
“Decolonisation” and “Africanisation” of Knowledge: Politico-Ideological or Educational Concepts?

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ABSTRACT: *This paper argues that decolonisation and Africanisation of the curriculum are problematic concepts that appeal more to political sentiments than present an academic discourse. First, the concept of decolonisation is used in a narrow sense relating only to the effects of the post- Berlin Conference of 1884 and similar forms of subjection of indigenous peoples to foreign domination and excludes other forms of colonisation, the subjugation of the other, which manifests in elite, class, gender and other forms of segmental colonisation. Secondly, the simultaneous use of decolonisation and Africanisation as transformation is inappropriate because the two do not lead to the same result. Besides adopting a narrow conception of decolonisation, Africanisation of the curriculum is just as chauvinistic in practice as colonisation itself; and also fails to distinguish between the normative and epistemic dimensions of knowledge production. While not denying the role of the sociology of knowledge in epistemology, the paper maintains that one cannot decolonise or Africanise the curriculum and still retain both the colonial framework and the substantive structure. That would be simply engaging in semantics and not in substance. The paper further maintains that scholarship and knowledge production are universal practices; and Africa has made serious contributions to knowledge and scholarship outside of the discourse of decolonisation and Africanisation. Therefore, while both concepts might appeal to sentiment, practically they are unimaginable. A more appropriate conceptualisation would be “internationalisation and advancing Africa’s contribution to the global movement for change in the academy, and by extension in the curriculum.”*

KEYWORDS: decolonisation, africanisation, knowledge, politico-ideological educational concepts

INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I want to challenge the terminology used in protest movements and demonstrate its weaknesses in conveying the desired intentions as well as the practicality of envisaged changes. I argue that decolonisation and Africanisation of the curriculum are problematic concepts, particularly when used simultaneously and in a narrow sense as reflected in the protest movements (# Rhodes Must Fall/ Fees Must Fall et al), that appeal more to political sentiments than present an academic discourse. The title of the colloquium, “Contested spaces, epistemic asymmetries, mobilities and identities” hosted by the London School of Oriental and

African Studies together with the University of Kwa Zulu Natal School of Social Sciences in January 2021, best locates the debate on decolonisation and Africanisation within the domain of politics where it, indeed, belongs rather than in academics where the two happen to belong by circumstance. in the academy, and by extension, in the curriculum.” This is not to say decolonisation and Africanisation do not affect the curriculum but rather to say that the ensuing noises have been more deafening politically to the extent of obfuscating the very knowledge production they seek to promote and improve. The first problem with the concepts decolonisation and Africanisation is the failure to locate colonisation within its proper space, that is the subjugation of the other, which manifests in elite, race, class, gender and other forms of segmental colonisation. A more appropriate conceptualisation would be “internationalisation and advancing Africa’s contribution to the global movement for change.

Secondly, Africanisation of the curriculum fails to distinguish between the normative and epistemic dimensions of knowledge, and this is not to deny the influence of the sociology of knowledge on epistemology, rather to point out that the political noises arising from the epistemic asymmetries have obfuscated academia, a development which, if unchecked, might prove detrimental to the development of knowledge. The contention is, for instance, the noises do not make a distinction between those disciplines or domains of knowledge which are substantively politically neutral and those susceptible to biased interpretation. One immediately thinks of disciplines like History, Sociology or Political Science, Psychology and Philosophy, to name a few which could be affected by the interpretation, mainly because the substances are not value-free. This is not necessarily the case with the pure sciences; for instance, it would be very difficult to temper substantively with Biology, Physical Science, Mathematics and for that matter Accounting mainly because values play no role if at all in the substantive composition in the latter disciplines.

Admittedly, the correction of historical facts and the renaming of places has a significant psychological impact on facticity and the development of identity in intellectual circles, but is this not picking up the low hanging fruit? Structural and organisational complications add yet further problems. One ponders how a decolonised academy would look like structurally. However, the political noises are silent on this point, nor do they offer the substantive components of an Africanised curriculum. Is the appropriate approach not probably: adding Africa’s contribution to the substance and methodology in knowledge production? There is plenty of evidence on the contribution by persons of African descent, both abroad and in Africa, to contemporary global philosophical and scientific discoveries and inventions. And they have done this within the ambit of the conventional school structure and organisation which includes the curriculum.

The Curriculum in African Education

It is common cause that the curriculum in use in African education is of European origin through the processes of colonisation and conquest which were not without ideological connotations. There are contested versions regarding the motivation for the curriculum and I do not want to go into that debate mainly because my point of departure is the relevance of the present curriculum in terms of its capacity, to achieve specific functional objectives within a context of a wide access to sources of knowledge. The first of these is to generate and develop scholarship, the second is to award credentials that enhance opportunities in the market place, and the third to develop problem-solving capacities harnessed for social upliftment. Exponents

of Africanisation and decolonisation maintain that both (Decolonisation and Africanisation) will free African education of the western ideological fetters in the curriculum with Africanisation constituting a practical application and realisation of an ideal educational position. This paper seeks to explore first the meaning and requirements of Africanising the curriculum within the parameters of the three objectives mentioned above, and secondly the practical implications of decolonising the curriculum within the present educational context.

Meaning and Requirements of Africanising the Curriculum

It is not certain whether there is consensus on what constitutes Africanising the curriculum. Exponents of Africanisation present “authenticity of the African voice” as a prerequisite for Africanising the curriculum. What is not clear is what this authenticity is and also the disciplines across which this authenticity should operate. Curricula across the world comprise complex interrelated components, some epistemological and others executional or operational. I want to focus on the variants of Africanisation as presented by various proponents of the concept as well as on three requirements of the curriculum that I consider significant, relevance, content and methodology. Furthermore, I wish to point out that the literature on Africanisation of the curriculum vacillates between three related but not necessarily synonymous concepts, decolonisation, indigenisation and Africanisation. In a number of instances, these concepts are used interchangeably. The fourth problematic is the structural and organisational shape of the Africanised academy. This will become clear as I elaborate below.

Relevance

Three factors determine the relevance of the curriculum as mentioned in the introductory section of this paper. The heuristic relates to the importance and beauty of knowledge for its own sake. In almost all societies, knowledge brings prestige to the holders. Societies respect and adore sages and bards. Membership in a debating society is a prestigious accomplishment and the professoriate takes pride in the number of publications and consequently citations attributed to their articles. The second consideration is instrumental or utilitarian, as curriculum-based credentials enhance opportunities in the market place. Thirdly, the curriculum generates useful knowledge for solving societal problems, thus serving as a tool for social upliftment. While the intended Africanisation would have to cut across all three functional areas, the heuristic and the utilitarian present the greatest problems. Academic prestige derives from expertise in the utilisation of globally accepted knowledge predicated on accepted epistemological criteria. Part of the call for Africanisation of the curriculum is the rejection of these epistemological criteria, the rationale being that the same yardsticks gate-keep African knowledge production away from mainstream intellectual discourses. African scholars decry the dominance of western knowledge systems across disciplines as a source of inequity predicated on historical political relations under colonialism. Admittedly, as Lukhona Mnguni (in a discussion on the political economy of knowledge production) would say, “the knowledge production chain is not without an agenda”¹, which might be intentionally political. If the counter to this is to affirm an African viewpoint in the global knowledge production, this is perfectly legitimate, otherwise Africanisation is equally a chauvinistic attempt which can only promote a particular political agenda, unless we only wanted to play with semantics.

¹ Lukhona Mnguni is a doctoral inter in the Maurice Webb Race Relations Unit

The relationship between credentials and the market place is axiomatic, and essentially in the context of global economic forces that demand uniformity in content and methodologies. The accent on research and technology in a globalised economy calls for uniformities in curriculum development especially in the scientific and economic disciplines, which in turn create international uniformity in content and methodologies in knowledge production, thereby favouring uniform epistemologies. The second observation is that a uniform system of knowledge production facilitates ease of knowledge transfers and problem solving in specific fields such as medicine using standard drugs and diagnostic techniques. Similarly, uniformities in knowledge production in the economic sciences facilitate knowledge transfers across global conglomerates thus promoting efficiencies in research, technology and the development of systems of production. Globalisation of the economy has brought with it a mobility and prestige in a cadre of personnel that is internationalised by its command of specific knowledge. For instance, managers in finance, human resources, engineering and other professionals in Unilever, Shell, De Loitte and Touche, and other multinationals traverse international boundaries because of the uniformity in the knowledge that they command. This ushers in a new dimension calling for a distinction between those disciplines or aspects of disciplines amenable to Africanisation and those, which might be problematic or are simply not Africanisable

Kwesu Wiredu and Paulin Hountondji, two eminent African philosophers maintain that there are normative disciplines such as mainly the social and human sciences which are value laden and susceptible to value propositions. On the contrary, there are disciplines such as the natural or pure sciences, including Astronomy Mathematics and Accounting where normative values have very little if any role at all. The latter are substantively and methodologically neutral disciplines and thus not susceptible to value propositions. Africanisation thus becomes a selective exercise in curriculum manipulation. Bearing these constraints in mind, an exploration of Africanisation (interpretation within an African context) of the curriculum including critique and reservations is necessary within the present conjuncture where calls for equity in the production of knowledge abound. Finally, one has to point out that successes in health have largely been a result of the universalisation of medicine where substance and method including the identity of drugs for treatment are universal. Progress made in working on the vaccines to curb the COVID 19 pandemic is a direct benefit of this universalisation.

Decolonising and Africanising the Curriculum?

I phrase the problem statement in a question form because I am highly sceptical of the academic integrity that would be entailed in the process other than changing the names as politicians often do in renaming the streets in an effort to recreate history.

Africanisation

Contributions purportedly on curriculum specific issues tend to stop at the theoretical and philosophical stages without penetrating into the operational domain of the curriculum. For instance, while it is relatively easy to relate to a decolonised history curriculum in terms of substance, and interpretation, how does one decolonise the chemistry curriculum? The publication by Tabello Lesekha: *“Revising the Debate on the Africanisation of Higher Education”* falls within the domain of curriculum specific critiques. However, the intention in today’s presentation is not to review Lesekha, I am only using him as a reference point of a curriculum-specific expose. What sheds more light on the topic in Lesekha’s publication is the

unpacking of the concepts Africanisation, indigenisation and internationalisation. Lesekha cites Ramose who posits, “Africanisation embraces the understanding that ‘the African experience is not only the foundation of all forms of knowledge but also the source for the construction of that knowledge” (Lesekha: 2013: 1).

Using this as a starting point, exponents of this African experience aver that the present curricula used in higher education are inappropriate to the African experience and need to be replaced by subject materials and teaching methods suitable to this experience. The question is: is there an African experience? Besides colonialism which, given the varying colonial policies, is not uniform, and being in Africa, what is this experience? The assertion by proponents of decolonisation of the curriculum is that colonialism introduced a curriculum that undermined African values and conception of reality thereby enhancing the West as the author and generator of knowledge to the detriment of Africans. A further argument is that no people are a *tabula rasa* hence the introduction of any knowledge wherever produced occurs within a medium where the recipients of that knowledge have an own knowledge base through which constituents of the incoming knowledge are filtered. There is not an elaborate substantive explanation and examples of how this can be achieved. We are thus left with speculation, with the only near-clear conclusion that the assumptions are more political than academic. However, to subject curricula issues to political expediency enhances neither the curriculum nor the knowledge produced.

Indigenisation/Decolonisation

Proponents of the decolonisation of the curriculum refer to a process of indigenisation where indigenous values, experiences and artefacts constitute the basis of knowledge production. In the case of Africa, the point of reference is Africanisation. These scholars agitate for the inclusion of local content in the curriculum on the rationale that what is presently in the curriculum is Eurocentric and reflects the worldview of white males as they dominate the academic fraternity. A glance into the disciplines, which constitute the curriculum, leaves one with very little choices with regard to local content. For instance, how does one localise anatomy, physiology, physics, chemistry, statistics, engineering and many others? The application of these disciplines is not an issue, what this presentation is contending is that substantively a majority of disciplines taught is neutral, and most disciplines can be applied to any area of human endeavour without any change in the substance as content. The philosophy of science as an epistemological tool is culturally neutral; changing the context in the interpretation does not affect the integrity of the science.

Take for instance the pretensions to incorporate indigenous medicine in the management and treatment of HIV/AIDs, as South Africans would like to emphasise. Empirically the significance of indigenous knowledge in this instance is a chemical fallacy. After more than two decades of attempts to include indigenous aspects in the treatment and containment of the virus, anti- retro-viral treatment remains and continues to be the only highly efficacious factor in the management of the disease. In the era of COVID 19, the Government appears to have learned better and the management of the pandemic together with the development and testing of vaccines has been left to conventional scientists working within the conventional positivist paradigm, internationally pursued by all countries.

The Problematic of Structure and Organisation

Reading through the material by proponents of decolonisation, in particular, one is not clear of where the boundaries in terms of the nature and extent of the decolonisation process start and end. Following a logical path to decolonisation, for instance, one assumes that for the written communication of the educational material, the alphabet remains intact as replacing the present Phoenician alphabet with either hieroglyphics, the Arabic alphabet or the Ethiopic script to name the current ones in use in Africa, would be a new invention particularly in Sub Sahara Africa; and this would be very costly both in terms of time and resources. The chances are, therefore, next to nil. Secondly, formalised schooling is not an African conception. In short, the framework (substantive structure and organisation) remains largely colonial thus putting a huge question mark to decolonisation as an honest process. Whatever modifications may occur, decolonisation and Africanisation have metamorphosed into syncretism, which is a legitimate practice as is grafting in the biological disciplines (agriculture and surgery). And one must add that syncretism is an old practice across Africa particularly in the field of medicine, where practitioners build on existing knowledge to improve both their acumen and healing capability.

One can draw parallels between the educational and political discourses on decolonisation, to illustrate practical fallacies. In the political sphere, Africans complained that the colonial state was an imposition, which it was; and that the colonial boundaries went contrary to the natural demographics by lumping independently constituted groupings under one contrived colonial authority thus in a number of instances separating kinsman from kinsman and brother from brother. But come independence and the subsequent decolonisation, the boundaries remained intact. As Beluce Beluci avers, the colonial state was, an enigma with contradictory trajectories on the political psyche of colonial subjects, particularly the elite. On the one side “the territorial and state frameworks established, notwithstanding their arbitrary nature, were of undeniable symbolic efficacy, and were accepted by the colonised population. Thus, isolated nationalities, Angolan, Senegalese, Mozambicans, and Malinese etc. became references of identity for those peoples and for others.”² On the other no African state has revoked the colonial boundaries despite the complaints, instead the political elite has used the same boundaries to build a nascent nationalism which after almost sixty years of effort still remains tenuous.

Evidence of Africa’s Role in Philosophical, Scientific and Technological Capability

Pre-colonial Developments

Sufficient evidence exists to demonstrate that Africa has made significant contributions to the world’s progress historically and in contemporary developments. The University of Timbuktu in Mali founded by Mansa Musa, believed to be the richest man ever in the world ³, housed as many as 25 000 students in the 12th century, and besides teaching mainly the Quran, also had scholars in Astronomy, Philosophy, Mathematics, social and the biological sciences including medicine among other disciplines. The Great Wall of Benin constructed between 800 and 1460 AD stretching over 16 000 kilometres and rising to 20 metres high protecting 6500 square kilometres of community land is testimony to Africa’s technological and engineering

² Beluce Bellucci 2010: “The State in Africa.” The Perspective of the World Review

³ Maima Mohamed: BBC Africa: March 10 2019

capability. The wall is billed as second only to the Great Wall of China. Intellectual giants of African origins both abroad and in Africa have made their marks both in the sciences and in the technological inventions. Is this not sufficient evidence of Africa's place in the international intellectual community?

Contemporary Achievements

Kirstin Fawcett (2016), a freelance investigative journalist lists ten Afro American inventors who changed the world. The list is auspicious and demonstrates that it is not in the curriculum but in the ideological prejudices located in politics that African capabilities get questioned. The list comprises inventions in technology, computer science, chemistry, engineering, astrophysics, agriculture and electronics:

- Thomas Jennings invented an early method of dry cleaning which was patented in 1821;
- Mark Dean designed the ISA bus that, the hardware interface that allows multiple devices like printers, modems and keyboards to be plugged into a computer. He was inducted into the Invention Hall of Fame in 1997.
- Madame Walker, suffering from hair loss late in the 1800s, experimented with various products and produced her own hair growing formula. She pioneered the Afro-American hair care and cosmetics industry;
- Charles Richard Drew, a surgeon, developed a blood bank for shipping blood from Europe across the Atlantic;
- Mary Van Brittan Brown created a precursor to the modern home television security system and had a home television security system patented in 1969;
- George Carruthers, an astrophysicist, invented the ultra-violet camera/ spectrograph which NASA used when it launched Apollo 16 in 1972. Carruthers was inducted into the National Induction Hall of Fame in 2002;
- Patricia Bath invented the laserphace, a device that refined lases cataract surgery, which she patented in 1988;
- Jan Ernst Matzeliger invented an automated machine that attached a shoe upper part to its sole;
- Alexander Miles designed an important safety feature for the elevator's safety doors, allowing both doors in the elevator to close simultaneously. The device was patented in 1887;
- George Washington Harwer, after experimenting on crops, used peanuts to create more than 300 products, the largest being laundry soaps, plastics and diesel.

The list is not limited to Afro-Americans only. Within Africa itself, Phillip Emeagwali "the Bill Gates of Africa" after studying bees was inspired by the honeycomb and applied the model to computer processing. In 1989, he used 65 000 processors to invent the world's first parallel processing supercomputer able to perform six billion calculations per second.

CONCLUSION

The contention in this paper is that both Africanisation and decolonisation are emotive populist concepts rather than logical academic formulations. What the decolonisation movements such as for instance, the # Fees Must Fall movement, fail to do is first to locate themselves in the broader definition of decolonisation, i.e., where their stances fall regarding the hierarchy of

power and privilege in the configurations of entitlements in the South African context; and secondly to be honest in the use of the concept of decolonisation. With regard to the first observation, it is not clear where proponents of # Fees Must fall locate themselves with regard to competing services for the fiscus, services such as health, housing, water and sanitation; or with services such as governance itself. This would lead to questions such as: where do we re-order priorities leading to a reduction in expenditure in other spheres in order to attain equity leading to a free education for all? Exponents of the # Fees Must Fall movement have not challenged privileges enjoyed by the governing elite probably because this is what they themselves aspire to. Just to cite an example: does the country need 490 members of parliament, 430 provincial members of parliament and 3935 town councillors? This is a heavily-governed country with an inordinate salary bill for politicians. Taking corruption by the same politicians aside, which has become endemic in the country, would a reduction in this sphere not save millions which could be channelled into tertiary education? Thinking along these lines would fit the requirements of a broad conceptualisation of decolonisation.

On the contrary, what one presently sees empirically is selective decolonisation, a focus on the post Berlin 1884 type of rhetoric because first, race is a common vector which makes it readily visible and easy to isolate given international opprobrium against racial inequalities. It thus becomes fashionable and expedient to focus on race. This is not to undermine the noble struggles against racism, but rather to point out that colonialism is an international project that transcends race and encompasses class, the discrepancy in privilege and consequently living standards between political and economic elites and the general public, discrepancies which have heavily divided societies and are a source of continuous disaffection, strife and conflict in a majority of political systems. Distributive justice is the most elusive concept in most societies on the globe. Secondly, in moral terms, proponents of decolonisation, where some colonial symbols are offensive when others are not, render what would be a noble protest movement dishonest. For instance, why are statues offensive and have to be removed while buildings are not? Both are symbols of colonialism to the extent that they even represent the architectural phases in the history of the colonisers. Are buildings spared because they are fundamentally necessary and, therefore, convenient to spare as we cannot do without them?

Regarding Africanisation of the curriculum, there is no denying of the psychological damage that colonisation inflicted intellectually on the indigenous populations through undermining indigenous practices. Equally, there is no denying that Africans have to engage with the past and rectify myths and fallacies by demonstrating through research and scholarship that Africa has substance and that she can equally contribute to the global knowledge system as anyone else. However, the claim that anyone can decolonise or Africanise an educational system while keeping both its framework and structure is fallacious. While this might appeal to sentiment, practically it is unimaginable. One has not heard of Asianising the curriculum despite a good number of Asian countries having primary Asian symbols such as for instance, the Japanese and Chinese characters as the basic symbols of writing and communication, the equivalents of our alphabet. Whatever we aspire to create, we probably need a different terminology lest we engage in a Humpty Dumpty semantic game.

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