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# Decolonizing higher education in Africa

## Implications and possibilities for university libraries

**D**ecolonizing higher education in Africa, a process inclusive of indigenous literacy,[1] is an emancipatory transformative concept that is largely grounded on critical theory,[2] critical theory of education,[3] dependency theory,[4] and Afrikology epistemology.[5] The four theoretical perspectives espouse emancipation, transformation, liberation, empowerment, inclusivity, equality, co-existence and social justice, and, to some degree, are rooted in neo-Marxist radical paradigms and can be used as the theoretical lens for analyzing decolonization and indigenization.

In particular, Dani Nabudere considers Afrikology to be universal emancipatory epistemology, arguing that, "Afrikology seeks to retrace the evolution of knowledge and wisdom from its source to the current epistemologies, and try to situate them in their historical and cultural contexts, especially with a view to establish a new science for generating and accessing knowledge for sustainable use."[6] Academic libraries are fundamental to enabling the access to and use of indigenous knowledge, as well as in promoting the decolonization agenda in higher education.

The colonial history of African countries has left deep scars in many sectors of African society, including in higher education. This history pervades culture (e.g., language–Anglophone, Francophone, Lusophone, etc.), religion, education, economics, technology, and politics, which are all prominent parts of the current decolonization debate within the global context. While colonization brought about modern education and enlightenment, it has also led to the "dependency syndrome"[7] in almost all aspects of life. For instance, where foreign/exogenous culture and languages thrive at the expense of indigenous culture and languages; where non-African religions, such as Christianity, replace traditional religions; and the proliferation of modern technologies (computers, the Internet, mobile phones and social media technologies, including 4IR technologies) that we cannot live without today, but which have become the new normal and the primary sources of power, influence, and domination.

These socioeconomic, political, and technological developments and influences are hardly decolonized in higher education.[8,9] This predicament has been echoed by social discontent, such as the '#Fees must fall' movement by higher education students in South Africa, which challenged the status quo regarding access, affordability of education, sociopolitical dispensation, leadership, "double speaking," colonialism, and improper compromises. The paradoxes of knowledge and power are overwhelming. Nonetheless, both knowledge and power

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can be used positively (for example for sustainable development), negatively (such as for neo-colonization, domination), and rationally.

This brings me to quote what Leopold Senghor once said of African magnanimity in the 1960s as many countries gained independence from colonialists:

"He [African] does not assimilate; he is assimilated. He lives a common life with the other; he lives in a symbiosis."[10]

Do we live in a symbiosis? Does this explain why indigenous knowledge (IK) has been marginalized and yet 80% of the people of Africa continue to use IK?[11] Or does it explain why decolonization has been so painful and difficult? Senghor's assertion, albeit sad and derogatory, could also be used to re-examine the paradox of decolonization and indigenization of knowledge in Africa.

The language issue is a dominant factor in the decolonization debate in Africa. In most instances, non-African languages (e.g., English, French, Portuguese) dominate knowledge production and dissemination at the expense of indigenous languages, and they are used conveniently and religiously in higher education. Universities are struggling to accommodate and reflect decolonization and the IK agenda in the university language policy and curriculum; information sources that are accessed and used for university education; the attitude of students and lecturers to local content; library access and services; and knowledge production and dissemination.

The reaction to this trend, as reflected in the literature, is that utterances and action have been compromised. Apathy, sympathy, frustration, and, most recently, open anger, have been expressed in the #Fees must fall[12] movement in South African higher education. One of Africa's eminent socio-linguistic scholars, Kwesi Prah, referring to the use of African languages, laments that:

What Asian countries have succeeded in doing is that they have replaced the superior role of the colonial languages in education and development in their societies with the languages and cultures native to themselves; the languages spoken by the overwhelming majorities. It is this shift from working under Western linguistic and colonial tutelage, to the use of an autonomous indigenous language or languages of education and societal communication, which has enabled the development and transformation of Asian societies towards modernity that we see today.[13]

The myth is wrapped in dependency, and occurs when we suggest that Western education be replaced with another form of education that does not exist or traditional knowledge restored; that the modern library collection should be replaced with underdeveloped and often nonexisting indigenous collections; that curriculum overhaul in higher education should be devoid of western epistemology and pedagogy, and be replaced with inadequately developed and inaccessible local knowledge; and that the language of instruction in the university should be a local language without preparation for such radical transformation.

The reality is that we still accept and thrive on Western epistemology and pedagogy, largely because we have nothing to fall back on, at least for now, when demand for rapid change occurs as it did through students' unrest in South Africa during the 2015/2016 "#Fees must fall" protests. So, we continue with "business as usual." This reminds us of the paradox of decolonizing higher education that lies in the Africans in us that was once expressed in a very candid way by Ali Mazrui, one of the greatest thinkers and leading political scientists and Afrikologists in Africa, and probably also in the world. In his caution-

ary note on adapting to Western culture, he expresses his pessimism thus:

> Africa as a whole borrowed the wrong things from the West—even the wrong components of capitalism. We borrowed the profit motive but not the entrepreneurial spirit. We borrowed the acquisitive appetites of capitalism but not the creative risk-taking. We are at home with Western gadgets but are bewildered by Western workshops. We wear the wristwatch but refuse to watch it for the culture of punctuality. We have learnt to parade in display, but not necessarily the West's techniques of production.[14]

## Academic libraries' response

Academic libraries are poised to respond to the decolonization of higher education in many ways, and discussed here are their work with respect to access to and success of their collections; user education and training, including information literacy; marketing and publicity of indigenous/traditional knowledge; research; and publishing.

Access refers to an enabling environment with resources, services, and education for information literacy that makes access to library resources anytime, anywhere, and everywhere possible, while success entails enabling library users to access the information resources without any cognitive, physical, and/or psychological barriers. Ordinarily, this means that the library has to acquire, process, and enable access to information resources that represent the local content or context where they are or were located culturally, socially, politically, economically, and within the social environment.

For a long time, academic libraries acquired and preserved special collections consisting of local and cultural literature, such as the "Africana" collections in libraries in some parts of the world or the UZULU collection at the University of Zululand. This collection has now been supplemented with Institutional Repositories (IRs) that enable access to local content locally and globally.[15] While such IRs are insignificant in Africa (219; 4.1% of 5,309 globally), South Africa's achievement in Africa (44; 20%) is significant, with the University of Pretoria (UP) leading on the continent. The IR collection mostly consists of theses and dissertations, but other forms of documents, such as journal articles, are closing in and currently topping the list at UP. I do find library special collections and IRs to be important for the decolonization agenda, and they should be encouraged and supported by governments and institutions as data on their usage globally is quite encouraging. The representation of special collections and IR collections in local languages, among other library collections, would also boost the decolonization agenda. Library support, in this case, requires institutional research, data management, community outreach, and a teaching and learning agenda, without which significant success cannot be achieved.

The education and training of users is equally vital to the libraries' response to the decolonization agenda. Many academic libraries in South Africa provide user education and a variety of other services.[16] Normally such services begin with library orientation and are then followed by user education, covering a range of services such as e-resources, e-catalogs, digital scholarship, information literacy, research information services, reference management tools (e.g., Endnote, Zotero, Mendeley), LibGuides, tutorials, ask a librarian services for the differently abled, social media, and open scholarship, among others.[17] While such information access enabling services focus on all library users, the decolonization of the services—guided by policy—would be sensitive to cultural or African language and literature and their translations. This should include local, national, and regional events; festivals; activities; programs, poli-

cies, and legislation; and other ways of living and doing things that are close to the library user's life experience, culture, and traditions.

Library users should succeed in accessing the library collection without any obstacles, which in turn would require an efficient human-to-human and human-to-machine interface and retrieval system, proximity to the collection (such as e-resources and e-catalogs), and information literate users who can interact with the information resources ethically with zero or minimal difficulty. The facilities that enable access to online services are evidently a major factor. Experience has shown that continuous user information literacy education and training increases the levels of information access and use. Unlike public libraries, academic library collections/information resources depend on university research, teaching, and learning (e.g., curriculum) to be relevant. Ultimately, the library should serve the decolonization agenda of the university, as reflected in its decolonization/indigenization policy/policies (e.g., language policy, IR policy, open access policy), research, and teaching and learning.

The promotion of indigenous/traditional/cultural knowledge also requires marketing and publicity. At the moment, academic libraries use various platforms or forums to market their services. The Internet[18] is increasingly used for the marketing and publicity of library services, as well as their visibility. For example, it is possible to find decolonization postings on university and library websites, and on the web pages of institutional and national documents in South Africa. Library websites, exhibitions and fairs, and social media can be used effectively to popularize de-colonization literature, activities, policies, and events, among others.

Another response is the concept of the "library as a publisher,"[19] which was pioneered by and is burgeoning at the University of Cape Town, where the library uses open access platforms to publish books and journals by staff, students, and others, covering a range of subjects and disciplines, by using a range of appropriate and accessible multimedia platforms/formats for knowledge transmission. This type of publishing is an important example of de-colonizing the publications of university academics by providing a platform for publishing locally and providing access regionally and beyond.

Lastly, libraries need to shape research,[20,21] and policy on decolonization. University administrators and researchers should be interested in knowing the nature, size, access, and usage of local collections. While many studies on IRs are prevalent and the use of open sources (e.g., Google Analytics, Piwik/Matomo [installed on-campus and not in the cloud]) for library usage analysis is increasing, academic librarians should lead research on their library collections' access and usage, focusing on local collection and content usage in order to inform decolonization research policy and decision making. It is encouraging that several university libraries in South Africa are paying attention to research[22] and that the positions for research librarians are growing in number.

## Conclusion

This article acknowledges the paradoxes of colonialism, decolonization, and globalization within critical, dependency, and Afrikology theories, alongside the reality that should shape the response by academic libraries to the complexity of decolonization and indigenization of information access and services. The process and challenges of decolonization and indigenization can be accommodated within the existing and evolving academic library access and sbervices' framework, but more so when supported by the policy, research, community engagement, and teaching and learning agendas of the corresponding higher education institutions. This is possible and desirable. I propose more research in this domain to unearth hidden issues and challenges for libraries' full involvement in the growing debate.

## Notes

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