

# A CRITICAL INTERROGATION OF PARADIGMS IN DISCOURSE ON THE DECOLONISATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN AFRICA

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## ABSTRACT

There have been persistent contestations over the conceptual implications of paradigms in the decolonisation of higher education in Africa. As a contribution towards the continued pursuit of a succinct conceptualisation of decolonisation, this conceptual article interrogates four paradigms that undergird the decolonisation of higher education in Africa. These paradigms – decolonisation as Africanisation, decolonisation as indigeneity in education, racial undertones, and decolonisation as Ubuntu – are employed as benchmarks for decolonisation. The unexamined entrenchment of these paradigms within the decolonisation of higher education, however, tends to encumber the intended goals of that process. The conclusion arrived at here, is that while decolonisation is a noble cause that must be pursued consistently; the distortion of these paradigms ultimately hinders the objectives of decolonizing African higher education.

**Keywords:** African higher education, Africanisation, decolonisation, epistemic injustice

## INTRODUCTION

The decolonisation of African higher education is a noble cause that must be pursued consistently. The notion remains an elusive term, however, given that the decolonisation of higher education in Africa is entangled with complexities, paradoxes and tensions (Zembylas 2018). Furthermore, decolonisation has become a big catch-call, encompassing “symbolic politics, white supremacy, curriculum, patriarchy, demands for diverse faculty, language politics, free public higher education, among others” (Heleta 2016a, 2). Certainly, there is merit in the observation that “the meaning of decolonization within this context is yet to be agreed upon, especially because several discordant voices are advocating different pathways for the decolonization project” (Fomunyam and Teferra 2017, 196). Indeed, discord on the

conceptualisation of decolonisation in higher education has arisen from an inadequate examination of the paradigms that are focused in this article. As a contribution towards the continued pursuit of a succinct conceptualisation of decolonisation, this article interrogates four paradigms which undergird the decolonisation of higher education in Africa, namely decolonisation as Africanisation, decolonisation as indigeneity in education, racial undertones, and decolonisation as Ubuntu. Notably, the pressing social, economic and political contexts of African higher education differ from one country to the next. However, given the common historical legacy of colonialism and apartheid, the paradigms which are the focal point of this article, are common to Africa. For instance, as far back as 1965, Ghana made calls for the decolonisation of education across the African continent (Mampane, Omidile, and Aluko 2018). Furthermore, since the issue of decolonizing higher education has remained contentious and, in some cases, divisive (along with race and ethnicity) (Quinn and Vorster 2017), this article seeks to contribute to a sustainable conceptualisation of decolonisation.

In this introductory section, it is important to make a distinction between colonialism and coloniality – two central concepts within the scope of the decolonisation of higher education. Colonialism refers to “a political and economic relation in whom the sovereignty of a nation or a people rests on the power of another nation, which makes such a nation an empire” (Maldonado-Torres 2007, 246). From a historical perspective, the imperialistic nation imposes its political, administrative, cultural and economic authority on the colonised. By contrast, coloniality points to the implicit and explicit continuities of colonialism that occur after the official termination of colonialism (Mbembe 2016; Mugwini 2017; Mignolo and Tlostanova 2006). Coloniality, as the enduring legacy of colonialism, degrades the cultural value system, economy, knowledge production and knowledge dissemination of a “previously” colonised populace. Thus, the decolonisation of higher education seeks to rectify the legacy of both colonialism and coloniality. A pertinent question therefore is: What distortions are embedded in the paradigms of the decolonisation of African higher education? This investigation also seeks to inquire into the ramifications which any distortions have for the conceptualisation of decolonisation.

The article is structured into three interwoven subsections. First, there is an articulation of the concept of epistemic injustice, which is central to discourse on decolonisation. Second, in contributing to a succinct conceptualisation of decolonisation of higher education in Africa, the paradigms mentioned in this subsection are interrogated, so as to wean out any embedded distortions thereof. Our interrogation of these paradigms is informed by the underpinnings of epistemic injustice. Finally, the third subsection covers a conceptual navigation towards a discourse on decolonisation that considers social and racial diversity in Africa.

## EPISTEMIC INJUSTICE AS A CENTRAL PROBLEM FOR THE DECOLONISATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Epistemic injustice, as the lens upon which paradigms discussed in this article are analysed, is the overarching problem in discourse on the decolonisation of higher education in Africa where, arguably, there is a deliberate undervaluation of the knowledge traditions of previously colonized peoples (Heleta 2016b; Mugwini 2017; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2015). Such undervaluation, which constitutes epistemic injustice, manifests itself through a higher education culture that reflects, valorizes and perpetuates colonial values and worldviews. In drawing upon Miranda Fricker's categorization, epistemic injustice can be classified into two strands, namely testimonial and hermeneutical. *Testimonial injustice* occurs when a credibility deficit is attributed to the speaker by the hearer, because of the hearer's prejudices regarding the social group to which the speaker belongs. As a facet of epistemic injustice, it entails that the speaker is regarded as unreliable because of the social group to which s/he belongs. *Hermeneutical injustice* refers to the deliberate trivialisation of a society's collective knowledge sources and social experiences (Fricker 2007; Fricker 2008). An illustrative example is that elements of the African worldview, such as witchcraft, *amadlozi* (ancestral spirits) and *amafufunyane* (the experience of being possessed by a spirit that hinders speech and thought) are dismissed by Western perspectives as infantile imaginations and pseudo-scientific thinking (Ally and August 2018; Makhubela 2018). In both testimonial and hermeneutical injustice, as components of epistemic injustice, there are fallacies of generalisation and hasty judgments based on misconceptions about a given social group. Arguably, epistemic injustice is a perpetuation and entrenchment of the dominance of the Westernised over the African educational worldview (De-Sousa Santos 2016)

Mindful of the foregoing descriptions of epistemic injustice, it is apparent that the decolonisation of higher education is designed to dismantle those injustices which are prevalent in institutions of higher learning. Epistemic injustice in higher education takes the form of a racial hierarchy of knowledge systems, where Western knowledge is located at the apex of the ranking, and indigenous knowledge systems are trivialized at the bottom. In view of this hierarchy, a misconception has been (and continues to be) established that the Western world possesses the canonical standard and monopoly on knowledge – in other words, that non-Western knowledge systems are illegitimate. As Mbembe (2016) notes, epistemic injustice transpires when the only “acceptable” and standardised knowledge system is one that emerges from the West. Accordingly, the exclusive canonisation of Western knowledge ultimately leads to hegemony. It is imperative to state that decolonisation calls for a realisation that the

hegemony which was “officially” instituted during the colonial epoch in Africa has persisted, and survives despite the juridical collapse of historical colonialism. In summary, epistemic injustice as the central problem in decolonisation means that;

“Western traditions have become the norm for all knowledge, the methodologies underlying these traditions are seen as the only forms of true knowledge which has led to a reduction in epistemic diversity, because of the institutional and epistemic power that Western tradition hold, they constitute the midpoint of knowledge so that other forms of knowledge are suppressed and seen as inferior.” (Naude 2019, 3).

Decolonisation is therefore, premised on the imperative to confront the systematic discounting and devaluation of African knowledge systems. In addition, there is a perception that higher education in Africa, as an outpost of the Western world, endeavours to replicate the values of universities in Euro-America (Hendricks 2018). The continued marginalization of African knowledge systems is, consequently, an epistemic injustice. Nevertheless, in the euphoria of decolonizing higher education, there are embedded distortions in those paradigms that act as benchmarks of decolonisation. In the following subsections the argument will be made that, in order to obtain a succinct conceptualisation of decolonisation, certain conceptual distortions should be eliminated from forms of Africanisation, indigeneity, Ubuntu and racial undertones.

## **THE FOUR PARADIGMS**

The following subsections offer a critical exposition of the four paradigms which are focal points in this article. The paradigms of decolonisation as Africanisation, indigeneity, Ubuntu and racial undertones tend to dominant the discourse on decolonisation of African higher education. In pursuit of this critical exposition, we employ the notion of epistemic injustice as outlined in the foregoing section.

### **The paradigm of decolonisation as Africanisation**

One assertion of epistemic injustice is that there are two conflicting parties, namely; the wronged and the offending. The interplay between wronged and offending parts is pronounced in the paradigm of decolonisation as Africanisation. Succinctly, the term Africa is representative of the previously excluded, marginalised, the “othered” and thus occupying the wronged part. On the other hand, the Western/European connotes the previous colonizer, thereby occupying the offending part in the epistemic injustice discourse. Distortions in this paradigm are occasioned by the polarized positions which are historically and supposedly currently occupied by the parties. We argue that epistemic injustice can be reversed through

establishment of mutual middle ground. The mutual middle ground is possible if the discourse on Africanisation is informed by Martin Buber's I-Thou rather than the I-it relations. The I-thou is founded upon mutual respect of the two parties; whereas, the I-it embeds antagonism and affronts dialogue (Morgan and Guilherme 2010).

The imperative for Africanisation of higher education is based upon the observation that "universities have done little to open up to different bodies and traditions of knowledge and knowledge-making" (Heleta 2016b, 3). Higher education lack of progress in accommodating other knowledge traditions attributed to Eurocentrism – in this context, taken to mean the "linguistic codes, cultural assumptions, social images, and Western/European notions that underpin what constitutes desirable knowledge" (Jeevanantham 1998, 218). In addition, the need for Africanisation is grounded on the assertion that colonial education has "obliterated nearly all the linkages that black students may have with the prescribed texts, propagated narratives, debates and learning on the one side and their history, lived experiences and dreams on the other side" (Heleta 2016a, 4).

Furthermore, Africanisation attends to the "marginalisation of African values in African education which has resulted in the general Westernization of education theory and practice" (Higgs 2012, 38). Resultantly, Africanisation encompasses "a renewed focuses on Africa and reclamation of what had been taken away from Africa" (Naidoo 2016, 1). Africanisation is suggested to be a reclamation and reassertion of African knowledge systems and identity. In characterizing decolonisation as Africanisation, the decolonisation of higher education can logically be explained as the undoing of coloniality through validation of African worldviews and experiences. In employing the lens of epistemic injustice, it becomes apparent that a failure to Africanise higher education is tantamount to entrenching epistemic injustice. In this respect, the imperative to Africanise is based on the noticeable earth of non-Western or non-European traditions and epistemologies in the African higher education (Etieyibo 2016). For African students to study and graduate in institutions that does not take into account and values their experiences, worldviews, values and norms is a clear case of reinforcing the epistemic injustice. Perhaps, it is for this reason that "unAfricanised" universities are said to be producing graduates who are termed as "Natives of Nowhere" (Kumalo 2018). The term Natives of Nowhere is developed to depict universities in Africa whose graduates are alienated from their cultural backgrounds, while simultaneously they cannot fully integrate and identify themselves with the Western or European values they are "forced" to acquire at the university. Therefore, Africanisation is touted as having the potential to not only reverse the harms of epistemic injustice but also equally repair the damaged African identity and sense of belonging.

However, the paradigm of decolonisation as Africanisation requires further conceptual

interrogation, in order to extract any distortions. First, there is the danger that decolonisation as Africanisation can become radical, erecting barricades that fortify African knowledge against the values of European knowledge systems. In similar vein, Morreira (2017) argues that attempts at decolonisation should be wary of the pitfall of obfuscating knowledge formations by entrenching binaries of Western versus African knowledge systems. It may be problematic to suggest that there is a vast gulf between these knowledge systems. In fact, so-called Western knowledge is an infusion of non-Western paradigms such as Latin-American, Arab and Indian knowledge systems even containing elements of African knowledge systems.

Second, is there really something that can uniquely be called African knowledge system? In truth, the experiences, cultures and worldviews currently held by Africans, have been mutating and integrating with non-African systems.

Third, is there an archived Africanised system of knowledge on which to draw? This interrogative question is important, because knowledge production occurs within cultural contexts. However, most of what could be regarded as indigenous knowledge has always been produced and disseminated orally, and therefore lacks documentation.

Fourth, on the basis that African knowledge tradition is contestable Africanisation may be reduced to relativism. For instance, people in North Africa may have different worldviews from the inhabitants of southern Africa. Of course, we are aware that the domain of pluriversity which asserts local knowledges. Nevertheless, African scholarship on decolonisation should advance the validation of African, without disenfranchising the Western knowledge system. The decolonisation process should involve a cautious separation of the beneficial in Western knowledge, from the detrimental. In this respect, Western knowledge systems could be translated into other contexts to produce relevant and applicable results. Emanating from Africanisation, the indigeneity of knowledge as one of the trends in the decolonisation of African higher education is the focus of the next subsection.

### **The paradigm of decolonisation as indigeneity in education**

The reversal of epistemic injustice in higher education in Africa entails the concurrent termination of Western hegemony and appreciation of indigeneity. Nevertheless, a distorted conceptualization of decolonisation as indigeneity in education may further ensconce epistemic injustice. The paradigm of indigeneity as decolonisation is informed by the understanding that all knowledge systems are developed from the context, worldview, culture and values of a social group. Indigenous knowledge is described as “a complex accumulation of local context-relevant knowledge that embraces the essence of ancestral knowing as well as legacies of diverse histories and cultures” (Akena 2012, 601). To this end, there are suggestions that the

insertion of indigenous knowledge systems in the decolonisation of African higher education is necessitated by the view that Eurocentric knowledge is hostile, to the extent of marginalising and trivialising African knowledge systems (Breidlid 2008). Accordingly, decolonisation is a remedial discourse that seeks to centre African indigenous systems in the academic mainstream. Fomunyam and Teffera (2017,197) note that “decolonization is the foregrounding of local or indigenous knowledge and experiences in the curricula content, thereby downplaying or eradicating Eurocentric or global north experiences which have dominated curriculum content for centuries”. In articulating the need for African indigeneity, it is argued that “the basic problem is that educational structures inherited from colonialism are based on cultural values different from those existing in most African indigenous societies” (Kaya and Seleti 2013, 33). Essentially, indigenous knowledge systems espouse the language, symbols, worldviews and interpretations of African experiences. By contrast, Eurocentric knowledge is an import of values from Europe and other Western nations.

Critique of the paradigm of indigeneity as contributing to the decolonisation of African higher education, is based on this central interrogative question; what are the benchmarks for indigeneity in Africa? By and large, the conceptual distortion of this paradigm tends to socially divide the African citizenry, classifying people as either indigenous or non-indigenous. Such social divisions cascades down to African higher education. For instance, “black students and staff have to invent a set of creative practices that ultimately make it impossible for official structures to ignore them and not recognize them, to pretend that they do not see them or pretend that their voice does not count” (Mbembe 2016, 34). Moreover, the term “indigenous” is politically loaded. For example, indigenous language denotes “home” languages spoken by black Africans, such as isiZulu, chiShona, Setswana, isiNdebele and Sesotho, thereby excluding other languages spoken in Africa such as English and French. Despite the conceptual disputations on indigeneity, there is an argument that a decolonised higher education system in Africa should be underpinned by indigenous knowledge systems (Ndofirepi and Gwaravanda 2018). From the indigeneity-of-knowledge perspective, the modern African university is perceived as a colonial implant which produces and disseminates Eurocentric knowledge that alienates Africans.

The systemic marginalisation of indigeneity undermines both the knowledge (object) and the people (subjects) who are the custodians of such knowledge. From the perspective of epistemic injustice, the concurrent devaluation of indigeneity and entrenchment of Western epistemologies commits both testimonial and hermeneutical injustice. On the testimonial level, the custodians of indigenous knowledge are often as persons whose knowledge is considered as superstitious and lacking scientific verification (Murove 2018). Epistemic injustice is

conceptualized as the practices and tendencies of illegitimization, marginalization and trivialization of local knowledge production and sites.

Another contentious point is the inaccessibility of indigenous knowledge systems. In most patriarchal and hierarchical African social groups, the elders are usually deemed the custodians of accumulated knowledge. Elders have exclusively conferred knowledge authority. However, the transference of such knowledge to contemporary higher education may be problematic.

### **The paradigm of racial undertones**

Who “owns” the decolonisation of higher education discourse in Africa? Are some races more “qualified” to debate and contribute in the decolonisation of higher education in Africa? These questions are important as we interrogate the racial undertones that are pronounced in decolonisation. We argue here that the binary of black Africans as the “historically-aggrieved” and the white as the “historically privileged” denies a common ground for the address and possible reversal of epistemic injustice in higher education in Africa. Misconceptions around race pervade the discourse on the decolonisation of higher education in Africa, where the paradigm of racial undertones is common. In the racial undertones paradigm, the notion of race is a determining factor in discourse on the decolonisation of African higher education. Tuck and Yang (2012) speak of “settler guilt”, which can contextually be applied to refer to the awareness among white people in Africa that they are direct and indirect economic beneficiaries of colonialism. As Heleta (2016b) reports, student protests revolve around the demands to an end to domination by white, male, Western, capitalist, heterosexual and European worldviews during the 2015–2016 South African student protests.

From this racial standpoint, decolonisation is predicated on the dismantling of whiteness, which is considered as symbol of purity, privilege, civilisation, modernity and humanity. Notably, “whiteness is still engaged in daily open/subtle racism and marginalisation of black people”, according to Heleta (2016a, 2). Black students are the “other” in their country of birth, not recognized or valued unless they conform to the Western-imposed worldview. Through education, black students are expected to learn to “speak well” and “acquire competencies and Eurocentric knowledge that will enable them to be recruited in the market place, yet not allow them to fundamentally change the status quo in society and [the] economy” (Heleta 2016b, 5). Under the colonial and apartheid regimes, higher education was designed to reinforce values associated with white people, while relegating black people to the margins of society.

Notably, the teaching methodologies and examples used during teaching and learning are designed to ensure that white students feel at home, while black students are culturally alienated, and the key to success for black students involves assimilating white people’s value



systems (Quinn and Vorster 2017). In similar vein, Mbembe (2016) notes that, in general, black students and staff are mentally harassed and humiliated by university iconography which appears to celebrate white colonial culture. Some authors have observed that university iconography represents people who tormented black people during colonialism and apartheid (Costandius et al. 2018). According to Kotze (2018), the university iconography of Africa alienates blacks while simultaneously embracing white students in higher education. As a result, white students are said to find the university environment homely. Recall that this institutional culture reflects coloniality.

Additionally, “many still consider white people as settlers who, once in a while, will attempt to masquerade as natives. And yet, with the advent of democracy and [the] new constitutional state, there are no longer settlers or natives” (Mbembe 2016, 30). Concurring with this observation, Leibowitz (2016) notes that, in South Africa, white people are sometimes “reminded” of their colonial baggage and requested to avoid speaking on behalf of the colonised black masses. Leibowitz (2016) further testifies about a personal experience at an academic seminar where she was told that, as a white person, she is part of the system that epistemically oppresses black academia. White staff and students are accused of being indifferent to real and imagined racism, and seldom participate in collective protests that seek to respond to social injustices at universities (Costandius et al. 2018). On the other hand, many white students and staff are uncomfortable with the decolonisation of higher education, since such a process threatens to disrupt their acquired and generationally passed-on economic and social privileges: as (Mbembe 2016, 31) notes, “white people are still fencing off their privileges, ring-fencing themselves as they continue to live in whiteness”. The result is that the decolonisation of higher education seeks to end white cultural and epistemic hegemony.

In interrogating the racial undertones in decolonisation, a few questions seem unavoidable. Is decolonisation all about integrating black staff and students in already existing white structures? Is it about inviting black staff to a white dinner table which subscribes to white cultural etiquette? While decolonisation should not bypass the disruption of white supremacy, caution should be exercised in framing whiteness, lest the African academic ingrain racial prejudices, as was the case during the colonial and apartheid epochs. Conceptually, decolonisation ought to make a distinction between white structures and white as a social group. Decolonisation needs to interrogate the notion of race as a socially constructed concept that can equally be deconstructed, without necessarily targeting individuals. In borrowing from Critical Race Theory, misconceptions around the notion of race only serve to perpetuate racial prejudice. In the socially diverse context of Africa, the conceptual interrogation of race should ideally be underlined by the indispensability of social relations, as espoused in Ubuntu. In other

words, decolonisation should enable students and staff in higher education in Africa to avoid stereotyping other social groups.

Because of the political and social historical circumstances in Africa, the notion of race has remained a highly controversial matter that shapes most discourses including decolonisation of African higher education. Of course, we are aware of the schools of thought that either regard race as a mere social construct or biological/physiological character. However, in the debates of decolonisation, race is a term used to refer to the physiological appearances which are categorised as white, black and Indian. Henceforth, when reference is made to the hegemony of Western or European epistemology as indicator of epistemic injustice, the implicit claim is that these are white epistemologies. Western or European is not just a geographical entity but racial category. This becomes the case when consideration is given to the fact that social composition of contemporary Europe or the West is constituted by both white and a minority black people.

The contestations on race within the decolonisation discourse have some epistemic injustice implications. When academic or scholarly debates on decolonisation of higher education are stalled, compromised or disrupted because of racial disagreements then epistemic injustice are implanted. In analysing racial undertones in decolonisation of higher education discourse, we draw on Martin Buber's classification of the I-Thou and I-It relations. In the I-Thou, dialogue is an encounter of equals, it is about mutuality and respect. The academic or scholarly debates which are underlined by the I-Thou relations are not predetermined by racial prejudices and stereotypes. On the other hand, the I-It dialogues are (mis)informed by preconceived ideas and objectify the other (Morgan and Guilherme 2010). Subsequently, when the discourse on decolonisation of higher education is predominated and shaped by the I-it relations among the white, black or Indian then both testimonial and hermeneutical injustice are committed. Instead of reversing the epistemic injustice, the debates on decolonisation might rather entrench epistemic injustice. The I-thou relation approach to decolonisation creates what we will term "our time to eat" phenomenon in which the black Africans might be tempted to see decolonisation as an opportune time to "revenge" and settle old scores of colonialism and the coloniality.

### **The paradigm of decolonisation as Ubuntu**

The imperative for decolonisation as ubuntu is based on the idea that the exclusion or constriction of Ubuntu is tantamount to the commission of hermeneutical injustice. In the domain of epistemic injustice, hermeneutical injustice is described as "an injustice that occurs at a prior stage, when someone is trying to make sense of a social experience by is handicapped

in this by a certain sort of gap in collective understanding” (Fricker 2008, 69). Ubuntu is a collective social experience; worldview, packaged norms and values upheld by Africans especially those from the sub-Saharan continent. We argue in this section that in the contemporary Africa which is characterised by propensity towards individual autonomy and deliberative democracy, a distorted version of decolonisation as Ubuntu can lodge rather than dislodge epistemic injustice in higher education in Africa. A distorted version of Ubuntu does not espouse common humanity. Rather, being human is appropriated to certain ethnic, tribal or closed social group.

The foregoing paragraph does not propose to dismiss Ubuntu as incompatible with decolonisation. Rather, we seek to delineate the point that distorted version of decolonisation hinders efforts towards a termination of epistemic injustice. Therefore, in its ideal description, Ubuntu asserts that human beings depend on one another; it is about a communal existence derived from culturally shared practices (Murove 2014). According to Ngunjiri (2016), Ubuntu is humanity reflected in collective personhood and morality. It dovetails with highly communal values such as interdependence, harmony, hospitality, generosity, caring and compassion. Ubuntu is a cultural worldview whose practices and values are communally-oriented. In essence, decolonisation finds resonance with Ubuntu which is said to possess restorative powers for African humanity. For Matolino and Kwindigwi (2013, 198), “Ubuntu has rooted in the search for identity and human dignity. It is used as an attempt to restore the identity and dignity of the African person.” On the basis that colonialism and apartheid violated the humanity of Africans, decolonisation as ubuntu tends towards the restoration of the cultural identity of Africans. For that reason, statues of prominent colonial architects such as Cecil John Rhodes are viewed as a reminder of the violation of the tenets of Ubuntu. Supposedly, the decolonisation of higher education targets the elimination of the systemic discriminatory practices associated with colonialism, such as racism, tribalism and sexism. Decolonisation is the reclamation of African humanity, the restoration of a humanity that was violated by colonialism and apartheid.

Tavernaro-Haidarin (2018, 104) explains that “the African moral philosophy of Ubuntu provides a different realism, where the process of decolonization can be framed as evolutionary, developmental and integrative. Through the lens of Ubuntu, decolonization can be re-imagined as a constructive process of resilience that significantly transcends coloniality.” For Walton (2018), Ubuntu should be regarded as an African orientation towards education, for “there is a common assumption that society consists of a defined set of distinct groups, each within its own culture or life and worldview” (Horsthemke and Enslin 2009, 210). According to Hlatshwayo and Shawa (2020), on the basis that the central question in decolonisation involves

knowledge production and knowledge validation, Ubuntu is indispensable for decolonizing higher education in Africa. As Goldhill (2018, 2) states;

“The communal outlook of Ubuntu influences African ideas of epistemology or the study of knowledge. For example, some African thinkers influenced by Ubuntu believe that an object should be understood according to its relationship with context and surroundings rather than by any intrinsic properties.”

Consequently, a decolonised higher education system is ideally anticipated to promote the communal, rather than the European individualistic perspective.

Though the modern university has been in Africa over many centuries, it is pointing that the Ubuntu only begun to be given attention only a few decades ago (Horsthemke and Enslin 2009). In the interrogation of the paradigm of Ubuntu, we borrow from the perspective of epistemic attention deficit, a concept advanced by Smith and Archer (2020). Accordingly, epistemic attention deficit is the “failure to pay someone the attention they are due in their role as epistemic agents. Epistemic deficit agent constitutes epistemic injustice because it affects someone’s ability to influence what others think” (Smith and Archer 2020,777). With regards to the observation that for quite a long time, the domain of Ubuntu had been either completely neglected or trivialised by the African university, the custodians of Ubuntu could not influence institutional culture. In fact as part of epistemic injustice, Ubuntu ideals were “othered” through systemic exclusion.

African ethics and ideals such as Ubuntu are sometimes dismissed because in the past, it used to be transmitted orally. Yet testimony according to Fricker can be “spoken, or written, signed or signed, it can be direct as when someone tells us face to face what time t is or indirect as when we learn about the world from the newspapers” (Fricker 2008, 69). Subsequently, a higher education in Africa that systemically excludes Ubuntu commits epistemic injustice.

Despite the socially unifying ideals of Ubuntu, as listed in the foregoing paragraphs, the paradigm of Ubuntu as decolonisation of higher education in Africa is not without contention. For instance, if Ubuntu is a cultural derivative of the Bantu people, then its blanket application may impede the process of decolonizing higher education on this continent. In other words, not all students and lecturers in education in Africa are adherents to Ubuntu. The appropriate approach is for decolonisation to facilitate open dialogue with Ubuntu-based philosophies, to establish selected tenets that can be incorporated within higher education. As a result, Ubuntu should be considered as but one of numerous cultural worldviews in higher education on this continent.

Ubuntu’s emphasis on the notion of community, hierarchy, and authority may be

incompatible with critical thinking, an academic discipline that encourages individuals to hone those analytical skills, which are related to self-reflection, autonomy and reflective morality. Moreover, in an era that promotes social diversity (Walton 2018), Ubuntu is inadequate at, and incapable of, showing tolerance for social differences, including persons living with disabilities, those with albinism and homosexuals. It is instructive to state that Ubuntu is highly prescriptive of who a person is. An illustration is noted that in Zimbabwe, parents of disabled children are culturally shunned due to the misconception that disability is caused by misfortune or their practice of witchcraft (Walton 2018). In most African traditional set-ups, forms of physical disabilities were attributed to the machinations of evil forces, thereby discriminating against the disabled persons.

Given the points raised in the foregoing paragraph, there is a version of decolonisation that draws on exclusive racial politics. For instance, white students and staff are sometimes “reminded” that they are not qualified to offer critical analysis on Ubuntu and decolonisation as contentious issues in African higher education (Horsthemke and Enslin 2009). By contrast, there is also an observation that some white academics are uncomfortable with decolonisation (Heleta2016b). As a result of racial tensions, decolonizing higher education is a project to be advanced by the black (male) students and staff (*abantu*) who are the custodians of Ubuntu precepts. Judging from the patriarchal influences derived from Ubuntu, black male students and staff tends to be more vocal and dominant in decolonisation campaigns than female students and staff.

## **TOWARDS A DISCOURSE OF CONCEPTUALLY EXAMINED PARADIGMS ON THE DECOLONISATION OF EDUCATION**

We begin this section by making two statements. Firstly, decolonisation should be considered as an on-going process. It is difficult to imagine arriving at a state where people can say, we have achieved all the objectives of decolonisation. Secondly, there is a danger of making decolonisation a communally-compelling and forceful project. The interplay between individual and communal orientations. Finally, given the conceptual distortions noted above, this subsection is an exposition of a discourse on decolonisation which has minimal distortions. Decolonization presupposes that under colonialism and apartheid, knowledge systems in Africa were marginalised. In response, decolonisation endeavours to restore the value of African knowledge systems. However, in discourse on the restoration of African knowledge systems, as decolonisation seeks to do, this article has interrogated the paradigms employed as benchmarks for decolonisation. A conceptual interrogation is necessary, because decolonisation should facilitate an equal epistemic interaction between Africa and the knowledge systems of

other continents. As noted, decolonisation is an acknowledgement of the colonial legacy which is embedded in the structures, culture and knowledge validation systems of higher education.

Four points can be deduced from an analysis of the paradigms of decolonisation, as discussed in this article. First, higher education in Africa is structurally and culturally a remnant of colonialism, with most universities having been established during the colonial or apartheid regimes. Inadvertently, they still reflect colonial culture and architecture. Second, given global coloniality, the former coloniser countries have continued to influence the curriculum, standardisation, assessment criteria and research focus of African universities. Third, the decolonisation project should be owned by all, regardless of race, ethnicity, nationality and other social diversities. Fourth, the discourse on decolonisation paradoxically uses the same tools (such as language) as those employed to advance colonialism. On this point, it is possible to concur with the observation that “decolonization cannot come from existing philosophic and analytic paradigms which have dominated the world thus far but from these epistemologies born out of the historical experiences of the struggle against domination” (Mignolo 2007, 559).

Decolonisation confronts those ideals, cultures and values that deliberately systemise and maintain forms of epistemic oppression in higher education. In this respect, Wiredu (1998) states that decolonisation should be conceptualised as a holistic approach to militate against Western hegemony within the African education-scope. In other words, decolonisation ought to accommodate and infuse the “good” and neglect the “bad” of Western educational influences. Unlike political colonialism, decolonisation in higher education needs to remove the veil, which covers the salient and explicit forms of knowledge marginalisation. Decolonisation is not an end in itself, but an avenue that may facilitate continual pursuit for social justice in African higher education.

For a fair exchange of knowledge systems within African higher education, decolonisation should address the social and racial composition of the staff component and student body alike, in line with national demographics. Ramoupi (2017) notes that there are extremely few black professors, in comparison to their white counterparts in the case of South African higher education. The multiracial and ethnic social composition of staff and students can countervail the tendencies of epistemic and cultural dominance by one social sector of the population. Nevertheless, decolonisation should also be instructive towards forms of oppression between and among black people. In other words, the colonised often mirror the coloniser, as has been the case in the governance of many African countries. Therefore, the decolonisation of higher education in Africa is not about eliminating one race group, but rather establishing cooperation, coexisting, and the equal sharing of knowledge systems. Mathebula (2019) describes the equal sharing of knowledge systems as a critical engagement with settled knowledge. An environment

should be created in which pro-decolonialists can dialogue with the “suspected” custodians and perpetrators of coloniality within African institutions of higher education. In other words, it would be incorrect to suggest that white students and staff are the custodians and actors of coloniality. There are cases in which black academics tend to perpetuate coloniality through their teaching practices and values. Hence, decoloniality will not be completed once the racial composition at universities has been rectified.

Given the foregoing argument, it is erroneous to regard decolonisation as the exclusive establishment and institutionalisation of a “purely” African knowledge system. The ultimate purpose of decolonisation must be to eliminate a hierarchical knowledge system in which other forms of knowledge are marginalised. In this respect, the main contention in decolonisation revolves around issues of struggle and power. Coloniality is a system of power that is not amenable to rational discussions and the free interchange of ideas. It is about maintaining the power and privilege of the few. To this end, the decolonisation of higher education should result in an epistemic-mutuality dispensation, where Africa interacts and learns from the rest of the world and the rest of the world learns from Africa. Decolonisation should not be some form of revenge-mission against certain social groups. On the contrary, it should facilitate the fair, mutual and equal exchange of knowledge systems from different cultures and worldviews.

## **CONCLUSION**

The search for conceptual clarity on decolonisation of higher education in Africa is an important endeavor. The significance of such a process is patent when consideration is given to the indispensability of decolonization discourse of higher education in Africa. Nevertheless, the discussion in this article on the four paradigms of decolonization has indicated that there is a risk that in trying to undo coloniality, the endeavors towards decolonization may in fact entrench epistemic injustice. Conceptual misrepresentations on Africanisation, indigeneity, racial undertones and Ubuntu we have discussed in this article have unintended consequences of impeding decolonization. Our understanding of decolonization is that it is a process that seeks to rectify all forms of epistemic hegemony rather than embedding epistemic injustice. On this understanding, the distortions of paradigms alluded to in this article lead to both testimonial and hermeneutical injustice. We conclude that the continual cognizance of conceptual distortions on paradigms can militate against epistemic injustice and thereby, contributing to conceptual clarity on decolonisation of higher education in Africa.

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