonial, technical standards of literacy. As a result, the imposition of Western literacy standards in African academic literacy units has historically erased local literacies and marginalized Indigenous knowledge systems and cultural expressions. ICELDA literacy tests continue this erasure, also known as Epistemicide, raising significant concerns for social justice and equity in post-apartheid universities. This restriction also undermines the importance of multimodality and multiliteracies, which are central to the philosophies of Ma'at in Kemet and Tewahedo in Ethiopia.

It is recommended that future research prioritize longitudinal studies that evaluate the impact of centering African identities in academic literacy instruction on student success, retention, and disciplinary integration. Furthermore, addressing institutional resistance to African-centered paradigms is essential for systemic transformation and ensuring that African identities are not marginalized but celebrated as integral to disciplines. By embracing African identities and heritages as core elements of academic literacy, this work advocates for a transformative shift in higher education. Such an approach not only empowers African students but also honors and revitalizes the continent's intellectual and cultural legacies, creating new pathways to equitable and culturally affirming academic futures.

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