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Navigating Marginalisation: A French Lecturer's Journey in Kenyan Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents a personal reflection on my trajectory as a French lecturer in Kenya, examining how marginalisation shapes lived experiences within Intercultural Communication Education and Research (ICER). Drawing on Dervin (2023), Holliday (2011), and R'boul (2023), I investigate the intersection of power imbalances, epistemic hierarchies, and linguistic dominance in academic spaces. Using Riordan's (2024) cultural capital theory alongside critical interculturality frameworks, I explore how geographical location, linguistic identity, and professional positioning interact within systems dominated by Western knowledge production. Through auto-ethnographic reflection combined with critical discourse analysis of institutional policies and peer review practices, I examine tensions between resistance and conformity in navigating exclusionary structures. Central to this inquiry is the "intercultural maverick" – do marginalised scholars actively challenge dominant systems, or do they strategically conform to survive within them? This study argues that ICER must broaden its multilingual scope to challenge English dominance, creating space for genuine linguistic and epistemic plurality. Employing Dervin's (2022) principle of "criticality of criticality," I resist framing marginalised scholars' resilience as triumph over obstacles. Instead, I interrogate the structural barriers that persist despite reform rhetoric, acknowledging that meaningful change requires institutional dismantling, not symbolic gestures. Ultimately, this chapter advocates for fundamental shifts in how ICER approaches knowledge production, urging movement toward authentic inclusivity that values historically sidelined voices not as supplementary contributions but as central to reshaping the field.

KEYWORDS: Marginalisation, Intercultural Mavericks, Critical Interculturality, Linguistic Identity, Decolonisation, Epistemic Diversity, Power Asymmetries, Academic Exclusion, Criticality of Criticality

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background: ICER and the Problem of Western-Centric Knowledge

Intercultural Communication Education and Research has long operated within frameworks that privilege Western perspectives while marginalising voices emerging from non-Western contexts. The field's foundational theories, research methodologies, and publication standards have been shaped by Anglophone academic traditions, creating systematic exclusions that many scholars only gradually recognize as structural rather than individual failures.

Fred Dervin (2023) challenges idealised notions of intercultural dialogue, exposing how power asymmetries embed themselves within ostensibly inclusive academic spaces. Adrian Holliday (2011) documents the phenomenon of "native-speakerism", whereby scholars whose first language is not English face persistent delegitimisation, regardless of their expertise. Hamza R'boul (2023), writing from a decolonial perspective, argues that genuine epistemic diversity requires dismantling – not merely reforming – dominant knowledge structures.

What unites these scholars is a refusal to treat marginalisation as an accidental by-product of academic development. Rather, they identify it as foundational to how ICER maintains its boundaries, determines whose work counts as scholarship, and constructs hierarchies of knowledge legitimacy.

1.2 Self-Positioning: Who I Am and Why This Matters

As a French lecturer in Kenya, I navigate daily the contradictions entrenched within ICER. I teach in a context where English functions as the primary medium of instruction, research dissemination, and institutional evaluation. My discipline – French language and literature – occupies a peripheral position within a system that overwhelmingly prioritizes Anglophone scholarship and STEM fields.

This positioning is not unique. Many scholars work at similar intersections: teaching non-English languages, conducting research outside dominant frameworks, attempting to build careers in fields deemed "less economically viable" than engineering or business. We are what I call "uncelebrated mavericks" – scholars whose intellectual work challenges dominant paradigms but whose contributions remain structurally undervalued.

The term "maverick" requires clarification. I do not use it romantically. Being a maverick in academia means:

- Publishing work that fits awkwardly within dominant frameworks
- Constantly justifying research choices to gatekeepers trained in Western methodologies
- Negotiating between intellectual integrity and institutional survival
- Accepting that challenging structures often comes at professional cost

1.3 The Intercultural Maverick: A Productive Contradiction

The "intercultural maverick" is not simply a marginalised person. Marginalisation alone does not create a maverick. Rather, mavericks are those whose scholarly work actively interrogates dominant structures, often at considerable personal and professional expense.

This raises difficult questions: Do I resist ICER's constraints, or have I accommodated myself to them? Am I contributing to transformation, or reproducing the very hierarchies I critique? Do I strategically embed decolonial perspectives within frameworks deemed "academically acceptable", or does this constitute intellectual compromise?
These are not rhetorical questions. They constitute ongoing tensions in my daily work.

1.4 Purpose and Scope

This chapter examines the mechanisms through which marginalisation operates within Kenyan higher education, using my experience as an entry point into broader questions about knowledge legitimacy, linguistic hierarchies, and epistemic power. The analysis is grounded in Kenya, but speaks to patterns observable across the Global South – postcolonial contexts where English dominance, funding inequities, and Western-centric curricula persist despite institutional rhetoric around decolonisation.

The chapter is organised as follows: Section 2 contextualises Kenya's higher education landscape. Section 3 establishes the theoretical framework. Section 4 details the methodology. Sections 5 and 6 present findings and analysis. The conclusion considers implications for ICER's future.

2. Context and Background

2.1 Higher Education in Kenya: Colonial Legacy and Ongoing Constraints

Kenya's higher education system carries the imprint of British colonialism. English was established as the language of instruction during the colonial period and has remained dominant through independence and into the present. This is not neutral infrastructure – it shapes which languages are valued, which knowledge traditions are legitimised, and whose contributions are deemed scholarly

The Kenyan government's 2023 shift to student-centred funding introduced significant pressures on universities. Rather than easing financial strain, the model has deepened inequalities. Universities now compete for student enrolments, leading many to prioritise programmes perceived as economically viable: engineering, business, nursing, accounting. Departments in the humanities, including foreign language studies, face chronic underfunding.

This restructuring reflects global patterns wherein neoliberal economics determines academic priorities. Research that generates immediate economic returns receives investment. Teaching and research in fields like French studies, linguistics, and intercultural communication – fields that facilitate critical thinking but not directly profitable innovation – are systematically defunded.

2.2 My Academic Journey

My academic trajectory has crossed multiple contexts: university education in France, postgraduate work in South Africa, and now employment in Kenya. Each context revealed different approaches to knowledge production, institutional structure, and the recognition of scholarly contribution.

In France, the university system emphasises philosophical inquiry, linguistic analysis, and critical engagement with Western thought. Yet despite France's colonial history and ongoing relationships with African nations, African epistemologies remain marginal within mainstream French academic discourse. African scholars in France often report feeling their work is welcomed primarily when it focuses on European interpretations of Africa rather than African intellectual traditions.

South Africa's post-apartheid university system has made deliberate institutional investments in decolonisation. Language policies have been revised to recognise African languages alongside English. Curriculum committees have moved to integrate indigenous knowledge systems. Research ethics processes now explicitly consider how colonialism has shaped academic norms. This does not mean South African universities have achieved decolonisation – they face ongoing resistance, resource constraints, and the persistence of Anglophone dominance. But the institutional commitment is visible and consequential.

Kenya presents yet another context. The system is administratively efficient and highly structured. Yet it remains firmly Anglophone. Unlike South Africa, systematic decolonial curriculum reform is rare. Non-English disciplines struggle to secure resources, build research collaborations, and establish scholarly visibility. French studies exists in institutional margins.

By bringing these experiences into dialogue, I aim to illuminate not just my individual constraints but broader patterns shaping knowledge production across postcolonial contexts.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Critical Interculturality

Dervin (2024) distinguishes critical interculturality from mainstream interculturality scholarship. Mainstream approaches often treat "culture" as stable entities and "intercultural communication" as the neutral meeting of different groups. Critical interculturality, by contrast, insists on interrogating:

- How power shapes intercultural encounters
- Whose perspectives are centred and whose marginalised
- How language and institutional structures advantage some groups over others
- Whether "intercultural competence" serves to smooth over or challenge inequalities

Applied to ICER, critical interculturality means refusing to celebrate "global" academic collaboration if that collaboration reproduces epistemic hierarchies. It means questioning whether diversity initiatives represent genuine change or performative gestures. It demands attention to the quotidian mechanisms through which exclusion operates – hiring practices, publication requirements, funding allocation, evaluation criteria.

3.2 Epistemic Diversity and Decolonisation

R'boul (2023) argues that epistemic diversity is not an additive project – integrating non-Western perspectives into existing frameworks. Rather, decolonisation requires challenging the very foundations of knowledge legitimacy. Which methodologies count as "rigorous"? Whose ways of knowing are considered scholarly? How have Western epistemologies become naturalised as universal?

Sefa Dei (2024) emphasises that decolonisation is ongoing work, not a destination. It requires continuous interrogation of how colonialism embedded itself not just in curriculum content but in institutional structures, hiring processes, and intellectual norms.

For ICER specifically, this means:

- Recognising that English-language dominance is not neutral but reflects historical power relations
- Questioning why particular theoretical frameworks are considered canonical
- Investigating how peer review systems function as gatekeeping mechanisms
- Creating pathways for scholars working in non-Western intellectual traditions

3.3 Application to ICER in Kenyan Context

These theoretical frameworks illuminate specific features of my institutional context:

Language hierarchies: In Kenyan universities, publishing requirements and research evaluation metrics overwhelmingly favour English. Research in French, even if rigorous and novel, carries professional risk for tenure and promotion. This is not accidental policy; it reflects historical decisions to make English the default language of scholarly legitimacy.

Curriculum structures: Accreditation bodies privilege Western-derived curriculum frameworks. When French studies attempts to integrate African literature or postcolonial theory alongside European canons, questions arise: Is this academically rigorous, or does it dilute standards? The burden falls on non-Western scholarship to justify its place.

Methodological hierarchies: Quantitative research using statistical methods is systematically funded and rewarded. Qualitative research, particularly auto-ethnography and narrative methods, occupies lower status. Yet for scholars examining lived experience of marginalisation, qualitative approaches are epistemologically appropriate. The hierarchies are not neutral—they advantage certain ways of knowing over others.

Knowledge circulation: Research produced in Kenya, particularly in non-English languages or employing non-Western methodologies, circulates primarily within local contexts. It struggles to enter global academic networks. Meanwhile, research produced by scholars from wealthy countries, presented in English, circulates globally and gains citations. This differential circulation reinforces impressions about whose work is significant.

4. Methodology

4.1 Qualitative Approach: Foundation and Rationale

This study employs qualitative methods centring on auto-ethnography and critical discourse analysis. These approaches are not peripheral to academic inquir – they represent rigorous engagement with lived reality and institutional structures.

Auto-ethnography, as articulated by Ellis et al. (2024), involves systematic reflection on personal experience embedded within broader social and institutional contexts. It is not memoir or confessional writing. Rather, it demands that personal narrative be interrogated critically: How does my individual experience reflect broader patterns? Where do my perceptions diverge from documented realities? What institutional structures shape what I observe?

Critical discourse analysis, following Fairclough (2024), examines how language functions to maintain or challenge power relations. In institutional contexts, language is never neutral. Policies use particular terminology that reflects and reinforces particular assumptions. Faculty recruitment documents employ linguistic markers that advantage certain candidates. Accreditation frameworks use language that privileges certain ways of knowing. CDA makes visible these functions of language.

4.2 Data Collection

The study draws on three data sources:

Personal narratives: Over approximately three years, I documented experiences navigating faculty recognition, curriculum development, research funding, and institutional marginalisation. These reflections form the auto-ethnographic base.

Institutional document analysis: I examined university policies, accreditation reports, curriculum frameworks, faculty hiring guidelines, and research funding criteria. These documents reveal structural constraints – what institutions officially expect from faculty, how they evaluate achievement, what they fund or don't fund.

Contextual interviews and conversations: Through informal conversations and semi-structured discussions with colleagues – French educators, intercultural communication scholars, administrators – I gathered comparative perspectives on how marginalisation operates across disciplinary contexts.

4.3 Data Analysis

Analysis proceeded through iterative engagement with auto-ethnographic reflection, institutional documents, and scholarly conversations:

1. **Thematic coding:** I identified recurring patterns related to linguistic hierarchies, funding disparities, and institutional recognition. Rather than using software coding tools, I engaged in manual thematic analysis, maintaining close attention to language and context.

2. **Critical discourse analysis:** I examined how institutional language functions to maintain or challenge hierarchies. For instance, how do recruitment policies linguistically position certain qualifications as central and others as supplementary? What assumptions about «academic rigor» underlie accreditation frameworks?

3. **Reflexive interpretation:** Throughout analysis, I interrogated my own positioning. Where do my perceptions reflect systemic realities versus individual circumstances? How does my own investment in academic legitimacy shape my interpretation? This reflexivity is central to rigorous auto-ethnography.

4.4 Ethical Considerations and Limitations

This work reflects on lived experience within my institutional context. I have sought to identify systemic patterns rather than criticise individuals. Where I reference institutional practices, I focus on documented structures rather than personal grievances.

The work is inherently partial. It reflects one person's experience in one institutional context. Patterns I identify may manifest differently in other settings. The analysis is also inevitably shaped by my positioning – a relatively privileged scholar with access to higher education, published research, and international networks. Many scholars face more severe exclusions than those I document.

5. Findings

5.1 English Dominance and Linguistic Hierarchies

In Kenyan higher education, English functions as the default language of academic legitimacy. This is not neutral. It reflects historical decisions to position English as the language of modernity, development, and international engagement.

What I observed: Faculty hiring processes privilege English proficiency. When recruiting someone to teach French, interview panels ask: "But will this person be able to teach in English"? The implicit assumption is that French language instruction is supplementary to English-medium education. The "real" academic work happens in English.

Research evaluation criteria overwhelmingly favour English-language publications. When I publish in French or in multilingual journals, colleagues perceive it as less prestigious than comparable work in English. This is not my imagination. Metrics systems quantify it: journals with English publications rank higher in impact factors; funding bodies allocate more resources to English-language research platforms.

Consequences:

For scholars in French studies, this creates a bind. We can either:

1. Conduct research in French, risking professional disadvantage when evaluated for tenure and funding, OR
2. Shift to English-language research, which may compromise our intellectual commitments to French language and literature

Many scholars choose option 2. The field loses scholars working in depth within French intellectual traditions because the institutional incentive structure makes such work professionally risky.

5.2 Funding Disparities and Institutional Priorities

The Kenyan government's 2023 funding reforms shifted universities toward a student-centred funding model. Universities now receive per-student allocations. Popular programmes – engineering, nursing, business – attract students and thus funding. Less popular programmes – humanities, foreign languages –face budget crises.

This reflects a global pattern wherein higher education is increasingly treated as workforce development rather than site of intellectual inquiry. Universities are rewarded for producing "employable graduates" in particular sectors. Critical thinking, cultural studies, foreign language expertise – while valuable – are not measured in employment-focused metrics.

Consequences for French studies:

- Faculty lines remain unfilled because universities view additional French instructors as not cost-justified
- Research funding is unavailable for qualitative studies on language, culture, and identity
- Library budgets are cut, limiting access to French-language scholarship
- Students are discouraged from majoring in French because employment prospects are presented as limited

5.3 Academic Publishing and Peer Review

Publishing in ICER journals reveals how peer review functions as gatekeeping mechanism. When I submit research examining marginalisation in Kenyan higher education, reviewers frequently suggest I *"situate the work within established ICER frameworks"*. Translation: *Ensure your argument centres established Western theorists*. If I draw on African scholars, I'm advised to *"supplement with"* Western theorists. The underlying assumption: *African perspectives are interesting but require validation through Western frameworks*.

This is not criticism of my research quality. Papers are often accepted with revisions. Rather, it reflects how discipline reproduces epistemic hierarchies through peer review.

Reviewers also express preference for quantitative data. When I present qualitative findings from auto-ethnographic and interview-based research, questions arise: *"How representative are these findings"*? *"Can you quantify this"*? The implicit message: *qualitative, lived-experience-based research is less rigorous than quantitative studies*.

5.4 Curriculum and Accreditation

Kenyan universities operate within accreditation frameworks established by national bodies. These frameworks privilege certain disciplinary structures and research methodologies. They also embed assumptions about what constitutes "international standards".

"International standards" typically means standards developed in wealthy countries and now positioned as universal. When French studies curriculum is accredited, questions arise: *"Does it align with European standards for French language education"*? African approaches to teaching French – emphasizing postcolonial literature, contextualizing language within African migration and diaspora experiences – are sometimes presented as "non-standard".

6. Criticality of Criticality: Interrogating Claims of Reform

Dervin (2022) introduces the principle of "criticality of criticality", warning against framing academic change as straightforward improvement. Rather, he argues, scholars must interrogate: Who benefits from claimed reforms? What barriers persist despite reform rhetoric? How do institutions absorb reform discourse while maintaining underlying structures?

This principle is not pessimistic. Rather, it demands realism. Academic transformation requires more than policy documents and diversity statements. It requires sustained institutional commitment, resource allocation, and willingness to redistribute power.

6.1 The Gap Between Reform Rhetoric and Structural Reality

Kenyan universities increasingly include decolonisation language in strategic plans and mission statements. Accreditation bodies discuss "inclusive curricula" and "epistemic diversity." Funding agencies encourage "gender and geographic diversity" in research teams.

Yet structural change remains limited. In my institution:

- Decolonisation language appears in documents but is not systematically integrated into curriculum redesign
- "Gender diversity" initiatives focus on recruiting women into existing frameworks rather than questioning those frameworks
- Hiring remains constrained by English-language and Western-credential requirements
- Funding continues to flow toward STEM and market-oriented research

6.2 Barriers to Meaningful Change

Several factors constrain institutional transformation:

Institutional inertia: Universities are conservative institutions. Changing hiring criteria, curriculum frameworks, and evaluation systems requires coordination across multiple stakeholders with divergent interests. Change happens slowly.

Financial dependency: Kenyan universities depend on government funding, international donations, and student fees. This creates vulnerability to external pressure. When international accrediting bodies emphasise «global standards» (typically Western standards), universities feel pressure to conform. Genuine educational autonomy – necessary for decolonisation – requires financial independence many universities lack.

Faculty resistance: Some faculty, trained within Western traditions, perceive decolonial perspectives as politically driven rather than academically rigorous. This is not universal, but it represents a significant source of resistance to curriculum change.

Global hierarchies: African universities are evaluated internationally using metrics developed in wealthy countries. University rankings reward research in English, publications in high-impact (typically Western) journals, and research partnerships with prestigious Western institutions. These evaluation systems, meant to be objective, actually reproduce global inequalities.

6.3 Implications

Understanding these barriers matters because it prevents us from blaming individual scholars or departments for slow change. The barriers are structural. Institutional transformation requires addressing them systematically, not through good intentions but through resource reallocation, policy change, and power redistribution.

7. Discussion: What Marginalisation Means, and What It Requires

7.1 Marginalisation is Structural, Not Individual

An important realization emerging from this work: marginalisation is not primarily about individual discrimination. Certainly, individual bias exists. But more fundamentally, marginalisation is built into institutional structures.

When French studies struggles to hire faculty, it's not because individual administrators dislike the discipline. Rather, funding structures created by government policy, combined with accreditation frameworks emphasizing STEM, combine to make it difficult for universities to justify French faculty lines.

When French-language research circulates less than English-language research, it's not primarily because individual scholars prefer English. Rather, citation networks, publishing platforms, and library subscription models have evolved in ways that privilege English. These structures accumulate and reinforce each other.

Understanding this distinction matters because it reframes solutions. We cannot fix structural marginalisation through individual good intentions or even through awareness-raising. We need policy change, resource reallocation, and institutional restructuring.

7.2 The Cost of Adaptation

As a "maverick" within ICER, I have developed strategies to navigate marginalisation. I publish in both French and English, leveraging different platforms strategically. I implant decolonial perspectives within research frameworks recognizable to gatekeepers. I attend conferences, build networks, seek funding through whatever channels available.

These adaptive strategies allow survival within current structures. But adaptation comes with costs:

- Intellectual energy spent on navigation leaves less energy for original research
- Publishing in languages and venues strategically chosen for visibility rather than intellectual fit
- Self-censoring critical perspectives to maintain institutional credibility
- The ongoing emotional toll of working within systems that don't value your discipline or intellectual tradition

Moreover, individual adaptation does not challenge structural barriers. If I successfully navigate marginalisation through strategic adaptation, the structures remain in place for others coming after me.

7.3 What Transformation Requires

If marginalisation is structural, transformation requires structural intervention:

Decolonised accreditation: Accreditation bodies must develop criteria that recognize diverse ways of knowing, research methodologies, and languages. This is not lowering standards – it's recognizing that there are multiple rigorous approaches to knowledge production.

Resource reallocation: Governments must fund higher education adequately and equitably across disciplines. Market-based funding models that reward popular programmes while defunding others create systemic inequalities.

Language equity: Universities must establish genuine multilingualism policies that value research in multiple languages, not merely English. This requires changing evaluation criteria and publication infrastructure.

Curriculum transformation: Systematic, resourced initiatives to integrate African perspectives, methodologies, and languages into curricula. This is not adding African content to unchanged frameworks – it means fundamentally rethinking curriculum.

Peer review reform: Academic journals must examine and reform peer review processes to reduce bias. This includes ensuring reviewers understand non-Western methodologies and theoretical traditions.

None of these are easy. All require sustained commitment and resource investment. But without structural change, individual adaptation will persist as the primary strategy for survival, leaving underlying inequalities untouched.

8. Conclusion

8.1 Summary

This chapter has examined marginalisation in ICER through personal reflection grounded in my experience as a French lecturer in Kenya. Using critical interculturality frameworks and the principle of criticality of criticality, I have documented how linguistic hierarchies, funding disparities, and institutional structures systematically exclude non-Anglophone scholarship and scholars from the centre of academic legitimacy.

The analysis reveals that marginalisation is not accidental or individual but structural – embedded in policies, funding mechanisms, accreditation frameworks, and publication infrastructure. Understanding this distinction is crucial because it reframes possible solutions.

8.2 Implications for ICER

Several implications emerge:

ICER must interrogate its own reproduction of hierarchies: The field positions itself as concerned with intercultural communication, yet operates through structures that privilege Western communication scholars and marginalise non-Western perspectives. This contradiction requires acknowledgement and address.

Language hierarchies must be deliberately challenged: Making space for multilingual scholarship requires more than celebrating diversity. It requires changing evaluation criteria, funding structures, and publication infrastructure.

Decolonisation requires resource commitment: Talk of decolonisation is abundant. Genuine decolonial transformation is rare. The difference is institutional commitment and resource allocation. Universities serious about decolonisation must fund it.

Individual adaptation is insufficient: Scholars from marginalised groups will continue developing strategies to navigate exclusion. But individual strategy cannot substitute for structural change. ICER must address the structures.

8.3 Directions for Future Work

Research: Systematic investigation of peer review processes and citation patterns in ICER journals could document the extent to which Western perspectives are privileged. Comparative study of how different universities approach decolonisation could identify institutional practices that support genuine change.

Institutional action: Universities must examine their hiring, funding, and curriculum decisions through a lens of epistemic justice. What is being excluded? Who is being marginalised? What would genuine inclusion require?

Disciplinary conversation: ICER scholars must engage in sustained conversation about the field›s own reproduction of hierarchies. Conferences, journals, and professional organisations should prioritise discussion of these structural issues.

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