

Decolonising Education in Africa: What does it mean

The issue of decolonization remains a contentious subject in most African countries. This is firstly because there is no one way of defining decolonization, and secondly because there are too many interested parties in the decolonization agenda. The best way to define a term is to, first of all, establish what it is not. Decolonisation is not reverse colonialism or what Jean Paul Sartre would call “anti-racist racism”. To decolonize is not to erase the history of colonialism or to, in some radical way, reclaim the Africa that was, before the colonial encounter. In other words, decolonization is not an attempt to bring back the once glorious African continent of King Tshaka and Munhumutapa ... without roads, piped water, electricity and all the niceties of the modern world. Decolonisation is not a mere redistributive agenda aimed at punishing those who benefited from the injustices of colonialism. In short, the decolonization agenda is not, and must not, be an agenda of the Global South. It is not, in the context of Africa, a black agenda.

The second issue that needs to be cleared is that colonialism as, a system and practice, was unjust. So, in a sense, to decolonize to seek justice for those people who were denied justice- socially, economically, politically and epistemically. Decolonial scholars such as Walter D. Mignolo, Anibal Quijano and Ndlovu-Gatsheni have identified three ways in which the colonial system entrenched conditions of injustice upon colonised societies. Firstly, by doubting the humanity of the colonised (coloniality of being) and consequently consigning the colonised to subhuman conditions of life. Secondly, by universalizing Western knowledge and ways of knowing (coloniality of knowledge) and thirdly, by creating racial categories and hierarchising humanity (coloniality of power).

When we look at the way black people were treated during apartheid for example through laws such as the Group Areas Act, the Separate Amenities Act, the Immorality Act etc., we clearly see that the architects of apartheid did not believe that blacks were complete human beings. To survive apartheid, many black people had to pretend as if they were indeed subhuman by avoiding places meant for whites and saying “yes baas” even when they were mistreated. In other words, the fact of being black, even after the end of apartheid is, in many ways, entangled with this history, this experience. The recent incident at the University of Stellenbosch¹, where a white student urinated on the belongings of a black student speaks to this idea that black people are ontologically inferior to whites. To urinate on another’s belongings is not only to designate them to a position of inferiority on the racial hierarchy but also to literally categorise and treat them as excrement.

Thus colonialism and by extension coloniality does not only suggest that black people are lesser beings but also that they are inferior epistemologically. The thing one pees on is a thing that has no mind of its own. This takes us to what decolonial scholars call coloniality of knowledge whereby the colonial system universalized Western knowledge and peripheralised knowledge from the Global South. In simple terms, coloniality of knowledge is the demonization of African knowledge and its custodians. A sangoma becomes a witch-doctor and his/her practice black magic or witchcraft. The point that decolonial scholarship makes is that knowledge has a geography and

¹ <https://www.news24.com/news24/southafrica/news/just-in-police-investigating-stellenbosch-university-urine-incident-20220517>

a biography. It is therefore not universal. All knowledge belongs to someone, in some locality and oftentimes it is relevant for use in that geographical space. What colonialism did was to make some people's knowledge everyone's knowledge. If knowledge is contextual, it means that we cannot unthinkingly import ideas and things from other places for use in our own environment. A computer has less value to a villager in a remote village in Africa than it has for someone living in a similar village in Europe. In other words, the idea of development itself is not universal.

Lastly, what decolonial scholars call coloniality of power is the racial categorization and hierarchization of humanity which became entrenched during the colonial era. By virtue of having a particular skin pigmentation, some races became superior to other races. In other words, one race accumulated power (economic, cultural, political, epistemic etc.) as a result of this racial hierarchization of humanity. This power has nothing to do with qualification or nobility, it has everything to do with race (skin colour).

What does this mean for the decolonization African education? It means that we have to do three things: rehumanise, pluriversalise and deracialize. During colonialism, education functioned as a tool for entrenching coloniality- to make the colonised believe that they were inferior ontologically, that their knowledge was useless and that their blackness was a curse.

To decolonize is to rehumanise, not only those who were once dehumanized but also those who once dehumanized others. The case of the University of Stellenbosch student who urinated on the belongings of his black counterpart shows that decolonization is not only an agenda aimed at the black child. It must also equally target the psyche of the white child. One just has to imagine what goes on in the mind of someone who wakes up in the night, breaks into someone's room, undresses and pees on another's belongings. Urinating on another's belongings is an act of performing racialised power or what in the leaked video is called a "white boys thing". When journalists asked the black student how he felt after the incident, he said he was traumatized. I believe he was traumatized not only because the incident invoked memories of the colonial past but also because it made him an object – a thing in the same category as urine. Re-humanising the white student should not consist of hurling insults at him or all white people in South Africa. It should involve making an effort to understand how it is possible that something like that can happen nearly three decades after the demise of apartheid. The incident is not just something that erupts on the University premises out of nowhere. It is a mirror of a broader societal problem. How does the social environment of the white student look like? How does it compare with the social environment of the black student? What does the white student's hidden transcript or what Stein (2004) calls "white talk" on issues of race look like? Exploring these questions will lead to a deeper understanding of the problem and perhaps a more comprehensive solution that goes beyond suspensions and expulsions.

Frantz Fanon says that to decolonize is to allow humanity to touch. In my view, the purpose of the African University is to break ontological and epistemological boundaries and facilitate human contact. Here I am talking about human contact in terms intercultural communication and courageous conversations. My experience in the South African university is that teaching an interracial class can easily become an exercise in avoiding sensitive topics. The reason is that few Universities have made a serious effort to de-sensitize the decolonization agenda. Black students

have their own view of what decolonization means. White students have their own. I believe the same can also be said about black and white academics. However, I am not suggesting that everyone in the University falls into these broad categories. All I am saying is that it's important to conceptualise decolonisation as an agenda for the re-humanisation and deracialisation of the University. Decolonisation is not about defending or protecting territory. It is about harmonizing the different territories and challenging colonial mental enclaves. How do you teach a class of white boys and black boys in the context of the Stellenbosch incident? Breaking colonial mindsets does not start with doing big things such as changing curriculums. It starts with small things such as creating informal spaces for genuine interracial dialogue. I am sure there are exceptions in some Universities but my experience in the South African University is that race remains the elephant in the room. In a class of white, black and Indian students, you often find students sitting according to their racial groupings. Classroom sitting patterns are in fact a reflection of existing demographic patterns in society. This requires a different approach to decolonization, which targets the hidden curriculum (the culture and values of the University). Oftentimes, universities tend to focus on decolonizing the explicit curriculum but the most important form of decolonization is psychological, what Ngugi wa Thiongo calls "decolonising the mind". Changing the explicit curriculum (the readings, module guides, prescribed texts) does not always result in change of mindset.

To decolonize education is not only to include Africa or the Global South into the curriculum, but also to create conditions that allow humanity to co-exist and touch both literally and metaphorically. In South Africa, this might involve decolonising freedom itself. The rights that come with freedom such as the right of association should not be used as tools to perpetuate coloniality and stall decolonization. Students who sit in racial groupings will tell you that they have a right to sit that way (and they are right). The question is how to do both democracy and decolonization (incidentally both are *de*-words) at the same time. My view is that we tend to talk about Ubuntu/humanism and yet we do very little to practice it. To decolonize, as Fanon has taught us, is to practice humanism as opposed to talking about humanism. Fanon made this point in his reflections on colonial relations, that Western Man talks about humanism (human rights, human dignity etc.) and yet perpetuates anti-humanist projects (such as colonialism and neocolonialism) around the world. The temptation for those who suffered (and continue to suffer) the injustices of colonialism is to seek revenge but to decolonize is to move away from the logic of coloniality that designates others as ontologically and epistemologically inferior. It is to embrace humanity in its diversity.

In light of the Stellenbosch University incident, some people from different quarters of South African society have already called on the University to expel the "racist" student. Is that a solution? That is the question. Such an approach assumes that the white student is behaving in a vacuum, yet the student's behavior is most likely a microcosm of a bigger problem both at the University and in society. Decolonization is not a vengeful project. It's about seeking ways of building a humane society where cultures can interact with mutual respect. Advocating the expulsion of the student is most likely to entrench racial tensions. A good starting point would be to understand why the white student behaved the way he did, to try and see the human in what may appear as apparent inhumanity. Ultimately, the goal of decolonization is not to apportion blame or

beat others into submission but to re-humanise, deracialize and puliversalise. The question that we should be asking in light the Stellenbosch incident is what conditions could have enabled this behaviour. Do students from different racial groups at this university touch each other? What programs are there, not only to decolonize the explicit curriculum, but also to decolonize minds, culture and values of the University? If these questions are not addressed, this incident will not be the last one to happen, either at this university or at other universities in South Africa.

Fanon once said that decolonization is, of necessity, a violent process. By this, he meant, at least at the time, that those who lived under brutal colonial regimes needed to take up arms and fight against those who presided over their suffering. However, Fanon's notion of violence-as-decolonization is not only literal but also metaphorical. Metaphorically, it means decolonization does not come on a silver platter. It requires us to deliberately disrupt systems, patterns of thought and ways of doing things. One can read the behaviour of the white student at Stellenbosch University as a reflection of the perpetuation of the coloniality of power and the coloniality of being within the University corridors. To decolonize is to dismantle power structures and hierarchies of the colonial system that perpetuate even after the end of colonialism. This is particularly important in former whites-only universities where everything was originally designed for a particular race. The "white boys thing" is probably a ritualistic rights-of-passage performance that validates one's whiteness. To decolonize is thus to deracialize power by dismantling racial hierarchies that keep the former colonised/black child on the darker side of the University education system. What conditions make it possible, not only for the white student to pee on a black student's belongings but also for the black student to become the object of such abuse? The decolonization of education is in many ways intricately intertwined with the decolonization of society. We cannot decolonize education and education institutions without decolonising society. The reason is that students and academics are human beings who come from particular social groups and communities. The University is in fact an extension of society and what happens at Stellenbosch mirrors what happens in South African society in general.

Decolonising the African university is indeed a painstaking exercise, not only because of ongoing contestations about what decoloniality and decolonization actually mean but also because decolonization is a potential threat to the status quo. The Stellenbosch incident and the reaction it has attracted from South African society shows that there are two ways of doing decolonization. Firstly, we can think of decolonization as an attempt to move away the culture of the colonial system that consists of dehumanization, violence (both physical and epistemic) and racial hierarchisation of humanity. Secondly, we can think of decolonization as a "payback time" project which aims to victimize real and perceived victimizers of yesterday. This means if you are white you cannot make a mistake, otherwise you will be labelled racist and expelled from the University. Here I am not suggesting that the white student at Stellenbosch University was right or wrong. I am simply trying to show that decolonization is not an "ant-this and anti-that" agenda. It is an agenda to reconcile the world. It is important to resist narrow forms of decolonization that often masquerade as radical because they easily degenerate into other ugly things such as xenophobia, homophobia and tribalism. To decolonize is to see the world from where you stand, not to reject the world because of where you stand. Lessons can be drawn from the Zimbabwean experience

where decolonization has been reduced to a narrow partisan project and schools and Universities have, arguably, become platforms for indoctrination as opposed to centres of robust intellectual engagement. Narrowly conceptualised decolonization often degenerates into name-calling and violence. In such contexts (Zimbabwe is a good example), if you think differently, you become a detractor, sell out and a puppet of the West. In my view, the University of Stellenbosch has done the right thing by refusing to bow down to pressure from “radical decolonization groups” and insisting on following due process. A true decolonial agenda always values the humanity of others, no-matter who they are and what they have done.

In sum, decolonisation, particularly in South African education ought to focus on rehumanising (creating conditions that ensure interracial co-existence and mutual respect), pluriversalising knowledge (creating conditions that ensure that all humans are recognized as creators/producers of knowledge) and lastly deracialisation of power (creating conditions that balance power dynamics in the University space and in society in general). The African University ought to be conscious of the history of colonialism and how it has shaped knowledge production and power relations. All stakeholders in the education system, regardless of race ought to see decolonization as an agenda that seeks to bring justice as opposed to vengeance. In light of ‘decolonial’ movements such as #RhodesMustFall movement, which called for the removal of offensive monuments in University spaces, the case of the Stellenbosch student should be seen as a wakeup call on Universities in South Africa (and Africa in general) to rethink their decolonization and/or transformation agendas, to say how do we decolonize minds and facilitate intercultural communication.