

Combating colonial mentality within higher learning spaces: The case of sub-Saharan African universities

Babalola Joseph Balogun, Emnet Tadesse Woldegiorgis

Ali Mazrui Centre for Higher Education Studies,
University of Johannesburg, South Africa

Abstract

As former colonies of Western imperial powers, virtually all aspects of African life have been invaded by forces of Western hegemony. Colonial mentality is the blind assimilation or internalisation of the colonial powers' socio-cultural forms resulting in the destructive and disruptive abandonment of the ways of life of the colonies. As it applies to Africa, colonial mentality is a product of African cultural invasion in which, having been exposed to colonial experience for a long time, an average African has internalised foreign ideas and ideals—so much so that she has lost the authentic African ways of life in the process. Using philosophical methods of argumentation and critical engagements, this paper contends that a connection exists between colonial mentality and the observed failure of African universities to efficiently effectuate their relevance as Africa's development partners. The paper identifies four key areas in which colonial mentality plays out most profoundly in African universities, namely, the nature of knowledge produced, the mode of certification, the language of instruction, and research funding. The paper argues that the incursion of colonial mentality in these vital areas continues to impede African universities' capacity to substantively contribute to African development drives and aspirations. Given this close nexus, the paper maintains that African universities may never realise their potential as a critical sector in African development discourse. This qualitative research is based on critical inquiry through a process of identifying, questioning and assessing deeply held assumptions about Western hegemony. The paper concludes that decolonisation in learning spaces can only be a feasible project if it is accorded the seriousness that it deserves by all stakeholders both within and outside the university.

Keywords: Colonial mentality, Western idea of university, African universities, African development aspirations, decolonisation

Introduction

By “colonial mentality in higher learning spaces”, we mean the unpatriotic disposition of African intelligentsia to reject things that are of African cultural origins, and cling to things that are foreign to their cultural orientations and social ontology. Such a mindset has pushed African epistemology to the margins of learning spaces and has saddled the continent with irrelevant knowledge that disempowers Africans. This disposition is historically embedded in the colonial experience to which Africans were, and are still being, exposed. Colonialism stayed long enough in Africa for its people to develop cultural dementia, altered identity and distorted reality. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2017) describes colonisation as an immense project covering the alienation of power, space, time, being, nature, gender, spirituality, aesthetics and knowledge. Africans have been denied, and are thus devoid of, history, context and the ability to understand themselves in relation to others. It is thus of paramount importance to articulate that altered identity which snatched away African voices in the arrogant face of the status quo.

Although physical colonialism has long left Africa, Africans continue to act in ways that undermine their mental freedom in a post-independence era (Thondhlana & Garwe, 2021). This point is reinforced by Taiwo in a recent article where he accuses African leaders and intellectuals of what he calls *acquired independence deficiency*:

The irony is that the African fought for the independence with mirth and main but have done little to exercise independence or provide evidence that it occupies any serious place in their lives, in the design of their institutions—social, cultural, economic, political or legal—or in their embrace of borrowed practices and processes. (Taiwo, 2019, p. 33)

With the foregoing backdrop, the central claim of the paper is that a nexus could be established between the uncritical acceptance of the Western idea of a university, occasioned by the phenomenon of colonial mentality and African universities’ ongoing inability to effectively play their roles as the continent’s development partners. Hence, the paper aims at achieving three principal objectives, distributed along three sections of the paper. In section one, the paper reviews the idea of a university. This section is very important because it reveals the genealogy of the idea of the university, as currently reflected in the African case, as the invention of the

Western hegemony foisted on the continent during colonial rule. Section two of the paper identifies areas in which colonial mentality most profoundly plays out in the African university system. In doing this, the paper primarily aims to demonstrate how the Western-inflected idea of university continues to hamper the extent to which African universities can go in the realisation of their essence as major players in Africa's development agenda. In section three, the paper reiterates the urgent need to decolonise African universities if they are to have a reasonable impact on the African development drive.

To avert confusion as far as our position is concerned, there is a need to clarify some of the assumptions undergirding the central thesis of the paper. Two such assumptions are worth mentioning from the outset. The first is our view on the nature of African identity, and the second is the variant of decolonisation that we adopt in the paper. In the first place, the paper accepts the essentialist view of the African identity. Essentialism in matters of African identity is the view that, as a people, Africans¹ have a uniqueness that differentiates them from any other group of human beings in the world. This essentialism derives from the concept of culture, which has been widely accepted to be a way of life for a group of people. However, given the non-static nature of culture within the historical context, our essentialist framework allows for changes within the socio-cultural milieu. These changes are rather accidental, not substantial, in the sense that they do not affect the core values, beliefs and socio-cultural outlooks of a people. They are merely transformative developments within every culture, which account for cultures' evolutionary progress from being simple to more sophisticated. For instance, that people move from simple culinary or linguistic culture to a complex one does not mean that they discard their local foods or languages in favour of foreign ones. On the contrary, it means that they have improved the ways they prepare their foods or have expanded the scope of their vocabularies in accordance with the dictate of the current realities.

Given the compatibility of our essentialist view of identity with (accidental) change within a culture, the paper resists possible objections to essentialism based on the alleged

¹ We adopt Agbakoba's criteria for defining who is an African. For him, an African cannot be strictly determined by the criterion of being domiciled in the African continent, given that there are people who are geographically classed as Africans, but whose descent and evolution find a better explanation outside of Africa. This description is apt for the North Africans. Agbakoba also rejects the classification of Africans based on racial/biological criterion, which views an African as a negro or a negroid, the reason being that there are individuals in this class who, having lost their link with their African roots, are only superficially African. He settles for cultural and ideological criteria for identifying an African. Accordingly, an African is "a person who shares in African culture and/or the history of African culture and is involved in its re-creation and evolution" (Agbakoba, 2014, p. 98). We take this description to be a near representation of an African.

neglect of the historical development of the university culture as an incursion of Western heritage on African identity. For one, our essentialism significantly diverges from what Agbakoba (2014) derisively refers to as the “immutabilist” view of identity because it can yield change. Our position is that the changes do not alter the identity from what it is to what it is not, much as the changes occurring in a growing child do not alter the child from who she is to who she is not. Agbakoba’s (2014) own “mutabilist” account grossly misunderstands the nature of identity. When the question of identity is asked, what is usually expected is some enduring markers which differentiate one thing, person or people from another. The mutabilist view of identity thus blurs this demarcationist apparatus of identity, thereby denying each cultural group its uniqueness.

As for the variant of decolonisation being espoused here, the moderate version presents itself most forcefully. Not all aspects of African universities can be decolonised without the universities themselves being dispensed with altogether. To be sure, Africa needs universities to generate relevant knowledge that can benefit her in her development drive. However, while we cannot decolonise the need for African universities to research and teach to generate knowledge, the kind of knowledge generated and taught to African students should constitute a great concern to Africans. This is because not all kinds of knowledge are beneficial or profitable to Africa; this is contrary to the saying that “no knowledge is lost”.

The idea of a university

The idea of a university and higher education has been hazily and indistinctly defined and conceptualised by several scholars since the Middle Ages. There is no consensus on the meaning, conceptualisation and narratives of the very idea of a university and what it constitutes. The notion of a university and higher education as we know it today has been predominantly shaped and conceptualised within the distinctive features of European historical trajectories. The “idea of a university” here refers to the essence of a university. In the ordinary manner of speaking, “essence” means the most fundamental aspect of a thing. The essence of a thing is that property that makes that thing what it is. Philosophically speaking, the essence of an object comprises the most intrinsic property of the object. According to Metz (2018, p. 221), “a thing’s essence is those properties it would have in any possible world in which it exists”. The essence of a thing thus defines its existence. An object loses itself (i.e., fails to be what it is) when it loses its essence. The essence of a knife is to be able to cut; so, if it fails to cut, it has lost its essence as a knife, even though its physical structure persists.

With this essentialist background, to talk about the idea of a university is to ask about the most essential aspect(s) of a university. What are these features of a university? Everyone will agree that the idea of a university is incomplete without features such as teaching, learning and research. Some interconnectedness exists among these three features. Teaching is usually accompanied by learning (Of what use is teaching without learning?). Teaching is a matter of sharing relevant information, while learning is the receiving thereof; hence wherever there is teaching, learning is always present. Given that it is a place where there are teaching and learning, the idea of a university is also characterised by the intercourse between teachers and students (Alemu, 2018).

The uniqueness of the university system lies in the role that research plays in teaching and learning. The function of the university was to advance knowledge by original and critical investigation, not just to transmit the legacy of the past or to teach skills (Anderson, 2009). Even though teaching and learning are important elements of university life, the direction of what is taught and learnt is properly determined by the kind, model and quality of research available. This is the so-called “principle of unity of teaching and research”, which is the first out of the three undergirding principles of the idea of a university identified by Humboldt (1809). The principle of unity of teaching and research is “critical both of research divorced from teaching, undertaken by private scholars or in separate research institutes, without the stimulation of sharing those investigations with young minds, and of higher education divorced from original enquiry” (Lucas & Boulton, 2008). Hence, given the centrality of research to the Humboldtian idea of the university, while it may be possible to conceive of the idea of a university without teaching and learning, it is almost impossible to have a university without research.

The other two principles upon which the idea of a university is based, identified by Humboldt (1809), are freedom of teaching and academic self-governance. Freedom of teaching could be interpreted to mean that university professors have the discretionary capacity to determine the contents of their curricula in line with their years of academic discoveries and intellectual convictions. This presupposes or demands that university professors have a sufficient level of academic maturity and leadership required to utilise the freedom of teaching to the advantage of their students and society at large. The principle of academic self-government, on the other hand, is meant to protect academic work from the distortions of government control (Lucas & Boulton, 2008). The search for truth, which is the hallmark of

research activities within the university, should not be meddled with to preserve the integrity of research outcomes. Hence, university professors are meant to be unfettered (in their pursuits and dissemination of truth) by any agent that may put their research activities at risk of compromise or distortion. In summary, the Humboldtian principles aim at the idea of a university wherein teaching is informed by research, where the contents of teaching and learning are products of critical studies and rational convictions of academic staff, and where the autonomy of knowledge producers is guaranteed in its fullness.

Another scholar whose thought has shaped the Western idea of a university is Henry Newman. As cited in Lucas & Boulton, (2008), with less emphasis on research than Humboldt, Newman views the idea of a university as a place where:

students come from every quarter for every kind of knowledge; ... a place for the communication and circulation of thought, by means of personal intercourse. ... It is the place to which a thousand schools make contributions; in which the intellect may safely range and speculate. It is a place where inquiry is pushed forward, ... discoveries verified and perfected, and ... error exposed, by the collision of mind with mind, and knowledge with knowledge (Lucas & Boulton, 2008, p. 3).

Fundamental to Newman's definition is the idea of a university as a place for teaching universal knowledge (Alemu, 2018; Fuller, 2004). This, to him, implies that the object of a university is, "on the one hand, intellectual, not moral; and, on the other, that it is the diffusion and extension of knowledge rather than the advancement" (Newman, 2008, p. ix). According to Newman, the fact that there are students in the university indicates that its primary essence is neither a scientific nor philosophical discovery. This downplays the place of research as the essence of a university.

Newman's conception of the university as a place where universal knowledge is taught continues to generate controversies. Specifically, the notion of the universality of knowledge has raised a few questions. If a piece of knowledge is generated in a particular region of the world, then it becomes questionable how such knowledge attains the status of universality. Gwaravanda & Ndofirepi (2021, p. 1) rhetorically ask, "If research method arose within a particular culture and context, how do they gain universality?" What makes a piece of knowledge universal: Is it its origin or its validity across cultural and temporal boundaries? Of

course, being universal cannot be tied to geographical origin, for that will imply that people of other origins cannot generate universal ideas, which will be unacceptable. Also, it would be difficult to grant that an idea *always* applies to all peoples because that would undermine ontological differences among a variety of peoples and the uniqueness of each temporal reality.

Given this and other controversies in which the concept of universality is shrouded, scholars of the Global South are beginning to explore an alternative to universality, popularly known as pluriversality (Gayá, 2021; Gwaravanda & Ndofirepi, 2020; Mignolo, 2018). It is not the aim of the pluriversalists to entirely reject universality as an epistemological doctrine; what they are up against is the universalisation of universal thinking (Vasconcelos & Martin, 2018). Hence, instead of having an overarching epistemological paradigm which dominates or reigns over all, and the destructive silencing of other equally valid epistemological paradigms, the pluriversalist explores the possibility of having several competing epistemological worldviews slug it out in the marketplace of ideas. It is the acknowledgement that a tree does not make a forest as far as knowledge production is concerned. In the pluriversal mode of thinking, knowledge is a multi-tiered venture that takes into consideration the possibility of coexistence among many worlds and paradigms of meaning. Hence, pluriversality is convivial, dialogical and plurallogical in its epistemological approach to reality (Gwaravanda & Ndofirepi, 2020).

It could, therefore, be submitted that the universalist model of the idea of a university is an extension of the imperialist hegemonic and megalomaniac strategy for keeping the Global South continually epistemologically impotent, culturally alienated and ontologically disoriented in questions most critical to their survival, and to which they have rich and more epistemologically viable alternative responses. Obsessed with the appetite for the production of globally accepted knowledge, African universities have been made not to see what truly matters within the context of their existence; and have become engrossed in the production of academic content that they neither entirely understand nor are they needing. Keim (2008, p. 32) observes that “African scholarly production is oriented neither towards the local peers nor to one’s own society, but towards the overseas public.” Besieged by the philosophy of limits in which (post)colonial African education is circumscribed (Taiwo, 2019), the quest for universality has continued to encumber African universities from being truly independent in every critical sector of knowledge production.

The two views of the idea of a university considered in this section, namely, Humboldt and Newman, represent the two dominant Western models of university. The first, as we have

demonstrated, takes the primary essence of a university to be research, given that the quality of teaching and learning is determined by the quality of research available. The second holds the idea that a university is a place where universal ideas are taught and learnt, and that knowledge acquired in the university setting is not meant for other purposes beyond the knowledge itself. Both views could be reconciled by arguing that, since research drives teaching and learning, and both are supposed to result in universal ideas, then the real essence of research is to produce universal outputs. However, given the identified link between the politics of universality and the imperialist project of neo-colonialism in learning spaces, especially in postcolonial Africa, this idea of a university becomes suspect.

As we have also noted, research is the driver of teaching and learning. Hence, if research is not well motivated, properly intended and culturally oriented, the result would be an intellectually shallow, socially confused and culturally alienated generation of scholars, and a university system that is irresponsive to its responsibilities as an agent of social transformation. The idea of a university in which the academic staff has absolute freedom to invest their time researching whatever catches their intellectual fancies—regardless of the social, political, or economic relevance of the outputs on the overall wellbeing of the tax-paying populace—is not only insensitive but also wasteful.

It is our position here that the essence of the university in Africa should be seen in the light of its relevance to Africa's development agenda. Hence, Africa must occupy the central concern of the African universities' overall activities. This is not intended to mean that African universities have no use for research, teaching or learning of other people, only insofar as it contributes to the understanding of the African situation and how to enhance it. The truth remains the ideal end of every academic inquiry. However, we contend that not all truths are of developmental relevance to Africa. African universities must thus be selective in their search for truth by limiting their search to only the truths that have beneficial consequences for African realities. In the following section, the paper identifies and discusses four areas in which African universities manifest colonial mentality, and how these hinder them from realising their essence as Africa's development partners.

Colonial mentality within learning spaces

Colonial mentality is a culturally inauthentic attitude or state of mind, occasioned by the historical antecedence of colonialism that results in deep-seated animosity towards self. It also

causes the rejection of the indigenous ways of life of the colonised in favour of the ways of life of the erstwhile colonial powers, which are considered better, more civilised and acceptable. Hence, for Alicia Soller (2017), “colonial mentality is a form of internalised oppression that conditions colonised people that their ethnic or cultural identity is inferior to Western culture or whiteness. Therefore, they live their lives striving to be westernised and learning to hate their indigenous roots.” Colloquially dubbed “colo-mentality” by Kuti (1977), one of the foremost Nigerian musicians and activists, the colonial mentality is the tendency among African elites to consider everything African inferior and everything Western to be extolled as a standard for human existence. It is a multidimensional construct that refers to personal feelings or beliefs of ethnic or cultural inferiority (David & Okazaki, 2006; Utsey, et al., 2015).

There are elements in the African university system that continue to hold on, unabated, to vestiges of colonial mentality. A critical review of African universities reveals several such elements, but in this section, we shall identify and critically discuss four of them. They are: first, the belief that a university is a place meant for acquiring knowledge for its own sake (knowledge-for-knowledge’s-sake argument); second, the emphasis on paper qualification; third, the instructional methodology—with emphasis on foreign languages as the medium of instruction; and fourth, research funding in African universities. In discussing these themes, the section is motivated by two objectives, namely, to demonstrate how the elements constitute barriers to the relevance of African universities to the development aspirations of Africa, and the need to decolonise African universities in these areas.

One of the legacies bequeathed to African universities by the colonial regime is the belief that knowledge is to be sought for its own sake. Newman specifically holds this position (Anderson, 2013; Anderson, 2009). This is to say that knowledge is intrinsically good, which implies that it owes its goodness not to its relationship to anything else, but solely to its own nature (Kraut, 2010). The foundations of this belief are diverse. One of them is the distinction philosophers have drawn between extrinsic or instrumental value on the one hand and intrinsic or ultimate values on the other. Extrinsic or instrumental values are those sought not for their own sake, but for the achievements of further values. Intrinsic or ultimate values, in contrast, are not sought for the sake of bringing about further values or good; rather, they are sought for themselves. Kraut (2010, p. 450) defines intrinsic value as referring to “what is good in itself, or good for its own sake, or good as such, or good in its own right, or good without qualification, or good absolutely, or good *tout court*, or good *san phrase*”. Evidence abounds

that philosophers such as Aristotle (Irwin, 2019), Ross and Ross (2002) as well as Moore (Hurka, 2021) have identified knowledge, either explicitly or implicitly, as an intrinsic value or good.

Canonical as the knowledge-for-knowledge-sake argument seems, there are reasons² to doubt its neutrality as far as its affiliation with colonial mentality is concerned. Three such reasons are discussed here. First, the belief is deeply rooted in Western individualism; thus, it is selfish and un-African. It contradicts the African philosophy of communalism and the moral principle of Ubuntu, which gives primacy only to actions done with the good of others in view. There is a need to show how knowledge for its own sake wears the badge of individualism. The history of Western philosophy is replete with agreements on the description of knowledge as a form of intellectual pleasure. In ancient Greek philosophy, scholars like Plato and Aristotle recognise knowledge as a higher pleasure. In Plato's *Republic*, for instance, Socrates suggests that there is a particular kind of pleasure peculiar to each part of the human soul, taken respectively in profit, honour and *knowledge and its acquisition* (Rowe, 2012). Since the rational part superintends over the appetitive and spirited parts in Plato's tripartite division of the soul, it is easy to see that the pleasure peculiar to it, that is, knowledge and its acquisition, takes the highest form of pleasure. Also, Aristotle includes intellectual pleasures in the list of his human highest good. Mill (1863, chapter 2), in his outline of the utilitarian principle, writes that "[T]here is no known Epicurean theory of life which does not assign to the *pleasures of the intellect*, of the feelings and imagination, and of the moral sentiments, a much higher value as pleasures than to those of mere sensation."

The hedonistic conception of knowledge betrays its selfish tendencies and its insensitivity to, or detachment from, surrounding realities. It views knowledge as neatly and indisputably within the purview of the individual will, with little or no concern for realities outside the individual. This manner of thinking is deeply rooted in the egocentric philosophy of Descartes, whose *cogito ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am) formalises Western individualism and capitalist orientation and attitude of the mind. In Descartes' epistemological vision, the

² Here we are not denying that some areas of research such as mathematics, logic, theoretical physics, etc., could be studied for their own sake; neither are we discouraging African scholars from engaging in these legitimate areas of enquiry. The point we are defending is that in engaging with these subjects, African scholars should be primarily motivated, unlike their counterparts elsewhere, not by mere satisfaction of their academic curiosity or enjoyment of mental pleasure. Our argument is that, as third-world academic professionals, it is morally imperative on African scholars to look beyond the parochial tendencies of their disciplines and start to reflect concerns for African predicaments in their research. It is our position that every discipline has capacity for this just demand.

knower is taken out of the worldly context and locked up within the bounds of her own ego, where she lives on the illusion that she alone exists in a world populated by others. Because the individual in Descartes' epistemology cannot go beyond herself and, thus, must ratify other knowable objects in the light of her subjectivity, the knowledge of the self becomes absolute, and the knower so content that the knowledge acquired is raised to the level of pleasure, which is sought for its own sake.

The Kenyan philosopher, John Mbiti, was perhaps the first African scholar to identify the absurdity in Descartes' philosophy. Whereas Descartes "believes that a human being is essentially self-contained and self-sufficient; an inherently rational, mind-bound subject, who ought to encounter the world outside her head with scepticism" (Birhane, 2017), Mbiti (1969) points out that such an introspective knowledge-stance is irreconcilable with an African epistemological framework. As he puts it in what has now become a cliché within academic circles "I am because we are, and because we are, therefore, I am" (Mbiti 1969, p. 106). Thus, in the place of the crude individualism that characterises Western epistemology, Africans recognise communion (Metz, 2020), organicism (Gbadegesin, 1991), harmony (Mokgoro, 1998), cohesion (Masolo, 2010), and community-belongingness (Iroegbu, 2005; Nkondo, 2007). The summary of this African collectivist ontology is succinctly captured by Metz:

On the one hand, there is what I call "identifying with" others or "sharing a way of life" with them, that is ... considering oneself part of the whole, being close, belonging, being bound up with others and feeling integrated. On the other, there is exhibiting solidarity with other[s], and caring for their quality of life, namely, achieving the good of all, being sympathetic, service, being committed to others' good, and being concerned for others' welfare. Metz (2020, p. 125)

The above will lead to the second reason why we take "knowledge for its own sake" to be un-African, namely, that Africans do not do things just for the purpose of doing them. There is always a reason for doing something, and this reason transcends the parochial considerations of the doer. When one asks a *typical* African, "Why did you do X?", one is not likely to get "I did X because I felt like doing it" as a response. In the traditional African ethics of Ubuntu, the "I" is relegated to the barest minimum for the "we" to emerge. Unlike the I-consciousness that pervades the Western cultural philosophy of personhood, Ubuntu proponents believe in interdependence; hence they emphasise that: "a person is a person through other persons" (Waghid et al., 2018, p.55). With this outlook on human nature, every action or inaction is

inspired by the desire to affect others positively, alleviate human conditions, and make the world a better place for its inhabitants.³ To put it within the context of the current discourse, the ideal end of knowledge is to be measured by how well it conduces to human wellbeing, and not by its satisfaction of the pleasure-seeking appetite of an individual's intellectual sensibilities.

Following from the above is our third Afro-centric case against the knowledge-for-its-own-sake argument: it is insensitive, unpatriotic and wasteful for knowledge to be sought for its own sake in a continent struggling with the woes of underdevelopment in virtually all critical sectors of its existence. A properly decolonised African university cannot pride itself on the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake in the face of the deprecatory state of human conditions and infrastructural challenges in Africa. Metz (2019, p.1) asks if it is justified for a scholar on the continent of Africa to spend her time pursuing knowledge for its own sake, and for a public university to pay her to do so, given the ubiquitous problems of poverty, unemployment, oppression, poor healthcare, lack of quality education, worsening insecurity, unprecedented inflation, frustration, etc., which a large percentage of Africans currently experience. Balogun offers a triumvirate of arguments, specifically within the context of philosophy as an academic discipline, to answer Metz's question in the negative.

Balogun's first and most salient argument against knowledge for its own sake appeals to the social context of African philosophy (Metz, 2019, p.4). The warrant for this argument is that philosophy develops in context, and given that no philosophy exists in a vacuum, the contents of philosophical inquiries should reflect the realities (contexts) of the social, political and economic milieu within which it is practised (Balogun, 2008a, 2013). In his second argument, Balogun (2008b) opines that the African context of the concept of an "educated person" presupposes a life of service to the community to which the educated person belongs.

After an educational experience (whether formal, informal, or non-formal), it is expected that the educated should be able to turn his or her acquired skill and knowledge into a citizenship service ... The emphasis on the intrinsic value of knowledge and other related experiences shows again, the point of divergence

³ That many Africans do not live or act in the manner described, or because there are problems in Africa, does not seem to disprove our position here. In contemporary Africa, people are either Christian, Muslims or traditionalists. None of these religions support the violence going on in Africa today. Yet, it is wrong to deny either that the majority of Africans are Christians, Muslims and traditionalists or that none of these religions preaches violence.

between the African understanding of an educated person and the Western conceptual model. (Balogun, 2008b, p. 123–124)

This may be properly called a pragmatic approach to education. The third argument advanced to show the impropriety of seeking knowledge for its own sake by Balogun is hinged on an African moral viewpoint that “it would be immoral to devote time, money, and other resources to an inquiry that is unlikely to make a practical difference in people’s lives” (Metz, 2019, p. 8). This last argument is especially forceful, not only because the resources expended on a “profitless” venture are scarce but also because they could have been spent on other critical sectors with more possibility of yielding practical utility or benefits to people’s lives.

Although Metz has raised some objections to Balogun’s submission, especially the first two arguments, our position, has a similar point of departure to that of Balogun. The university system is a huge public investment, gulping up several billion in annual budgetary allocations in each African state. Given its capital-intensiveness, the financial cost of running universities in some African countries has become so burdensome that it has negatively impacted the financing of other critical sectors of their national lives. As an investment, African universities are expected to yield practical profits, not merely equipping the younger generation of Africans with knowledge and skills required for better lives in an increasingly competitive global community, but more importantly, in the production of research outputs consciously intended to raise the quality of lives of Africans. Thus, they must not pursue esoteric knowledge that bears no relevance whatsoever to their communities of origin. Just as an individual does not stand aloof from the community, so African universities must not live lives of their own, but rather the lives of the communities that established them. This way, African universities are only free insofar as freedom is a protective mechanism against unnecessary external interferences that may impinge on the realisation of this essence.

The second colonial element in the African educational system generally and in African universities, particularly, is the emphasis placed on paper qualifications. Being educated is increasingly being equated with possessing degree certificates. But it has now been widely established that contrary to the widespread belief that they were absent, formal and informal education were actively present in Africa prior to the arrival of colonialism (Ezeanya-Esiobu, 2019; Mosweunyane, 2013). Writing on the specific case of Nigeria, Taiwo notes that:

Given the available evidence in history, sociology, anthropology and political science, there is sufficient warrant to say that many of the indigenous communities attained a very high level of social differentiation as well as of material and cultural development in the period before the advent of the alien historical movements which disrupted their capacity for autochthony. The only problem is that little has been done to research this mode of knowledge production system and describe their characteristics. Taiwo (1993, p. 894)

What Taiwo avows above is probably true of all African societies. This is because it might be very difficult to sustain the claim that Africans were living in an epistemological vacuum before colonialism arrived in Africa. Evidence exists that Africans were both theoretically and practically learnt in their precolonial mode of existence. For instance, it remains a thing of surprise and intellectual wonder how the primitive Africans were able to develop such a highly complex epistemological system as the *Ifá* divinatory device found among the Yoruba of Nigeria. In fact, “considered as a system of knowledge, the *Ifá* corpus not only had its complement of specialised personnel; it also had, in many communities, spaces exclusively reserved for its dissemination to those who sought to acquire the knowledge it contained” (Taiwo, 1993, p.893). This implies that there were not only professional teachers and practitioners of *Ifá* knowledge, but there were also designated centres or, more precisely, schools, where it was taught and learnt.

Practically speaking, Africa was also not an isolated tabula rasa. There are indications that Africans were fashioning farming and hunting tools to advance their existence and survival. Mosweunyane (2013, p. 52; see also Adeniji, 1983, p.82) argues that “the fabrication of metallic tools and implements, textile production, traditional medicine or food processing, involved the application of various techniques, principles and propositions arrived at through observation of the environment and experimentation at various levels”. The knowledge of herbs for curing various illnesses and diseases ensured that they lived in good health despite the negative impacts of environmental forces that were against them. Scholars like Dugard (2012) identify how artisans wove cloths and baskets, and how they brewed beer from bananas and grain. Several other aspects of the indigenous knowledge production mode that are yet to be investigated—and from which scholarly inquiries are sure to benefit—include the system of music education, technological education and priestly training, among others (Taiwo, 1993).

Although a large corpus of literature has built up around the precolonial African educational system, there has been scant scholarly evidence on the mode of awarding African “students” on successful completion of their courses of training. Amid these limited scholarly resources, the *Igba-boi* business school or apprenticeship model, practised among Igbo people of South East Nigeria readily comes to mind (Agozino & Anyanike, 2007; Lady-Franca, 2016; Iwara et al., 2019; Oyewunmi et al., 2020). Under this practice, an apprentice (i.e., an aspiring entrepreneur [usually] male) lives under a master entrepreneur for a period, during which time he both learns the art of trading and serves the master. After this learning and serving period, the master “settles” him either by giving him money to establish his own business or by giving him some wares to initiate it (Iwara et al., 2019).

Furthermore, such linguistic evidence as *Bí ọmọdé bá tó l’ọkọ, a fun l’ọkọ* (that is, when a [male] child is mature enough to be given a hoe, he is given a hoe) underscores a similar practice among the Yoruba of Southwest Nigeria. Here, a “hoe” represents concepts including freedom, maturity, readiness, independence and responsibility. It is a way of saying “Having satisfied all conditions required for this training, I hereby certify you sufficiently knowledgeable in the craft”. There may be other ways in which this purpose is achieved in other parts of Africa. Notice, however, that in all of these, no other “certificate” is given for having completed a round of education (e.g., apprenticeship, training) beyond practically assisting the “student” to start the craft after evidence of *sufficient proficiency has been established*.

Our submission, therefore, is that paper qualification is not only foreign to the African educational system but has also impacted negatively on the quality of university education in Africa. Given the significance of certificates to their survival outside universities, a high number of African undergraduate and graduate students alike are now more interested in these pieces of paper than the actual acquisition of knowledge and skills made available in the university. The race for certificates has largely compromised the standard of higher education, resulting nowadays in all manner of corrupt practices in African universities. As highlighted by Mohamedbhai below, the ripple effects of this alien practice on contemporary African universities are quite worrisome:

It was reported that in May 2015, South African authorities shut down 42 bogus colleges and universities that were offering fake and unaccredited programs, including three bogus, supposedly US-based universities offering degrees in 15

days. In Nigeria, which has the largest higher education system in Africa, areas, where corruption occurs most frequently among academic staff, are ... promotions, journals and book publications, extortion of money for handouts and marks, and sexual harassment. In a 2012 anonymous survey among 475 students in three East African universities, about a third of the students admitted to plagiarism and to fabrication of references, 25 percent to collusion in an examination to communicate answers, and 5 percent to impersonating someone else in an examination. Even a small country like Mauritius has not been immune to fraud. A couple of supposedly branch campuses of private Indian universities, set up in Mauritius without the necessary approval of Indian authorities and offering degrees that would not be recognised in Mauritius or India, are in the process of being closed down. (Mohamedbhai, 2016, p. 13)

Among others, the above challenges have crippled African universities, preventing them from adequately playing their role as agents of social transformation in their respective national domains. Laziness, dishonesty and irresponsible attitudes among African university students are now so widespread that one wonders what the future holds for these students as professionals in their respective fields, including in the field of education.

The third colonial element we identify in African universities is the instructional methodology, with emphasis on the language of teaching and learning. Language plays a crucial role in the decolonisation project. What one finds, however, is a gravely contradictory situation in which the decolonisation project and conversations are driven by the languages of colonisers such as English, French, German and Portuguese. A laughable instance will suffice as an example. In 2021 at the Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria, the Faculty of Social Science organised a workshop tagged “Rethinking decolonisation of knowledge: A critical scrutiny of African progress”, where all the lofty observations and submissions, including the communique of the workshop, were rendered in English. The height of it all was when a senior faculty of the university insisted that she was grateful for colonialism because, without it, she would not be able to speak as fluent English as she now can, a colonial mentality at its peak! Ironic as this case is, it is a commonplace occurrence as far as decolonisation discourse is concerned.

The language question has been raised at various disciplinary levels in African scholarship. Scholars like (Balogun, 2021; Makinde, 2010; Saro-Wiwa, 1992; and Wa

Thiong'o, 1986) have respectively raised the question in the context of African philosophy and literature. For instance, Balogun (2021, p. 300) has insisted that to “continue to do African philosophy in non-African languages is the very perversion of philosophy, which thrives richly on language”. Although this point is made in relation to the specific case of philosophy, it is probably also valid for other areas of inquiry. This is because central to every discipline is the task of revealing the aspect of reality that it studies. The various aspects of reality studied in different disciplines are revealed to the intellect through thoughts and are expressed through language. In essence, language mirrors reality, and dictates the extent to which the intellect can go in investigating reality.

If language affects the way we represent ontology and given the distinction between Western and African ontologies, then the use of the former's language to represent the latter's ontology incites a fundamental problem of loss of identity. This problem forcefully manifests in the “black skin, white brain” or what Fanon (2008) calls “black skin, white mask” syndrome which is evident in the Africa of today. The use of European languages as a medium of instruction in African universities not only helps implant the dominance of white people's culture in the psyche of African students but also creates a confused generation of Africans who are neither genuinely African nor sufficiently Western. This is not limited to students alone; it also restricts the scope of research carried out in the universities because of the linguistic constraints it poses on what can be researched. Many research interests would have benefitted Africa immensely, but which language of research cannot contain.

An aspect of the foregoing problem worth mentioning here is the proclivity among Africans to take foreign language proficiency as evidence of intelligence. The corollary of this may play out in two major ways. One, it is possible for a teacher to be sufficiently knowledgeable in an area of study but lack the linguistic competence to communicate it both in the contexts of research dissemination and imparting knowledge to students. The implication of this may be dire not only for the productivity of the hypothetical teacher but also for the quality of her pedagogy. This way, African academic staff, besides the responsibility to research and publish outputs in their respective fields, have an extra burden of improving on the foreign language in which they conduct their research and deliver their teachings. Two, some students would have done better in their academic pursuits but for encumbrances posed by foreign language incompetence. Succeeding in the university is inherently difficult, but with the addition of the need for language proficiency, success becomes even more so. With results

ranging from disengagement and non-commitment to outright withdrawal, language continues to be a vehicle for promoting a culture of silence, challenging students' success at universities, and in many ways, tending to have a direct bearing on students' access to knowledge, academic performance and meaning-making, to mention a few (Mayaba et al., 2018).

The fourth and last colonial element in which postcolonial African universities are deeply entrenched is foreign funding for African research. Research is the heartbeat of a university. However, research is greatly impeded in the absence of adequate funds to execute it. Given that research requires money, the extent to which a university can go in terms of its research outputs is directly proportional to how much funding is made available to its academic staff to pursue their research activities. Except in a few African countries, however, the majority of African universities lack the required funds to match the research obligations of their academic staff. In consequence, African academics hugely depend on the monies they get from foreign funding agencies to facilitate their research and career advancements.

Research funding is a form of aid. Scholars like Moyo (2009), as well as Taiwo (2019), have condemned what they term *development aids to Africa* on the grounds that no country ever gets developed on an aid model. As it pertains to African universities, foreign aid is given in the form of grants, fellowships, conference subsidies, awards and scholarships, among others. In whatever form it takes, it is our opinion that foreign aid remains an imperialist campaign against the intellectual freedom of Africa. The presence of these aid-giving agencies is so pronounced in contemporary Africa that some African universities not only have separate offices for them on their campuses (for instance, there is an office of the Carnegie Corporation of New York in Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria), but they also measure the academic success of aspiring vice-chancellors by how many foreign grants they attract to their universities. The mere appearance of such agencies as the African Humanities Programme (of the American Council of Learned Societies), Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Grants, Humboldt Research Fellowship, Fulbright Scheme, Commonwealth Scholarship Scheme and the Leventis Fellowship is enough to incite envy and aspiration from colleagues.

Meanwhile, the imperialist intent of these agencies is often concealed behind the façade of financial attractiveness. As research funders, they dictate the trajectory of research activities in African universities by specifying areas of research sponsorship. The politics are aimed at getting African universities to be committed to generating ideas that are not in tandem with their developmental aspirations, while at the same time furnishing the funders with critical

information about Africa upon which further imperialist actions are taken. Pauperised both by their governments and the socio-economic realities of their respective states, African scholars have continued to search for a better life by attuning themselves to the dictates of research funders while abandoning their responsibilities to their local communities.

Who is to blame for this trend? On the one hand, the blame for underfunding public universities in Africa can be apportioned to the government whose poor financial support for higher education and obnoxious policies on higher education and cognate sectors have continued to weaken the research capacity of public universities in Africa. Also, one cannot fail to mention high-level corruption by public officeholders and the politicisation of the education sector. This has created loopholes in Africa's research agenda that are effectively explored by the imperialist powers to their own advantage, and the disadvantage of Africa. African governments must stop paying lip service to research if they expect the university to play its role as an effective development partner. On the other hand, the African academics themselves have not played a strong role in the entrenchment of good governance in African countries. Academia has always exempted itself from politics on the grounds of neutrality. In this neutrality, the African university is guilty of being passive about things that can either boost or destroy the university's relevance on the continent.

Conclusion

The whole essence of the decolonisation project in African universities is rooted in the imperative of beginning to relearn to be African. Colonialism has done so much damage to the African psyche, that it requires drastic effort to be extricated from its many alluring hooks. The logic of dependency on which neo-colonialism thrives must be deconstructed for African universities to reclaim their relevant place in the scheme of African development. African universities must resist the urge to be mere imitations of their Western counterparts. For instance, Fredua-Kwarteng (2019) expresses doubt about whether copycat university culture will help to produce the relevant attitude needed to advance the continent's economic growth, provide direction to bolster existing industries and create new opportunities. For every academic curriculum that an African university imitates, there is a bigger picture of which Africa is not a part. Hence, what it means for African universities to decolonise is to prioritise African needs in the design and implementation of their curricula, research and pedagogical activities.

How, and to what extent, is this prioritisation achievable? One option is to take a radical approach and reject outright anything not reconcilable with African ontology and her developmental agenda. A motivation for this radical stance may be that, given her ontological and historical difference from the rest of the world, Africa must reinvent for herself a uniquely African developmental strategy that is in tandem with her socio-historical ontology. Every aspect of African life must be consciously harnessed towards the achievement of this grand plan. This approach demands a holistic cultural overhaul with African ontology as its theoretical foundation, African epistemology as its conceptual framework, and African logic as its underlying reasoning principle while African ethics provides its moral operational modalities. The university, which serves as the intellectual base of this cultural renaissance, has the responsibility of coordinating other aspects into a cooperative whole.

This radical approach to decolonising African universities faces some challenges. Primary among them is the doubt whether it is feasible for postcolonial Africa to discountenance all foreign cultural practices, and still survive the complexity of the contemporary world. With historical experiences of slavery, colonialism and other incursionary violence against African agency, such a purist decolonial stance appears untenable. Hence, decolonising the *whole* notion of African universities is questionable because the idea of “university” itself is not ontologically rooted in African ontology. Can Africa dispense with the whole idea of the university? Can Africa unlearn everything her contacts with foreign cultures have brought her way? How is that to be achieved? These and other issues make the radical approach unattractive as a way forward.

The other option, more practicable in our opinion, is the application of the principle of adaptation “which is based on taking a concept and making it one’s own through creative modification or tweaking” (Fredua-Kwarteng, 2019 p.1). This principle involves the creative indigenisation of foreign (and seemingly universal) content and other university practices with the sole aim of relativising them to meet local needs or demands. Here, African universities are encouraged not to “throw away the baby with the bath water” as far as Western ideas of a university are concerned. They are to sieve through and acculturate some of the ideals that may be malleable to African dreams and aspirations. This approach is pluriversalist in orientation because of its flirtation with foreign ideas, ideals and practices.

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