Geoforum xxx (xxxx) xxx–xxx

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Geoforum

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/geoforum

Debate Piece

Which road to decolonizing the curricula? Interrogating African higher education futures

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
African futures
Decolonization
Curricula
Higher education
Entrepreneurship
Tanzania

ABSTRACT

African universities need to decolonize their curricula, the sooner the better. Both the content and the teaching methods need to be evaluated. Decolonization means that Africans have both control over the process of formulating curricula and the knowledge produced through them. However, decolonization should not mean teaching only about Africa or isolating the continent from the rest of the world, but teaching what is useful to African societies under its natural environment. A key facet of decolonization must also entail the development of Africa situated perspectives on global problems, such as inequality, terrorism, and climate change. Africa must position itself as owner, producer and user of local knowledge that also has regional and global resonance.

1. Decolonization in the context of higher education

Universities are engines of regional socio-economic development and entrepreneurial innovations. To many economic geographers, universities are centers for creating knowledge and resource networks, which help in the formulation of new ideas, technologies and their practical application (Gråsjö et al., 2018). In Africa today, most universities struggle to achieve such objectives given they face many challenges, including increased enrollment, inadequate infrastructure, and lack of funds. Issues, such as these have forced public universities to undergo significant structural changes; for instance, the adoption of a more business-oriented approach, while private universities have proliferated significantly (Mamdani, 2007; Munene, 2015). Given that many African economies have experienced jobless economic growth since the 2000s, pressing questions remain with respect to the role that higher-education systems should and can play in the process of structural transformation.

The debate on African futures is helpful, because it reminds us that for African societies decolonization is not only necessary to overcome existing exploitative political and economic orders, but also "to provide original responses to universal issues, such as health, education, democratic participation and social organizational" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2014: 199; Sarr, 2016).

According to the Council on Higher Education (CHE) (2018), the decolonization of the curriculum entails the resurfacing of subjugated knowledges and reorienting knowledge production in order to do away with education that presumes that "everything that is advanced, good and civilised is defined and measured in European terms" (Kelley, 2000: 27). In the context of this paper, decolonization is understood as a process whereby African people demand changes to their curricula and the possibility to formulate and implement their own ideas, development agendas, strategies and plans as free citizens in their own countries. The remainder of this paper highlights the importance of decolonization in higher education for other African futures, drawing specifically on recent developments in Tanzania.

2. Why decolonize the curricula, and how does it define african futures?

There are several problems with the current higher education curricula in many African countries, which makes decolonizing the curriculum a necessity rather than mere political talk. In this section, I will discuss a few of them briefly and highlight the way forward, using the Tanzanian case to illustrate my points. I have been working as a lecturer in Tanzania for more than fifteen years, six of them teaching postgraduate students and participating in curriculum development. The problems with Tanzanian universities do not differ significantly from other universities elsewhere in Africa, especially within the East Africa sub-region, where universities work together under the umbrella of the Inter-University Council for East Africa (IUCEA).

First, knowledge systems within the current curricula are not contextualized to the present African environment. Tensions exists between the ambition of decoloniality and the notion that there should be a centralized and rather standardized form of knowledge. However, care

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https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2019.05.025
Received 15 May 2019; Accepted 31 May 2019

must be taken to differentiate between the humanities and social sciences on one side, and natural sciences on the other. In the humanities and social sciences it could be possible to have a more localized form of knowledge, while in the natural sciences (biology, engineering, physics), decolonization may need to be looked at differently because of the challenges to achieve assumingly universal laws of nature.

In Tanzania, the practice is that in research, for example, universities have similar guidelines for writing proposals, research reports, dissertations and theses. There is no flexibility in developing proposals. One size-fits-all, and students are taught to follow the guidelines properly. This could be attributed to colonial models of bureaucracy that shape research and training among many African Universities. With respect to decolonization, such guidelines limit the possibilities because they are a product of Western ontologies and epistemologies, which in turn shapes how researchers define problems and find solutions (Macamo, 2005; Nldovu-Gathseni, 2017). Thankfully, a few African universities, such as the African Leadership University (ALU) in Mauritius and Ashesi University College in Ghana are beginning to think outside Western ontologies and epistemologies (Chilisa, 2012).

A key facet of decolonization must also entail the development of Africa situated perspectives on global problems, such as inequality, terrorism, and climate change. Developing such knowledges does not mean that educators teach only about Africa or that researchers isolate the continent from the rest of the world, but that higher education institutions focus on what is *useful* to African societies and natural environments (Heleta, 2016). The future of Africa's education systems, and their ability to facilitate structural transformations, lies in whether curricula can be contextualized and synchronized in relation to local development challenges. An important question in this regard is who gets to decide on what is or is not useful?

Second, the current curriculum setting and knowledge systems position Africa as a "net importer" rather than "net exporter" of global knowledge (Heleta, 2016). Sarr (2016) proposes that the aim of decolonizing the curricula should be to regain "intellectual sovereignty" in order to develop our own metaphors for the future so as to eliminate the long time effects of alienation and enslavement. As a remedy, African universities need to re-position themselves as producers and exporters of global knowledge. The resources are already there, they just need to be recognized and harnessed, as Mbembe (2013) notes:

> "*So there are a whole set of areas where Africa's contribution to the world of ideas and praxis can be highlighted for the benefit for the world with implications for all sorts of things: theories of exchange, theories of democracy, theories of human rights, and the rights of other species, including natural species, in this age of ecological crisis. It is work that has not been done, but it is time that we are doing it.*"

Third, decolonization means that Africans have both control over the process of formulating curricula and the knowledge produced through them. As it currently stands, both the process of formulating the curricula and producing knowledge originates from the West. For example, in Tanzania, the procedure outlined by the Tanzania Commission for Universities (TCU) for developing new curricula requires universities to benchmark and compare these to international and national and regional priorities. However, the TCU does not provide guidelines on how such benchmarking ought to be done and many curriculum developers simply copy those already established in Western universities. Lacking in this process is a clear distinction between knowledge that should be universalized/globalized and that which should be localized/contextualized with respect Tanzania's specific development challenges.

The curriculum content is not the only thing to blame; teaching methods are of serious concern as well. Curricula in some universities specify that lecturers should use examples from Tanzania and the rest of Africa as much as possible. However, the practice is different, lecturers do not consider the curriculum; instead they opt to apply examples coming from outside of Africa, especially from Europe and North America, which are easily accessible via internet searches. Indeed, Mbembe (2015: 6) warns us that "we cannot keep teaching the way we have always taught". His main argument is that the current curriculum development *and* teaching and learning systems among higher education institutions discourage students and teachers from a free pursuit of knowledge, and there need to be changes the sooner the better.

3. A view on practical alternatives

There are a few universities in Africa which have shown some practical examples on how to decolonise the curricula – at least to some extent. A particularly good example is the African Leadership University (ALU) in Mauritius. One of its faculty members, Auerbach (2017), outlines seven key principles (commitments) that mark the attempt by ALU to decolonize its curricula. First, the university privileges the use of open access sources and publications that reduce resource burdens on libraries, scholars, and students. Second, ALU encourages students to use languages other than English such that they not forget that knowledge is produced, consumed, and tested in other tongues. Third, ALU decolonises the curricula through the student exchange ratio, where the university balances the ratio such that the number of African students who go for exchange in Europe is proportional to that of European students who visit ALU. Fourth, ALU has recognized that text, written forms of knowledge, are alone insufficient to enough to achieve decolonization. To eliminate this, the university is transforming its systems of storing knowledge to include non-textual sources of history, culture, and belief: studying artefacts, music, advertising, architecture, food, and many more. Fifth, ALU is also emphasizing the need for students to participate in unpacking the current knowledge systems hence contributing to the university's mission and vision.

The sixth principle encourages ALU students to position themselves not only as consumers but also as owners and producers of global knowledge. Seventh, and finally, ALU also insists that students maintain an African ethos; that is, to think and act to the highest ethical standards, and to expect the same from others with who they work together. This however, is not uniquely African. It can be traced back to the McKinsey principle #25 ("find the best intent in people" and principle #27 ("think of everyone as a helpful individual, not a 'resource'") (Hattori, 2015). It is not surprising to see ALU applying some of the McKinsey principles; the founder of ALU is a former employee of McKinsey, who embraces the culture of the consultancy world, and education with a Silicon Valley touch – itself a contradiction with the ambition to fully decolonize African educational systems, as this invokes the capitalist culture of a specific milieu in the US.

4. Conclusion

African universities need to decolonize their curricula, the sooner the better. Both the content and the teaching methods need to be evaluated. However, decolonization should not mean teaching only about Africa or isolating the continent from the rest of the world, but teaching what is *useful* to African societies under its natural environment. Distinction ought to be made between decolonization in humanities and social sciences and in natural sciences. In the humanities and social sciences it could be possible to have more localized forms of knowledge, while in the natural sciences decolonization it appears to be somewhat more challenging to achieve. Regardless of this, Africa must position itself as owner, producer and user of local knowledge that also has regional and global resonance.

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