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The Conundrum of Decolonisation and Afrophobia: A Case for South African Higher Education

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Introduction

Decolonisation of higher education is predicated on the imperative to learn, unlearn, deconstruct and reconstruct values, norms, beliefs and thought systems that were disseminated during colonialism (Mutekwe 2017). In that regard, decolonisation cannot avoid confronting the misconception that anything non-European and non-white is inferior as espoused in afrophobia. Conceptually, afrophobia refers to anti-foreign sentiments expressed exclusively and specifically towards foreign nationals from other African countries (Tafira 2011). In the context of South Africa, afrophobia occurs both in the broader society and in higher education, albeit in different forms (Department of Education [DoE] 2008; Lee 2017). Afrophobia impedes the possibility of social interactions across nationalities in higher education. Conversely, decolonisation of higher education is fundamentally an emancipatory discourse in which

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forms of social oppression and prejudices are supposedly eliminated (Mbembe 2016). Decolonisation of higher education encompasses the process of redressing the oppressive structural, cultural and systematic colonial values (Mbembe 2015). In its conceptual absoluteness, decolonisation seeks to uproot and cleanse the seemingly intractable colonial imprints and unequal social relations that are embedded in African higher education exhaustively. One cannot claim to be an advocate of decolonisation while simultaneously engaging in afrophobic practices and attitudes that marginalise other members of the society.

While we are alive to the fact that afrophobic practices and attitudes occur in most universities in African countries, we chose to locate this debate in South African higher education because of two seminally important reasons. Firstly, South Africa continues to be the leading host study destination for many African international students. For instance, in 2013, there were 74,000 international students out of whom 74% were from the Southern African region (Lee 2017; Lee and Schoole 2015). The leading top student-sending countries are Zimbabwe, Botswana, Nigeria, Malawi, Lesotho and Swaziland. Comparatively, South Africa has the best universities and a stable political and economic environment. Secondly, owing to the comparatively democratic space that both staff and students enjoy, South Africa has reignited and re-galvanised Africa to revisit the debate on decolonisation of education (Sayed et al. 2017). The highly publicised #RhodesMustFall campaign as well as demands for a decolonised university curriculum and culture all captured the imagination of the rest of the continent. On the realisation that the Western and 'white' ideals dominate the university curriculum, in 2015, South African higher education students and staff embarked on nationwide campaigns for a decolonised education (Morreira 2017). It is our submission in this chapter that the decolonisation of higher education debate that gathered momentum in South Africa will inevitably cascade to the rest of the higher education sector in Africa. As noted already in this introductory phase, besides better facilities, African international students are pulled to pursue university education because of the democratic space that South African students enjoy. Resultantly, the demand for decolonisation of higher education epitomises the availability of student democratic space in South Africa. It is essential to state that in most

repressive African countries, higher education students are denied the right to protest.

Nevertheless, the ideals espoused in the discourse on decolonisation of higher education are in sharp contrast to afrophobic practices and attitudes in South African higher education. Decolonisation of higher education is premised on the ideals of restoration, reclamation, reaffirmation and reidentification of social values and norms that were disrupted during the colonial era (Mutekwe 2017). On the other hand, afrophobic practices and attitudes are tailored towards ingraining social dominance and oppression over African international students. Since decolonisation tends to be rather ambivalent, it is crucial to some conceptual outline.

Decolonising African Education: Some Conceptual Considerations

In search of some theoretical elucidation on decolonisation, it is indispensable to make a distinction between political and educational decolonisation. Political decolonisation is a process in which liberation political movements and activists tenaciously confronted the colonial authority demanding majority rule and attendant civil rights (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2015). In Zimbabwe, for instance, such confrontation led to protracted violent civil wars in which many people were maimed or killed (Mlambo 2010). In some other countries, the political activists and liberation movements instituted political negotiations that ultimately resulted in the granting of independence. From its generic political connotation, it can be argued that most countries in Africa are decolonised through the attainment of political independence. Since colonisation had entailed the territorial occupation and imposition of rule by an external force (Hendricks 2018), political decolonisation as the converse implies the removal of the colonial authority. The public representatives, supposedly without regard to racial and ethnic orientation, assume leadership positions. The central supposition in political independence is therefore an end to political oppression (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2015).

On the other hand, educational decolonisation, which is the key motif in this chapter, refers to the endeavours to eliminate oppressive colonial values, norms and beliefs that have obstinately remained embedded in African higher education after the end of political colonisation. Consequently, the conundrum is such that the attainment of political decolonisation does not necessarily imply the achievement of educational decolonisation. On average, most African countries have surpassed the 20-year political independence commemoration, yet educational decolonisation has persisted to be an ‘unfinished business’.

Primarily, decolonisation of education involves identification and elimination of influential colonial norms, beliefs, thought systems and values that continue to shape African higher education (Mutekwe 2017). Instead of establishing reaffirmation, reclamation and restoration, African higher education is often observed to be recreating and entrenching the colonial practices, values and thought systems (Mbembe 2016). In this regard, education perpetuates and re-enacts the presence of colonisers in their physical absence. Indisputably, decolonisation should be able to disrupt the perpetuation of colonial values and norms. Succinctly, the call for decolonisation is informed by the claim that “the books, theories and learning content predominantly reflect the thoughts of the previous Western colonial powers” (Van Jaarsveldt et al. 2018, 3). Decolonisation of education presupposes that at one historical moment, a form of colonial education was imparted to the colonised people. To decolonise, therefore, is a deliberate systematic erasure, recalibration and elimination of the residual colonial practices, values and representations in education. Arguably, the demands for decolonisation of education are an explicit acknowledgement of the inadequacies of political decolonisation.

Decolonisation of higher education in Africa can be theoretically analysed from what we will term ‘software’ and ‘hardware’ levels. The software level of decolonisation encompasses the intangible cultural value system that seeks to elevate remnant colonial norms while relegating the African student’s cultural normative system (Mbembe 2015). The software level is rather salient or latent. Pertinent issues to do with language of instruction, curriculum and history content fall under this category (Kiguwa and Segalo 2018). For instance, at both the Universities of Pretoria and of the Free State, there have been sustained calls for the

abandonment of Afrikaans as the dominant language of instruction. On the other hand, the hardware level entails the university architectural outlook as well as the racial composition of staff at the university. It could be argued that the hardware level of decolonisation is inserted in the post-apartheid transformation of education in South Africa. Accordingly, it is spelt out that both the student and staff composition of universities should reflect the social demographic composition of the broader society (DoE 2001). Inescapably, decolonisation identifies the university infrastructure and symbols that are suggestive of glorifying the colonial. Contextually, the demand for the removal of Cecil John Rhodes' statue and the request to change the name of Rhodes University are all contentious pointers to the imperative to address the remnant colonial hardware of the university. It is aptly noted that there are recognisable colonial continuities in higher education in Africa (Mamdani 2016).

There is a critical point to derive from this foreground on decolonisation of higher education in Africa Accordingly; decolonisation is ultimately tended towards a dispensation of social equality in African higher education. In other words, decolonisation of education in Africa must not be a vindictive programme that seeks to bring white supremacy on its knees (Mbembe 2015), while culturally 'elevating' the black African student. Ideally, the primary target of decolonisation of education is the eradication of colonial cultural hegemony that continues to define African higher education. It is therefore misleading to regard decolonisation as a reprisal period of 'correcting' the historical scoreboard against a certain racial or ethnic section of the social composition of the university. Furthermore, it would be inappropriate to claim that black African students are the 'appropriate' sole custodians of the decolonisation of education debate as they are the yesteryear victims of colonialism (Makhubela 2018). Fundamentally, decolonisation is supposed to result in the realisation of equal social relations in which cultures and knowledge systems are valued. In our view, a decolonised higher education is accommodative of the diverse social composition along race, nationalities, religions and sexual orientations. Decolonisation of higher education as the antithesis to colonialism envisages the eradication of opinionated prejudices and stereotypes that often arise within the social diverseness of the social composition of the university. Accordingly, the following subsection delineates

afrophobia as a colonial historical output that hinders the attainment of decolonisation of education.

Afrophobia in South African Higher Education: An Impediment to Decolonisation

Afrophobia, as a general dislike or irrational fear of African immigrants in the South African higher education and the discourse on decolonisation higher education creates a conundrum within South African higher education. A conundrum is evidenced by the observation, “international students and in particular those from Africa are in a contradictory position. This is to say that on the one hand they are welcomed and encouraged to study in South Africa by universities and government institutions, while on the other hand they face the possibility of xenophobia” (Bolsmann and Miller 2008, 216). As foreigners, African international students are exposed to misconceptions, stereotypes and unfriendly social interactions in South African higher education (ibid).

Lee (2017) observes that African international students in the South African higher education tend to encounter social discrimination on the basis of their nationalities. In the same line of thought, afrophobia is constantly singled out as a social issue of concern at South African universities. The anti-African international students occur in both academic and social settings within South African universities (Obadire 2018). These empirical research findings are a testimony to the fact that afrophobia is an affront to the decolonisation of education discourse. It is emphasised that “given the pervasive xenophobic sentiments apparent across South Africa, the experiences, then, of non-South African black African students in South African universities both at the level of staff and students cannot be assumed to be positive” (Dominguez-Whitehead and Sing 2015, 87). Having given this synoptic description in South African higher education, it is incumbent to cite some forms which afrophobia takes.

The Selective Application of Foreignness in Universities

While decolonisation advances the ideals of social equality, the conceptual distinction between ‘international’ and ‘foreign’ exposes afrophobia in South African higher education. An observation is made that white European international students are referred to as ‘internationals’, while those from other African countries are termed ‘foreign students’ (Kavuro 2013). This chapter does not seek to dispute that international students are foreigners. Rather, the point to observe is that the conceptual distinction between ‘foreign’ and ‘international’ is a vital indicator of afrophobia. Ideally, the negative connotations and assumptions that are inherent in the conceptualisation of foreignness need to be eliminated within the scope of decolonisation of higher education (Mbembe 2015).

Language Contentions

Language of instruction is a highly contentious issue in the decolonisation of education discourse in South Africa. However, in demonstrating afrophobia, African international students are exposed to systematic linguistic exclusion that defies the decolonisation discourse. In this respect, dominant local indigenous languages are often used to exclude African international students socially. It is common that local students and staff use their local language such as Sotho, Zulu or Xhosa during academic sessions in the presence of international students from Africa, who may not be conversant in these languages (Singh 2013). African international students indicated that local students deliberately avoid to socially interact with them in favour of white international students from Europe (Lee 2017).

Illustratively, at the University of Venda, Obadire (2018) notes that African international students are often excluded when lecturers and South African students converse in Venda language during the course of a lecture. Venda and Sepedi are some of the official languages in South Africa spoken by the majority of local people in the region in which the

University of Limpopo is located. Equally, African international students may be negatively prejudged based on their English accent (Waghid 2009).

It is noted that “foreign black students, whom we have worked with, typically report that their failure to speak isiZulu, in our context the dominant indigenous language, provides the focal point for hostility” (Singh and Francis 2010, 305). At the University of KwaZulu-Natal, it was found out that “according to the foreign African students, one of the ways in which they experience xenophobia was local students and sometimes staff members would speak to them in local language such as isiZulu” (Muthuki 2013, 114). An African international student pointed out, “my South African classmates show great dislike of my presence, which is often characterised by local comments and words which I have come to learn are abusive, inhumane to such an extent I can’t write them, let alone imagine them” (Singh 2013, 100). *Kwerekwere* is a derogatory term that is used to refer to African languages that are not spoken in South Africa (Tella 2016). On the other hand, languages of European international students like France, Turkey and England are not derided as *kwerekwere*. An African international student stated, “some of the locals judge internationals by their ability to speak their language. This can prove difficult as there are eleven official languages and most internationals speak English and at least one language from their home” (Lee 2017).

The Perception of African International Students as Economic Threat

The central imperative of decolonisation is the attainment of a dispensation under which equal access to economic resources is established (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2016). Subsequently, it is unsurprising that Afrophobic practices are manifested through contestations around the distribution and access to scholarships, bursaries and financial grants within South African higher education. African international students as non-citizens are constantly reminded that they do not deserve to have access to the economic resources in both the university and the broader society (Lee

2017). In most instances, African international students are perceived negatively as economically poor while international students from Europe are considered potential tourists (Matsinhe 2011; Ramphele 1999). According to Bayaga (2011), there is a general perception that South Africa is not 'really' an African nation-state because of its relatively advanced and stable economy. The disassociation with Africa is precipitated by the negative image of Africa as a poor and primitive continent (Matsinhe 2011). From the economic threat perspective, African international students are often perceived as economic threats who scramble for the available financial resources in higher education (Obadire 2018).

It is advanced that "South African students tend to think that African international students left their countries because of civil wars, hunger, poverty and unemployment" (Monke 2012, 49). The notion that African international students are economic migrants is reinforced by the observation that they are likely to encounter severe financial challenges during their study period in South Africa (Dominguez-Whitehead and Sing 2015). European and American international students may not face severe financial challenges owing to their stronger financial currency in comparison to the South African rand. In addition, Muthuki (2013) observes that African international students complain that there are few bursaries and scholarships available for international students. In the same view, Lee and Sehoole (2015) note there is a view that African international students deplete the economic resources that are meant for local students.

According to Monke (2012), African international students are made to feel inferior as they are reminded by locals that they are undeservedly benefiting from the economic privilege of studying and residing in South Africa. Inevitably, such afrophobic assumptions contradict the fundamental objectives of decolonisation of higher education.

A point is made that "South African students complain that African students are stealing their jobs, while the same allegations are not levelled against students from Europe or America" (Lee 2017, 880). In the empirical study conducted by Lee (2017), higher education students from Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Swaziland, Uganda and Malawi raised their concerns about afrophobia. In the same study, European and American

international students attested to the warm reception they received from both white and black South Africans on and off campus.

The aspect of threat is significant because in afrophobia it is only the black African international students who are perceived as an economic threat. White and European international students are not considered to be an economic threat (Lee 2017).

Identifying a certain group of international students as an economic threat is not peculiar to the South African higher education landscape. Boafo-Arthur (2014) observes that in the United States of America, African international students are stereotypically viewed as a burden on the resources. The trend that most international students from economically less developed nation-states do not return to their nation-states on completion of their studies already sets them up as future employment competitors with the locals. This perception can only increase tensions between local and African international students.

The threat perception is encompassed in the sense of superiority that is often exhibited by local students towards the African international students. It is said, “the foreign African students felt that South African students exhibited a sense of superiority towards them” (Muthuki 2013, 117). The sense of superiority may be informed (misinformed) by prejudices that portray other African nation-states as economically poorer, rural and more impoverished than the host South Africa in this case (Matsinhe 2011). Accordingly, within the framework of decolonisation, it is important that the perception that African international students are draining resources should be discarded. In a country such as South Africa, which faces deficit challenges of critical skills, decolonisation can assist in the retention of skilled African international graduates.

Institutionalised Financial Exclusion

Ramphele (1999) observes that South African students invoke the ‘card’ of citizenship in instances where they perceive that they compete for financial resources with African international students. In South Africa, international students from the Southern African Development Commission (SADC) region pay tuition fees which are equivalent to

domestic South African students. In this context, the South African students complain that it is unfair for government to subsidise international students from the SADC (Ramphele 1999). Unlike international students from Europe and the United States, African international students who originate from nation-states with weaker currencies, are sometimes forced to scramble for the available scholarships and bursaries within South African higher education (Dominguez-Whitehead and Sing 2015; Mpinganjira 2012). For instance, the National Research Foundation (NRF) has some financial allocations that can be accessed by postgraduate international students. Consequently, tension emerges between African international students and their South African counterparts, which ultimately results in afrophobic attitudes and practices within higher education.

Lee (2017) points out that African international students note that they are regarded as people who drain financial resources that are legitimately meant for South African domestic students. A Ugandan student reported, “the general public’s perception towards international students is not good. The general thinking among most locals is that international students are using their government resources as well as taking their jobs” (Lee 2017, 880).

For economic resource competition in South Africa, black race is assumed to represent economic inferiority (Mbembe 2015). Therefore, the black race is a threat to the social structure. On the other hand, the white race, is representative of economic prosperity, and by this fact, international students from Europe are not perceived as a threat towards job competition upon graduation (Lee and Schoole 2015). It is through such analysis of the prevalence of race in informing the debates and discourses on economic competition that afrophobia manifests in higher education. In this regard, international European students may not be regarded as an economic threat in comparison to black African international students. The economic threat perception can only be decolonised by the appreciation of the fact that both the South African broader society can potentially benefit from the critical technical and academic skills that African international students may acquire during their study period.

Covert Hostilities

Covert hostilities manifest in subtle manners, which suggest the foreignness and the non-belonging of the African international students in South Africa (Obadire 2018). In higher education, there is an observation that “xenophobia may not be manifested in the form of physical violence, but in more subtle forms of making the non-nationals feel so unwelcome and despised in an environment that is made psychologically hostile” (Mogekwu 2005, 10). In this regard, covert hostilities are primarily attitudes and subtle acts that seek to exclude African international students socially. In terms of social interactions between South African and African international students, there is rather deliberate avoidance of mutual friendships between the two cohorts (Lee 2017). While this may be due to divergent cultural backgrounds, afrophobia occurs when social interactions are deliberately limited or avoided on the basis of nationalities (Lee 2017). Additionally, “the foreign African students expressed that black South Africans were largely hostile to their presence” (Muthuki 2013, 117).

Furthermore, African international students are of the view that the local South African students are unfriendly and unsociable towards them (Lee 2017). At institutional level, the higher education sector tends to be rather implicitly unfriendly in outlook towards African international students (Obadire 2018). A relevant point is made that “unfortunately, universities in South Africa continue to remain powerful mechanisms of social exclusion and injustice that succumb to external conditions of the wider society” (Dominguez-Whitehead and Sing 2015, 85). In addition, Pithouse-Morgan et al. (2012) point out that African international students find university structures such as the Student Representative Council (SRC) unreceptive towards them as they often convey the impression that they are mandated to give priority to issues pertaining South African students. In the same vein, African international students find it difficult to report cases of afrophobic practices and attitudes since offices like the SRC are usually manned by local South African students (Kavuro 2013). The perceptions and negative attitudes towards African

international students seem to be the key factor in determining the service provisions from administrative establishments in higher education.

There are observations that hateful language is sometimes used against African international students. For instance, African international students complained over the hateful utterances that were directed towards them from the other members of the student body at meetings that were intended to address issues related to student protests against annual tuition fee increases. From an institutional management perspective, there is a persistent resentment from South African students towards foreign (particularly African) students and a pervasive sense of 'outsider' amongst foreign students (xenophobia) (Obadire, 2018).

In view of the debate alluded to in this chapter, it has become apparent that afrophobic covert hostilities defy the logic of decolonisation under which both international and local students should have a sense of equal belonging. In other words, there is an assumption that higher education facilities belong to all enrolled and registered students as well as the lecturing and supporting staff (Dominguez-Whitehead and Sing 2015). To that end, attitudes and practices of hostilities towards a particular nationality in higher education contradict the basic tenet of equal belonging that is encompassed in decolonisation of higher education. Additionally, afrophobic covert hostilities are indisputably incongruent with the tolerance towards social diversity as intended in South African higher education (Makhubela 2018). Henceforth, management of social diversity is an essential and indispensable constituent of ideal decolonisation of higher education.

Conclusion

The primary occupation of decolonisation of education is dismantling the economic, cultural and social oppressive tendencies that proceed from the vestiges of colonialism. In this respect, it was shown in this chapter that decolonisation of higher education cannot sidestep the prejudices and negative nationalistic stereotypes that are espoused in afrophobia. It is a self-defeating conundrum that afrophobia and decolonisation can concurrently seek to 'outshine' each other in the

South African higher education. Colonialism in Africa was ideologically instituted and entrenched by the false narrative that anything African and black was essentially inferior to white and European. To a larger extent, the presence of afrophobic practices and attitudes bears testimony to the lingering colonial ideology of white superiority and the attendant black inferiority perception. To decolonise higher education therefore entails redressing the inculcated social assumption that African international students are 'undesirable' while white and European international students are the appealing cohort of international students in South African higher education. In consideration of the fact that graduates are supposed to develop capacities to live and work in socially diverse environments, the decolonisation of higher education in Africa cannot afford to bypass afrophobia. Decolonisation is about access, while afrophobia is a denial towards higher education in Africa.

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