Chapter 9

Contextual decolonisation of higher education in South Africa

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Introduction

The higher education landscape under apartheid South Africa was skewed in ways designed to entrench the power and privilege of the ruling white minority. Education is a principal tool in ensuring emancipation (or the lack thereof), however, it was also used as a tool to ensure the continuation of colonisation in South Africa. At the beginning of 1994, South Africa's higher education system was fragmented and uncoordinated. This was primarily the result of the white apartheid government's conception of race and the politics of race, which had shaped the higher education policy framework laid down during the 1950s (Bunting, 2006). Enforced racial segregation resulted in a plethora of institutions to accommodate specific racial and language groups, which were managed and professionally staffed mostly by white males (Barnes, Baijnath & Sattar, 2010).

Badat (2010) avers that in South Africa, social inequalities were embedded and reflected in all spheres of social life as a product of the systemic exclusion of black people and women under apartheid. The higher education system was no

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exception. Social, political and economic discrimination and inequalities of class, race, gender, including those of an institutional and spatial nature, profoundly shaped and continue to shape South African higher education. Given this, South Africa's new democratic government committed itself in 1994 to transforming higher education as well as the inherited apartheid social and economic structures and institutionalising a new social order. The South African higher education system in the post-apartheid period had to respond to the various discriminatory practices that existed during the apartheid era. This entailed responding to inequalities in the education system at various levels. There was an imperative to serve a society based on the principles of equality, equity and inclusivity (Govender & Rampersad, 2016). The failures of the transformation agenda created a dysfunctional vacuum where numerical access increased but epistemological access remained hindered; where institutional culture remained inhibiting and curriculum and language remained that of the coloniser. This led to the emergence of the decolonisation movement in South African higher education.

This chapter explores the decolonisation of higher education in South Africa. It recognises that the decolonisation process is different for all institutions, and therefore theorises a contextual approach to decolonising. To further investigate this issue, it is critical to deconstruct decolonisation.

Deconstructing the notion of decolonisation

Luckett (2016) argues that decolonisation is about interrogating the status quo, the relationships between curriculum and power, who decides what counts as knowledge, who decides whose knowledge is valid, and what constitutes the general culture of the university. This means that the higher education landscape should not be accepted as it is, but rather requires a thorough questioning of the process that constitutes the process of knowledge creation and socialisation. Luckett (2016) maintains that in decolonisation we deconstruct knowledge, the historical development of disciplines and the colonial archive. In this light, decolonisation is not simply the absence of a colonial administration and government; the heterogeneous and global structures put in place over a period of many years cannot just be eradicated with a change in political and juridical power.

While the political power matrix shifted grounds, the structures that enabled the function of the society, especially higher education, remained colonised. The Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) argues that discrimination, particularly regarding racism and sexism, continues to be pervasive in South African universities, as it is in the broader society (DHET, 2013). This has manifested itself differently in different universities and has created tensions between the global imperatives and the need for contextual relevance within universities in response to the legacy of apartheid (Mather, 2007). Mamdani (2016) expatiates on this by arguing that the political understanding of decolonisation has moved from one limited to independence from external domination to a broader transformation of institutions, especially those critical to the reproduction of racial and ethnic subjectivities legally enforced under colonialism. And since this reproduction has manifested itself differently in different provinces in South Africa, dealing with it conventionally would be a colossal error. Furthermore, the economic understanding has broadened from one of local ownership over local resources to the transformation of both internal and external institutions that sustain unequal colonial-type economic relations.

The epistemological dimension of decolonisation has focused on the categories with which we learn, unlearn and relearn, thereby apprehending the world. It is intimately tied to our notions of what is human, what is particular, and what is universal. There is much talk within the South African higher education system of inclusiveness, however, the status quo remains. The lack of inclusiveness has been a result of adopting a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to inclusion. Higgs (2016) argues that higher education in South Africa in the 21st century has to operate in both a postcolonial and a globalising context, though it has retained its oppressive status quo decades after political decolonisation. Higgs (2016) goes on to state that despite the advent of decolonisation, different universities in South African still mirror different colonial education paradigms inherited from former colonial education systems, and as a result, the voices of African indigenous populations are negated. The 'Rhodes Must Fall' and 'Open Stellenbosch' movements are examples requiring contextually tailored solutions.

Ngũgĩ '(2004), and Fomunyam and Teferra (2017) argue that decolonisation is a complicated process that focuses on the rejection of the centrality of the global North in Africa and its understanding of itself. This makes decolonising about shifting the balance of power in relation to knowledge hegemony and knowledge

economy. Decolonisation becomes the process of redefining African institutions from an African perspective in the bid to make it responsive to African contextual challenges. This makes decolonisation in South African higher education arguably about re-centring South African higher education intellectually and culturally by redefining what the centre is. South African institutions or universities, therefore, need to stop foregrounding European experiences, cultural and social capital at the expense of unique African epistemological nuances (Fomunyam, 2017c). By making Africa the centre of teaching and learning in South African higher education, academics would foreground the African experience and knowledge systems and empower Africans to make contextual knowledge relevant contextually and internationally. To Fomunyam (2017a, 2017b), decolonising the university or decolonising the South African higher education system focuses on three different constructs: (i) a partial or complete makeover of institutional culture and architecture; (ii) curriculum, teaching and learning, language; and (iii) the democratising university hegemony. While there are different views of decolonisation in South African higher education, what it means for most of the universities within the education system and how the decolonisation process is being handled is yet to be fully articulated or understood.

This chapter is an attempt to articulate the meaning of decolonisation as understood and theorised in one of the universities of technology in South Africa. The rationale for this was the different challenges and approaches universities face and how they are dealing with these challenges in the decolonisation process. For example, at the University of Cape Town, it started with 'Rhodes Must Fall', while at The University of KwaZulu-Natal it started with the defacing of the statue of King George. At the University of Stellenbosch it was about 'Open Stellenbosch', at the University of Pretoria, 'Afrikaans Must Fall, while' at Rhodes University it was about the change of name. These challenges, among others, show that universities respond to different things in different ways. There is a need to understand what they are responding to and how they are responding to it. However, to do this, it is necessary to first explain how the data used to construct such an understanding was generated.

Methodology

The data used in this study was generated using two different qualitative approaches: a debate and an open-ended questionnaire. The debate was used as a tool for data generation. Participants had an open discussion, and everyone had opportunities to put forward their ideas, counter those of others, and at the end to arrive at some sort of agreement on the way forward. Two debates were held. The first debate lasted two and a half hours and the second an hour longer.

The first debate was attended by students and staff as well as representatives from student associations, unions, departments and centres. This debate focused on two questions: First, what is decolonisation within the context of this university? Second, what does this university need to do to decolonise? The debate was accompanied by a questionnaire to ensure that those who did not get enough opportunity to express themselves had their say. The questionnaire had three open-ended questions:

What do you understand by decolonisation in the higher education context?

What aspects of the university require decolonisation?

What must the university do to decolonise?

The second debate, which was a follow up on the first, sought to further expatiate on some issues raised and provide a pathway forward. This second debate focused on five key themes that had emerged from the first debate: (i) The cycle of socialisation; (ii) Language; (iii) Internationalising the African perspective; (iv) Radical economic transformation; and (v) Community engagement. The debate included a questionnaire including the following five questions:

How should students socialise to ensure decolonisation within the institution?

What changes are needed in the language policy of the university?

How can the university internationalise the African perspective?

> *What can or should be done to ensure radical economic transformation in the university?*

> *How can the university engage the community effectively to ensure decolonisation?*

The data generated from the first and second debates coupled with the two open-ended questionnaires were categorised and coded using the five themes that emerged from the first debate. These themes (the cycle of socialisation; language; internationalising the African perspective; radical economic transformation; and community engagement) are presented and discussed in the subsequent sections of this paper in the bid to answer the two critical research questions within the context of the university:

- What is decolonising higher education in the context of this university?
- What does this university need to do to decolonise?

The next section of the chapter is a thematic analysis of the data.

Thematic analysis of the data

The cycle of socialisation

To some of the participants in the study, decolonising higher education within the context of the university is all about breaking the cycle of socialisation. To them, the university community is still racially divided, though informally. Different racial groups have been made to socialise with their kind making the university an involuntarily segregated environment. Elaborating on this, one of the participants pointed out:

> *From the day I came to this university, I mostly see different races associating with their kind. You rarely see friends across races. The people I met here fraternise with people of my race and I gradually learn to do the same, no questions asked.*

Black students have come to associate with other black students, while white students associate with white students, as well as with other races. The university

needs to create avenues where such circles can be broken. Emphasising on the need and how to break this cycle, another participant pointed out:

> *The university must engage students in activities that would be similar to staff capacity building workshops where students of different cultures will unite, and the race barriers will be broken.*

Another felt that:

> *The university must introduce multi-disciplinary and multiracial social and cultural activities, which would encourage cross-cultural and racial socialisation. Also, the university needs to prioritise social and academic integration within the context of teaching and learning.*

The few who dare to associate with others sometimes find it difficult to express themselves effectively because usually, they have a command of a particular language, while the others do not. Some of the participants concluded that majors need to be taken to ensure that the cycle of socialisation is broken both amongst the students and staff so that a new generation of students can be born who see people for who they are and what they are worth and not the colour of their skin. The pattern of socialisation, as well as the places of socialisation, needs to be reinvented to ensure that everyone feels comfortable in such spaces so as to break their cycle of socialisation.

Language

The issue of language in decolonisation cannot be over-emphasised. Many students, especially black students, lack a command of English. This makes it difficult for them to socialise, express themselves within the university classroom, or articulate themselves expertly for assessment purposes.

Expanding on this, one of the participants pointed out:

> *In lectures we are taught in English, it's OK because they are not even interactive. However, tutorials could be designed in such a way that they cater for African languages.*

The medium of instruction needs to shift from simply being English to include African languages.

Another participant pointed out:

> *Multiple languages need to be introduced in the university and the language of the coloniser minimised.*

Another added:

> *A language policy needs to be developed to ensure that we don't maintain the language of the coloniser.*

This was supported by another student who added:

> *There should be a deliberate use of local languages, maybe one of the official languages.*

The university also lacks a language policy that takes into consideration that the university is or was positioned as a previously disadvantaged institution and as such needs to assert itself in the culture and language of the province where it is found. Linguistically, many students who lack a command of English have been excluded making their stay within the university problematic. The university also needs to encourage the development of the local languages to ensure that students are fluent not only in English but in local languages. Also, students should not be forced to study in English, but be allowed to choose a study language (English, Xhosa, Afrikaans, Venda or Zulu, as the case might be). To ensure the improper circle of socialisation is broken and the hegemony of the colonial language of English destabilised, the university needs to ensure that one other national language is used within the university for teaching and learning purposes.

In this vein, one of the participants concluded that:

> *All students should be made to take basic courses in local languages to ensure that the playing field is level for everyone to learning and socialise.*

This would mean that all students have basic knowledge of the languages spoken for socialisation and integration.

Internationalising the African perspective

Decolonising higher education in South Africa is also about internationalising the African perspective. Internationalisation can range from the cross-border movement of students and staff, international research collaboration, the offering of joint degrees by universities in different countries, satellite learning and online distance education, the regional harmonisation of qualification systems and the increasing inclusion of international, intercultural and global dimensions in university curricula.

Elaborating on this, a participant pointed out:

> *The university can internationalise local languages where students and staff from elsewhere can learn and obtain degrees in local languages. This becomes a way of showcasing our rich heritage to the world.*

There is a need for the internationalisation of the local and the African perspectives. For decolonisation within the university to be effective, the university needs to give as much as it receives. Universities need to start collaborating based on what they could offer about Africa and not what they can receive about Europe.

Supporting this, another participant stated:

> *The university needs to form partnerships and international linkages where it gives and not only receive.*

Another added:

> *Collaborations on curriculum and other university activities will help showcase what Africa has to offer and not what we should be receiving.*

Another participant suggested:

> *The university must create more programmes which are geared towards offering the world opportunities to learn from Africa.*

Decolonisation is not only about correcting the injustice of the past, but also about making sure in never happens again. Internationalising the African perspective is a way of shaping the narrative and ensuring that Africa writes its own history however it wants to. A variety of avenues should be created for the university to export rather than import. As one of the participants concluded:

> *The continuous importation of educational materials and resources from the Global North and the maintenance of the status quo left by the hegemonic regimes of the North is what has to ensure the continuous colonisation of the higher education landscape and this must change.*

Internationalising the African perspective would ensure the breaking of this hegemony and give Africa, through the institution, a voice. Channels need to be created for the marketing and exportation of the education products created within the university, be they publications, patterns or other any forms of products. Internationalising the African perspective is key to decolonising within the university.

Radical economic transformation

Decolonising South African higher education was also understood as engaging in radical economic transformation. The higher education sector in South Africa has largely remained colonised because of lack of economic transformation. The societies in which students come from remain untransformed, and the communities in which the universities are located remain untransformed.

Elaborating on this, a participant pointed out:

> *It is the responsibility of the university to ensure that not only the community in which it is located is transformed but also the students within the university gain economic power.*

Another participant added:

> *Until now, economic power which drives all other types of power remains in the hands of a tiny few why the majority are languishing in misery.*

Without a radical economic transformation in the educational sphere, decolonisation would be a façade, because access and capital (social, political and cultural) would always be a problem as a result of generational poverty. Many students cannot afford to pay fees and they drop out of school. Even with the announcement of free higher education, not every student has been able to receive funding. For decolonising of the higher education sector to be successful, there needs to be radical economic transformation, at least within the university community.

One participant stated:

> We need to train individuals to manage economic systems that promote effective and sustainable living.

Another added:

> The university can and should invest in student projects or incubators where both students and the neighbouring communities can benefit developing commercial or products needed in everyday life.

Avenues and opportunities need to be created for such a transformation. If the university and student population have to rely on the generosity of a few, decolonisation would remain a mirage. Donors would always dictate the terms and conditions for the utilisation of their resources and the kinds of research undertaken, amongst other things.

To introduce decolonisation within the university context requires radical economic transformation for staff and students. Without the power to drive and sustain the decolonisation move within the university, the decolonisation agenda would never be complete.

Community engagement

To ensure decolonisation, one of the key missions of the university is community engagement. However, up to now, the way such engagement has been done is skewed and colonised.

To buttress this point, a participant pointed out:

> *The community or communities wherein the university is located is yet to feel the impact of the university.*

Another participant said:

> *Though there has been engagement of the community at different levels, this engagement is often characterised by philosophies which are foreign to the local community.*

The university is seen yet to engage the community on what its needs are and to address these needs through the education system.

Elaborating on this, a participant stated:

> *Community engagement should be the platform for decolonisation wherein the local context is taken into consideration and the university engage with it to ensure that it understands both the context of the students and the kind of challenges they deal with so that they can better train them.*

Economic transformation is needed for effective decolonisation, and a way of achieving that is through effective community engagement. Engaging and transforming the mindset of the community is one way of decolonising the mindset of the students and those they deal with to facilitate the decolonisation of the higher education sector, as well as the society.

Supporting this one of the participants pointed out:

> *The university needs to ask the communities what their needs are so that it can understand and formulate projects to help provide solutions to it.*

Another added:

> *The university also needs to incorporate local communities into curricular and also in teaching and learning approaches.*

By doing this, the university would ensure contextual responsiveness, which is at the heart of the decolonisation debate. The university, therefore, cannot fulfil its mission of community engagement without engaging with a decolonising mentality.

Discussion of findings

Decolonising South African higher education deals with the commonalities of colonisation and the legacies of colonisation in the higher education sector. However, decolonisation in specific institutions looks at the specificity of the institution, thereby moving away from the general to the particular. In this particular university, decolonisation is about five key issues, namely: the cycle of socialisation; language; internationalising the African perspective; radical economic transformation; and community engagement.

Dudgeon and Walker (2015) argue that an individual's connectedness to the community is central to that individual's wellbeing. The community is a collective space where people develop their sense of identity, participate in family and kinship networks, and maintain personal connections and socio-cultural norms. If a numb informal cycle of socialisation is maintained within the university community, the university would produce graduates who would maintain the same cycle of socialisation in the communities they move to or in which they work. There is a need to break this cycle for the creation of a more accommodating and socially endearing environment

Dudgeon and Walker (2015) conclude that the notion of socialisation is fundamental to identity and concepts of self within societies. They add that understandings of socialisation tend to conceive of society or the social as a pre-existing field of embeddedness in contrast to the mainstream construct, which imagines socialisation as a social contract between supposedly 'rationally acting' and 'free-standing', atomistic individuals. Decolonising by breaking the cycle of socialisation would ensure the critiquing of racist discourses founded on an ideology of individualism to reveal the role of power, oppression, and the pervasive impacts of 'institutional racism' in society. Heleta (2016) adds that the social and ideological construction of racial difference and the representations that defend

racial difference in social practices and institutional cultures need to be attacked from the core in the bid to ensure the decolonisation of the institution.

Naude further summarises the concerns of decolonisation as follows:

> *Western knowledge 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 traditions hold, they constitute the centre of knowledge so that other forms of knowledge are suppressed and are seen as inferior—a situation described as 'coloniality. (Naude, 2017, p. 1)*

For ages, South African higher education institutions have foregrounded Western knowledge perspectives and relegated the African perspective and language to the background. Decolonising is about recognising the hidden trends in African perspectives and internationalising them through African languages to make sure that these perspectives become the norm, not only in South African universities but also elsewhere in the world. As this continent finds itself in a postcolonial era, decolonisation has specific relevance to Africa, however, its knowledge and perspective still reflect the dominance of Western knowledge forms. Ngũgĩ (2004) argues that decolonising higher education in Africa is about Africans seeing themselves clearly in a relationship with themselves and others in the universe and this he says is the 'quest for relevance'. This relevance can only be established if South African or African universities succeed in internationalising the African perspective as well as foregrounding African languages by using them as a medium of instruction in higher education.

Fanon (2008) and Ngũgĩ (2004) argue that decolonising the mind is the first step to decolonising the higher education system since learning begins with students developing a critical consciousness about life's realities, what needs to be changed, and what should be maintained. According to Fanon (2008), decolonising is about freeing or engaging the mind with a different set of knowledge paradigms, belief systems, experiences and social capital. Language becomes the vehicle for this. The participants believe that without a change in the language of instruction decolonisation would be incomplete. Fanon and Ngũgĩ aver that knowledge is embedded in language and culture, and culture itself to a certain level only expresses itself through language. Therefore, for the African mind to be truly

decolonised, the language of engagement or instruction needs to change. In line with this, Ngũgĩ moved forward to write in *Gikuyu* a local language in Kenya.

Internationalising the African perspective and changing or enhancing the language of instruction within the university context becomes a critical issue for decolonisation for two reasons. First, it positions the university to negate or change the Western perspectives about African and its institutions and would ensure that Western traditions remain vital in African universities. Second, it would ensure that students get a better understanding of what is taught. This is confirmed by Fomunyam (2017b) who argues that the language of instruction in education is an issue to consider if the decolonisation process must advance. And since Fanon (2008) already positioned decolonisation as a chaotic and unclean process or break from a colonial condition that is already over-determined by the violence of the coloniser, regaining independence at the intellectual level on the platform of chaos would be to tear its hegemonic principles, ways of thinking and language of expression. Chilisa (2017) adds that the marginalisation of African perspectives in a disciplinary inquiry is not a new phenomenon. The development of research inquiry reveals methodological hegemony with a tendency to perpetuate the dominance of one race over the other by building a collection of theories, concepts, methods, techniques and rules designed to promote only the knowledge that promoted and profited Eurocentrism. Internationalising the African perspective becomes critical in turning the tides and foregrounding the African perspectives.

Habib and Padayachee (2000) argue that radical economic transformation is about re-industrialising South Africa's economy by severing its old growth path and creating the conditions for the economy to industrialise through manufacturing and beneficiation or the processing of raw materials. The transformation of higher education must promote a more diverse economy and give room for youths to thrive. It is about decentralisation of ownership of the economy by empowering younger minds in the academic milieu to grow into development. Sisk (2017) adds that radical economic transformation requires a rigorous analysis of why economic and social policies have not delivered growth and development.

The existing norm in South Africa is one where an uneven distribution of precarity is evident. The talk of simple, crude measures of redress would simply result in a greater number of people being inserted into the already untransformed, bipolar economic system, which is fundamentally skewed by race and gender.

This is neither transformative nor economically just. What is called for is the reformatting of the economy premised on a different, more just set of norms or values. Ideological norms must be built retrospectively, seeking to undo injustice from the past and prospectively seeking to produce more just futures.

This economic backlash has stifled the growth of higher education. The productivity of higher education graduates or graduate returns ensures that more and more black middle-class and poor students remain out of the higher education sector. Empowering the disempowered and ensuring that access at all levels is improved and that students get the opportunity to play different roles in national development is at the crux of higher education decolonisation. It becomes critically important to do this through community engagement. This will help the university to better understand the community and the needs of the community. This engagement will assist the institution to drive national development and to fulfil its mission.

Fomunyam (2017c) and Fomunyam and Teferra (2017) argue that decolonisation in higher education is not simply about the absence of colonial political administration or the destruction of colonial legacies, but also about ensuring a learning environment that is conducive for all to learn and within which none are disadvantaged for historical reasons. Engaging in radical economic transformation becomes a way of ensuring that the higher education system, both now and in the future, is rid of the ills or legacies of colonialism. Dealing with the current situation rather than the root cause would be chasing tales. Decolonisation from a standpoint of radical economic transformation through community engagement would be riding the system of everything colonial. As part of their mission, universities need to engage and uplift the communities in which they are situated and ensure that the impact of the knowledge being constructed on the university campus is felt by the community. The university, therefore, has a responsibility of ensuring the eradication of colonial legacies on its campus and in the communities wherein the universities find themselves. By ensuring economic transformation, both on its campus and in the community, the university is decolonising.

Conclusion

Decolonisation in the higher education sector is a complicated process, which unfolds differently for different institutions. The focus in each university varies depending on the challenges the university faces. The chapter has attempted to contextually understand decolonisation from an institutional perspective and to enhance understanding of what is happening within the university and how the university is dealing with it.

From the study, it is clear that decolonisation within the university is about five key issues: the cycle of socialisation; language; internationalising the African perspective; radical economic transformation; and community engagement. Engaging these five issues within the university would ensure that the university is decolonised.

The study, therefore, makes the following five key recommendations:

Firstly, the university in particular and the higher education sector in general needs to practically engage the subject of racism and segregation on campuses. This is not to say students are racist, however, the cycle of socialisation they have grown into and come to know have made them see race before everything else. In most cases, race, not by choice but by birth and association, has become a determining factor for socialisation. For the decolonisation project to move forward this cycle needs to be broken across universities.

Secondly, the university and the higher education landscape need to address the issue of language of instruction. Other local languages need to be developed within the context of higher education to make them tools for intellectual engagement.

Thirdly, Eurocentric views and ways of knowing and understanding theories and methodologies have dominated the higher education landscape in South Africa. There is a need for the internationalisation of African perspectives to counter and empower against the continuous indoctrination of students with European worldviews. Internationalising local perspectives would ensure that higher education has a voice both at home and abroad and ensure its rightful place in the knowledge economy.

Fourthly, economic empowerment is a critical part of any transformation process. The continuous cry in South Africa is that of improper wealth distribution, which

directly affects the students, the communities and the universities. Universities must make it a priority to address radical economic transformation and provide a pathway for the nation to follow.

Lastly, there must be community engagement within the university, but how the university engages in this is what makes the difference. Engaging to uplift and improve the surrounding community would help to ensure the smooth function of the university. If there is chaos in the community, the university cannot function effectively. The university, therefore, must engage to empower the community to decolonise.

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