

Decolonising Oppressive Epistemologies in the Higher Education System

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the process of decolonizing higher education in Africa through knowledge production in order for educational transformation to take place. Through a comprehensive literature review, the paper explores the calls for decoloniality and the practical approaches to decolonizing oppressive epistemologies in higher education. In this context, decoloniality theory serves as an analytical lens for informing both pedagogical approaches and institutional transformations in African higher education. This theory has been selected because it proffers recommendations that support systemic change. Central to this paper is an idea that higher education cannot be thought of in decolonial terms if it remains disconnected from acts of democratic action and transformation, the actions of access and equality. So, to pursue actions related to democratic actions such as equality, liberty, inclusion, tolerance, diversity and innovation is inadequate if education is not connected to such actions.

INTRODUCTION

For many decades after African independence, African universities continued to teach, assess and govern themselves using models inherited from colonial powers. The buildings changed, the flags changed, but the way knowledge was defined, validated and passed on often did not. This created a situation where students could be physically present on campus yet still feel excluded from the core of academic life.

Conceptualising Decolonity and Epistemology

This paper unpacks epistemological access from Morrow's perspective as well as outline the development and use of the term in relation to decoloniality. The term epistemology stems from the Greek word episteme, which means knowledge. In 1992 the concept of 'epistemological access' was first mentioned in a public forum by Morrow during an address at the University of the North West (published in Morrow 2007). Morrow subsequently explains the term several times in his writings.

Morrow first spoke of epistemological access within an education institution as being a form of access to 'the goods that it distributes' (Morrow 2007). According to Morrow, (2009) the main good distributed by universities is knowledge. Morrow gives explicit examples of procedural knowledge such as how to weld, care for the ill, solve a mathematics problem and conduct research (Morrow 2007:9). Muller (2014) suggests that Morrow's focus on procedural rather than propositional or principled knowledge was likely linked to his primary concern, which was for teacher professionalism. However, in stating 'all kinds of knowledge' it would be fair to assume that this would include principled knowledge too. On the same note, Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2015) conceives decoloniality as a way of thinking, knowing and doing, therefore, it is both an epistemological ideal and a political ideology. It is a response to marginalisation and oppression, which 'originate from the human struggle against the existential condition of the unjust historical experiences of slave trade, imperialism, colonialism and neo-colonialism' (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015:145).

Furthermore, Morrow (1993) expands on the concept when he reiterates that epistemological access is "learning how to become a participant in an academic practice" and that this requires learning 'the intrinsic disciplines and constitutive standards of the practice. Embedded in this statement are complex issues of

power relations, socio-cultural theories of learning, academic language and knowledge, values, ontology and student identity and agency, all of which should be taken into account when considering the manner in which educational practices enable or constrain such access. Central to this paper is an idea that higher education cannot be thought of in decolonial terms if it remains disconnected from acts of democratic action and transformation, the actions of access and equality. So, to pursue actions related to democratic actions such as equality, liberty, inclusion, tolerance, diversity and innovation is inadequate if education is not connected to such actions. This means, meaningful decolonization goes beyond pedagogic transformation and curriculum change, but is connected to theoretical conceptualization of democratization and transformation of higher education in Africa. African higher education must be understood within the contest of democratization.

METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

This section outlined the methodology and research design employed to explore the topic of decolonising oppressive epistemologies in the higher education system in Africa. The objective was to understand how educational frameworks could be transformed to reflect African identities, values, and knowledge systems. The study adopted a qualitative research approach, which was particularly effective for exploring complex social phenomena such as the decolonisation of education. Qualitative methods were suitable for this research as they facilitated the exploration of subjective meanings and interpretations related to identity, heritage, and educational practices. Comparative case evidence from three African universities that have attempted curriculum and institutional reform. This combination allows the researchers to move between what scholars are arguing and what is actually happening in institutions.

Utilising a case study methodology, the research focused on specific educational institutions across various African countries. This approach enabled an in-depth examination of how different universities implemented decolonisation efforts in their curricula, governance, and community engagement. By selecting diverse case studies, the research aimed to capture a range of experiences and strategies, highlighting both successes and challenges. The study drew examples from African countries, including Zimbabwe, Ghana and South Africa. These examples were selected for their unique historical contexts, educational policies, and experiences with colonisation, providing unique insights into local approaches to decolonising education.

The review was conducted across peer review journals. Scopus, web of science, and google scholar. The authors searched using four clusters, thus, decoloniality and knowledge, access and participation, curriculum and institutional change, and the African context. The authors prioritised peer-reviewed work published in the last five years to capture new developments, while still engaging classics such as, wa Thiong'o (1986) and Morrow (1993, 2007). After screening, the authors extracted themes and synthesized them. This method follows Thomas and Harden's (2008) approach to thematic synthesis and aligns with recent calls for transparency in qualitative reviews in African higher education (Cloete et al., 2021).

Data collection primarily involved semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders, including university administrators, educators, faculty members, students, and community leaders. Document analysis was employed to review institutional policies, curriculum guides, and strategic plans related to decolonisation efforts. This analysis provided context and support for findings from interviews and literature review.

In Defence of Decoloniality

Decoloniality as an emerging theory in African higher education is an ongoing process designed to challenge colonial structures, power dynamics, and Eurocentric epistemologies (ways of knowing) that still dominate academic institutions. To decolonize education is rebuilding a school system that supports all students, staff and teachers regardless of color, race or religion. It is building a system that is responsive to the needs of each and every child. Decoloniality demands a just response from higher education. For Terblanche (2019) to disregard the call for decoloniality is in itself, an act of violence made possible through perpetuated systemic unjust practices. Furthermore, Terblanche reiterates that any pedagogical practices and curriculum content could be perceived as acts of violence, if it lacks values associated with particular

knowledge systems evident through the selection of curriculum content. In this regard, Terblanche explains decolonial process as a project of seeking epistemic justice, affirming diverse, marginalized, and Indigenous knowledge systems, and transforming educational contexts to be more inclusive and liberating (Terblanche 2019).

For centuries, Africa's narrative has been shaped by external forces, particularly the legacies of slavery and colonialism, which have deeply influenced its educational systems. The colonial system of learning of the late 19th century spread from Europe and was implemented throughout the African continent. This system was patterned to create a working class that was not critical to injustices perpetuated by the colonial governments. In Southern and Central Africa, here being noted as Zimbabwe, Zambia and Malawi, South Africa and Namibia, colonial policies were more or less the same. Colonial powers imposed their educational frameworks to instil a Eurocentric worldview, often portraying African cultures as inferior. In South Africa, apartheid system created educational inequalities through overt racist policies, Jansen (2023). The Bantu Education Act of 1952 ensured that Blacks receive an education that would limit educational potential and opportunities for blacks, coloreds and Indians. The policy directly affected the content of learning to further racial inequalities by preventing access to further education. The less education students received, the fewer choices they had in the working world and in accessing more education. Since these policies ensured that the content and amount of education perpetuated social inequalities, changing these policies in a post-apartheid era was the logical step towards social equality, Jansen (2023). On the other hand, Zimbabwe was colonised by the British South Africa Company in 1890 after Cecil John Rhodes had been granted the Charter by the British Queen to occupy the colony. For a period of close to a century (1890-1980), Zimbabwe was a British colony characterised by unequal distribution of wealth, land and education (Mutumbuka, 1982: 5). In order to maintain their grip on the territory and its inhabitants, the colonial masters used education as a wheel of oppression and subjugation, and to shape Africans into subordinate roles. It had been white policy since the colonial era that Europeans and Africans be educated differently because whites believed that “an uneducated native was the most honest, trustworthy and useful” (Mumbengegwi, 2001: 16). There was therefore no need to destroy those virtues in Africans by giving them education equivalent to that of Europeans. Access to education was restricted in Zimbabwe through a bottle neck system. This was replicated in all British colonies south of the Sahara. Our argument in this paper is that any education system that does not engender democratic values is not a good education.

A review of the colonial education above has shown the justification for decolonisation of oppressive epistemologies. This decolonisation involves not just the physical dismantling of colonial structures but also a profound transformation in how knowledge is produced and disseminated.

Decolonising Access and Quality in African Higher Education.

Access to quality schooling and education remains a critical issue in African higher education system. In Zimbabwe, many students face barriers due to economic constraints, and these constraints are being derived from the system Africans we have adopted, for instance, the Dutch law which have some negative effects, leading to a situation where individuals drop out of school or seek education abroad, often at the expense of local systems. For instance, before potential students are admitted to university, they must apply. The application fee is \$20 for state institutions. This is too high for students coming from poor families who relies on government support for survival. Applications not accompanied by an application fee are not processed. University education in Zimbabwe is expensive from application fees to tuition and accommodation fees. This makes it difficult for some would be students to apply for university enrolment at local institutions.

This explains why the majority of students feel compelled to fly to other countries for studies when local universities offer similar programmes. Many of them go to Russia, South Africa, Zambia, India and Poland to study STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) programs. This exodus signifies a lack of confidence in the local educational landscape, undermining the very essence of decoloniality, which we are fighting for. Another point to note is, there is a troubling segregation between disciplines of study in Southern African Universities, Le Grange, L. (2021). South Africa's education is heavily invested in

Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) to accelerate its transition to a knowledge-based economy, with a target of 450,000 students eligible for STEM bachelor's programs by 2030, Le Grange, L. (2021). In Zimbabwe, university funding on arts programmes has been reduced significantly from 2002 when Zimbabwe was placed under European Union economic sanctions.

Students in the Arts and Social Sciences are marginalised compared to their counterparts in STEM subjects. This division perpetuates inequalities and detracts from the holistic education that Africa needs to foster. The emphasis on STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) fields over the arts not only strangles creativity but also disregards the cultural narratives that shape our African societies. Decolonisation calls for universities to produce knowledge that advances the conservation of African cultures and preservation of Ubuntu which colonial governments destroyed.

Observations by Poshai (2024) on university access are that the harsh economic conditions in Zimbabwe have further worsened the plight of students in institutions of higher learning. Budgetary cuts and the removal of student financial support systems in the 2000s has left many potential students with no option but to defer or withdraw from universities. Another issue raised by Poshai (2024) is the adoption of neoliberal approaches such as austerity measures in Zimbabwe which he blames for creating a domino effect in the higher education sector as universities started to introduce market-based approaches to survive the austerity measures introduced by the government. The adoption of market-oriented approaches in institutions of higher learning denigrated universal access to higher education and incapacitated students financially (Poshai 2024). The dilemma that the government faces now is of achieving broader access while at the same time maintaining quality with little resources. Decolonization in this case is dependent on achieving democratization of education by eliminating inherent exclusionary practices.

We also have an issue of programme choices and autonomy. Access to education and schooling should not be limited by arbitrary cut-off points or predetermined tracks. For instance, the system which is in Zimbabwe, that you need to have 12 points including Mathematics and English to go and study sociology or social work. Students must have the autonomy to choose programmes that align with their passions and aspirations, rather than being forced into specific paths by educational and schooling systems. This approach not only respects individual agency but also promotes a more diverse and enriched educational and schooling environment. As Maponga (2024) highlights, culture is important in resisting oppression and promoting resilience. The disadvantages of rigid cut-off points are evident; they often exclude capable students who may not meet arbitrary thresholds yet possess the potential and desire to excel. Remember English is not the measure of intelligence. This exclusion perpetuates a cycle of disenfranchisement and hinders the development of a robust intellectual community. The broader socio-political context, including historical inequalities, socioeconomic disparities, and power dynamics, also challenges decolonisation in higher education. This marginalisation cements the notion that certain disciplines are inherently more valuable than others, which is detrimental to fostering a well-rounded education that embraces the richness of diverse knowledge systems.

Furthermore, Heritage-Based Education and one system in African continent and naming of lands is also a critical issue to discuss. A decolonised education system must also reflect heritage-based values of Ubuntu, hard work, compassion and friendship taught in social sciences. A decolonised curriculum is relevant for its people. It promotes the value system of the people it is expected to serve. Currently, universities in Africa are saddled with irrelevant knowledge because of they are “too westernised” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013,11). This notion is further supported by Mbembe (2025:32) who reiterates that while universities in Africa are locally situated, they are capped in the Euro-centric academic model. Mbembe notes that, within higher education, the different knowledge systems in the world should not be viewed as mutually exclusive: “Nobody should go to the university and never have heard of, for example, ancient China or ancient Africa, and be unable to say something meaningful about those other traditions ... If that is what is meant by decolonization, then the term makes sense (Mbembe 2025: 32).

Governance and Community Involvement

Educational governance should reflect local customs and values instead of colonial legacies. Indigenous knowledge systems, which emphasise consensus and community involvement, can lead to more inclusive and effective educational practices. Recent political changes, such as Captain Ibrahim Traoré's military coup in Burkina Faso, highlight an urgent need for transformation within governance structures to foster true freedom and educational reform (Cawood & Amiradakis, 2022). The Chairman of the Council stated that "the renaming of some of the streets in the area became necessary as some were named after colonial masters and had long lost their meanings while some had no meaning or bearing whatsoever."

Decentralisation and community empowerment are important for reconstructing African educational systems, allowing local communities to participate in decision-making processes. This participatory governance approach can address the shortcomings of post-colonial educational frameworks, enabling a more inclusive and culturally relevant curriculum that reflects African identities (Nabudere, 2010). This is critical especially if academic success is to be championed within the current university settings across Africa, particularly in South Africa, where the continued dominance of neoliberalism in defining university practices and processes significantly influences students' academic success. Empowering local communities in governance not only ensures that educational policies are relevant and reflective of local needs but also fosters a sense of ownership and accountability among stakeholders.

Transitioning from Dutch law to indigenous governance: A path to Decolonising Higher Education in Africa
Transitioning from Dutch law to indigenous African governance in higher education is essential for dismantling oppressive epistemologies that have shaped academic environments for too long. Prominent scholars such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2019) advocate for the recognition of local languages and narratives as vital forms of resistance against colonial influences. Additionally, the insights of African leaders, including former South African President Nelson Mandela (1994), highlight education's transformative role in fostering empowerment and equity. By incorporating African philosophies and governance practices, universities can create inclusive settings that resonate with local values and customs. This shift not only encourages critical engagement but also nurtures innovation grounded in African contexts, paving the way for a fairer and more representative educational landscape that truly benefits all members of society. Embracing indigenous knowledge systems fosters a renewed sense of identity and belonging among students and faculty, ultimately enriching the academic experience.

Agriculture: An Educational Approach

We should not forget of agricultural education which is critical for Africa's development and should focus on indigenous methods and food systems. These traditional practices are not merely about food production but also about preserving cultural heritage and empowering local communities. By prioritising local crops and sustainable farming techniques, African countries can strengthen food security and cultural identity. For instance, grains such as millet and sorghum, which are well-suited to local conditions, can enhance community resilience (Maponga, 2024). As Moyo (2022), notes, economic strategies that use Africa's resources wisely can promote economic development and reduce poverty.

Land ownership remains a pressing issue in agricultural education. Addressing historical injustices through land reform can empower communities and promote self-sufficiency. As Mugabe (2000) highlights, redistributing land to local communities not only rectifies past wrongs but also fosters sustainable agricultural practices that can enhance educational outcomes in rural areas. By integrating agricultural education with cultural practices, students can learn the importance of sustainability, biodiversity, and local food systems, ensuring that they are equipped to address the challenges facing their communities.

Comparative case evidence

Case 1: University of Cape Town, South Africa

The #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall movements forced UCT to confront its colonial symbols and

curriculum. The university responded with task teams, curriculum reviews, and new programs in African studies. Le Grange (2021) describes gains in representation. However, Jansen (2023) and Tabensky (2022) argue that much of this remained at the surface. Assessment practices, promotion criteria and departmental power structures changed little. The lesson is that curriculum change without institutional change risks being cosmetic.

Case 2: University of Zimbabwe, Zimbabwe

Faced with economic crisis and sanctions, Zimbabwe launched Education 5.0 in 2018. The policy requires universities to teach, research, serve communities, innovate and industrialize. At NUST and UZ, this has meant innovation hubs and projects linked to agriculture and energy (Magwa & Magwa, 2022). Chitando (2021) sees this as an attempt to root universities in national development. But Poshai (2024) highlights the contradictions thus, students cannot innovate if they cannot pay fees. The case shows that decolonial intent must be matched by public funding and democratic governance.

Case 3: University of Ghana, Ghana

UG has long been a center for African studies. Recently it has expanded efforts to integrate indigenous knowledge into mainstream programs and to pilot bilingual instruction (Owusu-Ansah & Mji, 2022). This addresses both content and language. The challenge is scale. Pilot projects often stay small without systemic support. Still, the case shows how language policy can be a decolonial tool.

Across these cases, a pattern emerges. Where students and staff are involved in designing change, outcomes are stronger. Where change is imposed from above or limited by money, it stalls.

Any serious proposal must engage criticism. Four stand out. First, the critique of symbolism. As Jansen (2023) puts it, “you cannot decolonize with a brochure.” If assessment, hiring and budgets stay the same, then new courses are just window dressing. The authors response is that decolonisation must be tied to governance reform.

Second, the risk of essentialism. Keet (2020) and Zeleza (2021) warn against inventing a single “African” way of knowing. Africa is diverse. The goal should be pluralism, not replacement. Mbembe (2021) captures this well, a decolonised graduate should be fluent in multiple traditions, including their own.

Third, concerns about standards. Badat (2022) asks whether decolonisation will make African degrees less competitive globally. The authors agree with Singh (2021) that we need to redefine quality. A quality degree should prepare students to solve African problems while engaging globally. That requires investment in teaching support, not less rigor.

Fourth, resources. No curriculum reform survives austerity. As Cloete et al. (2021) show, African universities are expected to do more with less. This is not sustainable. Decolonisation therefore requires a conversation about public funding and redistribution.

CONCLUSION

In order to achieve decoloniality, African universities should provide education that develop creativity, problem solving and critical thinking in students. Achieving decoloniality of epistemologies in higher education system requires dismantling oppressive epistemologies in the higher education system, promoting indigenous knowledge, and fostering unity among diverse communities. By prioritising decolonisation, African nations can pave way for a more equitable and sustainable future, reclaiming their narrative and fostering a collective identity that drives progress across the continent. This commitment to access, quality, and heritage-based education, reflect indigenous histories, and is also fundamental in reshaping Africa's educational landscape and empowering its people.

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