Decolonizing Higher Education and Curricula – Ali A. Abdi

Logan Cochrane,[1,2] Ali A. Abdi[3]

[1] Carleton University, Canada

[2] Hawassa University, Ethiopia

[3] University of British Columbia, Canada

This issue of NokokoPod presents a discussion on decolonizing higher education and curricula. The annotated PDF is available on the Nokoko journal website. This conversation took place on August 4th, with Logan Cochrane in Ottawa and Ali A. Abdi Vancouver. This version of the PDF has been reviewed by Logan Cochrane and Ali A. Abdi. In addition to the conversation, a set of annotations have been added as footnotes so as to strengthen the value of these publications and enable them to act as a resource for listeners and readers who want to have additional context and/or find additional resources on the topics discussed.

Logan: Welcome to NokokoPod. Today, we are joined by Dr. Ali A. Abdi, who is a professor in the Department of Educational Studies at the University of British Columbia.[1] Dr. Abdi has been a

---

1 For additional information on our guest, see: https://edst.educ.ubc.ca/facultystaff/ali-abdi/

leader as an author and editor of many books and a long list of articles and book chapters.[2] He has also been a leader in the positions he's held at institutions and with journals, including serving as the president of the Comparative and International Education Society of Canada.[3] His research has crossed many geographic areas in eastern, southern and western Africa. Thank you for joining us and spending some time with NokokoPod today.

Dr. Ali A. Abdi: Thank you Logan, it is good to talk to you.

Logan: Decolonization as a concept and the process of decolonizing has been used in many different contexts and by many different people. When you talk about decolonizing institutes of higher education and decolonizing curricula, what do you mean by that? How do you define that process? What do you see as its objectives?

Dr. Ali A. Abdi: Thank you. Decolonization is a construct, a possible practice, which more or less goes against the colonization of education, against the colonization of systems of knowledge and knowing, and against the colonization of the mind. This is as many African thinkers have talked about, like Ngugi wa Thiong'o,[4] Chinua Achebe,[5] Amilcar Cabral[6] and others. Historically, African education and the education and knowledge around the world were minimally contextually attached. In other words, African education was related

---

2 Recent books include: Ibrahim and Abdi (2016), Shizha and Abdi (2014), Ghosh and Abdi (2013), Hebert and Abdi (2013), amongst many others, other relevant works by the guest include Abdi (2008, 2012, 2013).

3 Comparative and International Education Society of Canada: https://ciescanada.ca/

4 For books by Ngugi wa Thiong'o, see: wa Thiong'o (1992, 2009, 2014).

5 For some writings by Chinua Achebe, see Achebe (1958, 1977, 1988, 2003, 2013).

6 For some works on or about Amilcar Cabral, see: Cabral (1979), Chabal (1983), McCulloch (2019), amongst others.

to the cultures and the histories of the peoples it was about. But European colonialism, from the mid-19th century (although there was a lot happening before) to the mid- to late-20th century, created a situation where traditional systems of knowledge and traditional systems of education were colonized. Eurocentric,[7] monocentric systems of learning were created. This did not create what we usually expect from education, which is social well-being, social development, cultural development, cultural well-being and so on and so forth. The ideas of decolonization, knowledge decolonization and educational decolonization are all about ways of reviving cultures, languages, histories and ways of knowing from societies and bringing them into the education and learning contexts of these societies, and beyond. This does not mean, as things are today, that you are actually cancelling current systems of education. As I have said before, it is bringing what is best from around the world and using that without marginalizing, for example, African cultures, histories, ways of knowing, and knowledges and so on and so forth. If you look at the work of Sandra Harding at UCLA,[8] and others, if you do a serious study of the history of knowledge in the world, it is clear that knowledge is a multi-source category and practice. In other words, all societies have contributed to the construction of the knowledges that we have today.

Logan: When you have engaged in eastern, southern and western Africa, what is the common institutional setting and common curricula that is being taught? Can you take us into the world of that monocentric and eurocentric space? What does it look and feel like for students?

---

7 The term 'eurocentrism' was first proposed by Samir Amin (1988).

8 For more on the work of Sandra Harding, see: https://gseis.ucla.edu/directory/sandra-harding/

Dr. Ali A. Abdi: The cancelling of traditional systems of education in Africa by colonialism has been well analyzed from historical perspectives. This has been done by people like Julius Nyerere, who was the first 'post-colonial' president of Tanzania (I always put quotation marks on 'post-colonial' because that is contested). There is also the work of Walter Rodney, in his well-known book How Europe Underdeveloped Africa.[9] There are others who have written on this, such as the Senegalese cultural anthropologist Hamidou Kane, in his book Ambiguous Adventure.[10] Once those systems actually were rescinded, their intention was to de-culture African peoples so they fit into the physical and mental mode of European colonialists.

It is true that African systems of learning were cancelled by force and European colonial system were imposed. Education actually was one of the most important weapons in terms of colonization. As I have said a few times myself, colonialism was first and foremost, in Africa, a psycho-cultural program, in other words colonizing the psychologies and the cultures of Africans. This was undertaken through education. What happened then was that education was limited, intentionally limited. For example, in Somalia, where I am from, Somalis were not allowed to go beyond Grade 7 during colonial education. Although, the idea of colonialism was announced, as people like Edward Said wrote about,[11] as a "developing" and "civilizing" mission. With that education system in place, a lot of the African countries in the west, south and east (as well as in other places) became politically independent in the 1960s.

From analytical hindsight, someone like me would have expected that these countries would modify, even minimally modify, the curricular systems through philosophical, conceptual and knowledge reconstructions. But, that did not happen. More or less,

---

9 Rodney (2018).

10 Kane (1963).

11 Said's most well-known work is Orientalism (1979).

they kept the systems of education that were in place. These systems actually stayed in place because they served the elite of Africa. Very few people were chosen to go beyond Grade 7 and to go beyond high school. In the French context, for example, these people were declared as the conduit between the French and uncolonized Africans. With the continuation of the colonial system of education, colonial language, colonial characteristics, and colonial valuations of knowledge, such education did not help the African people that much. My argument is that if at least there was a process of educational decolonization, mental decolonization and knowledge decolonization, Africa would have achieved so much better in the past 60 years. All of these countries, if you go there today, have systems of education that are based on the colonial structures of education.

Logan: A case in point might be language. If we consider not only the accessibility of knowledge using colonial languages, but also the dehumanizing factor of not seeing your language taught in institutes of higher education, then this has multiple layers of colonizing, as you said, of psychology or of colonizing the mind.

Dr. Ali A. Abdi: Without any doubt, language, as Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Chinua Achebe and others wrote, is the most important component of culture. It carries culture. It explains culture. It constructs culture. It re-constructs culture. For example, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, in his 1993 book *Moving the Center*,[12] talks about how language is not just an expression of something, but the way you live, the way you think, the way you react to the world, and so and on and so forth. All of that creates a situation where the devaluation of language is actually the devaluation of culture. If you devalue a culture, you are actually devaluing the subjectivities, devaluing the existence of the person. That is why today you have a situation where speaking

12 wa Thiong'o (1993).

English is associated with being educated, having knowledge, being advanced, and so on and so forth. It is an inverse relationship: you are devaluing African knowledges and you are elevating European knowledges. That is highly problematic. You cannot actually achieve development by devaluing your culture and knowledge.

If you look around the world today, the countries that have achieved a viable level of development (and we can talk about 'development', and what it is) and social well-being are those that use their own language in their education. Within this new structure of nation-states, which we are not going to cancel now, all the countries that have achieved a viable level social development and social well-being are countries that use their own language in education. If you look at Japan, South Korea or China, even Brazil to an extent, although the Brazilian context is complicated because whose language is a question. Nonetheless, the power of language is something that is central to the well-being of societies. In my work, everything is actually about doing something so that people have a better life and better life prospects.

Logan: When you have worked in the east, south and west of Africa and you have met with deans and presidents of institutes of higher education and you have these conversations, is there receptivity to changing the medium of instruction and decolonizing the curricula, or resistance?

Dr. Ali A. Abdi: There is a conversational reception. People understand and value of what you are saying. People even know what you are saying before you yourself actually express it. These are people who are relatively well educated, and they understand the issues. But, it is a very complex situation, that might be even described as beyond repair. I like to refuse that because 'beyond repair' does not make sense. I will give you the example of South Africa. There are eleven official languages, ten of which are indigenous to South

Africa (including Afrikaans, which is what the Afrikaner people were using). Although there are campaigns, efforts and programs to introduce these African languages into the education system, and some of them are, up to a point, you can feel and understand the currency of English as the language of technology, of business, of higher education, and of employment. A couple of colleagues, including Ailie Cleghorn, did research on the perception of communities and the perception of parents regarding language.[13] For parents in Africa, the preference is that children have to master English because they know that actually assures employment and economic development, vis a vis anything else. This is something that is attached to what we are talking about, not detached from it. What we are saying is that you can still develop African linguistic and cultural contexts while you are mastering English. If that is the case, then you can also, slowly, value African languages and actually conditionalize economic opportunities and employment on also the acquisition of African languages.

Logan: I teach at Hawassa University, in southern Ethiopia. We have an institute for teaching and learning Chinese, but the only place where you will find Ethiopian languages, in their great variety, is in a linguistics department. Beyond that, we do not see an emphasis or an institutional value of publishing works, general and academic, in any language other than English.

Dr. Ali A. Abdi: It is very complex. Interestingly, I can share a couple of short episodes with you. One was that I actually presented what I am now talking about at the Faculty of Education Conference at the University of Addis Ababa in 2009. The reception I received was massive, in terms of professors, lecturers and people who were

---

13 See: Cleghorn (2005), Cleghorn and Rollnick (2002), and Plonski et al (2013).

there. They said, "we do not even talk about this, but this is exactly what we need." However, not much has moved forward because the system is the way you describe. We are not willing to change, and that is an issue. One of the most important writers on African cultural development, and especially on African languages and mental decolonization, is Ngugi wa Thiong'o, the Kenyan writer who is at the University of California (Irvine). Maybe 20 or 25 years ago he tried to stop writing in English and write in his indigenous language, which is Gikuyu. He more or less realized that the medium was important, culturally, but the message was not really reaching the place that he wanted it to reach. He has not given up on it, I think he is very tenacious in his efforts of reviving these languages. However, he went back again to writing in English. In his 2009 work called *Something Torn and New: An African Renaissance*,[14] he actually spoke about the linguicide, or the killing of language. The question for me, you and others is: if there is a linguicide then what level is that language now? And, how could it be revived? The systems are actually structured to marginalize African languages. Interestingly, and unfortunately, that is the African systems of education.

Logan: There are individual barriers and there are institutional barriers, such as how people are hired and how people are promoted. Within institutions, there are many structures that reward publishing in English journals based in the Global North over, and a devaluing of, publications that would be written in national languages, local languages and published within national journals. There are these pressures that even if one was individually convinced to change what they were doing, change what they were teaching, and change their medium of instruction they would run into all these institutional barriers.

---

14 wa Thiong'o (2009).

Dr. Ali A. Abdi: Right. It is exactly as you said. I do not even need to add anything to what you said. That is precisely what the what the situation is. I am the best example of myself. I am at the University of British Columbia because of, first and foremost, my English linguistic expressive and written capacities, more or less. I have seen, many times, in contexts of hiring, in contexts of promotion for faculty and others, the first thing that comes to mind is the name of the journal. Even the ones who talk about what we are now talking about, somehow, they suddenly jump to the point that this is 'how good', and that is a code expression. By the time somebody says, "how good is this?" you have already actually created doubt in the quality of the of the journal. "How good is the Zimbabwe Journal of Educational Research?"[15] The question comes up. Or, "how good is the Ethiopian Journal of Education?"[16] When actually, when I was at that conference in Ethiopia and even beyond that, and I looked at what the Ethiopian scholars were doing at the University of Addis Ababa, it was as original and as powerful as anything written in Western journals of education or social sciences or sociology. This is an issue of valuation. How we value something becomes extremely important. The mental colonization, from education to knowledge to mental colonization, actually is what brings you to devalue your own history, your own culture, your languages. Slowly, and without any doubt, that is the constitution of your being. By devaluing any of that, you are devaluing your constitution of being, as I have described it a few times, to existential devaluation.

Logan: It reminds me of the late Dr. Pius Adesanmi, who was the Director of the Institute of African Studies and who passed away in the Ethiopian Airlines crash a little more than a year ago. In one of his essays, he reflected on his experience in the United States and

---

15 ZJER: https://www.ajol.info/index.php/zjer/index

16 EJE: http://ejol.aau.edu.et/index.php/EJE

in Canada that it reminded him of a proverb in Yoruba where a child was standing on the roof of his father's farm and was looking around and proclaimed to the world that his family's farm was the largest in the world, having not had seen any other farms.[17] He likens this to when there are scholars that are based in the Global North and they come up with some idea and they look around and they think that they are the first ones to have thought about it. I was reminded of this in reflecting on your thought about the contributions of Ethiopian scholars, in that there is so much originality, there is so much innovation and there are so many contributions being made, but they are not being seen and recognized.

Dr. Ali A. Abdi: That was a huge loss, our colleague in that tragedy. We were happy that Ottawa and Carleton University paid important respects for that massive loss.[18]

This is about the idea that you slowly internalize that situation itself. The problem is that if nothing is done it becomes naturalized. Once it is naturalized, then it becomes a liability in that you actually lose the initiative to take the action that is necessary to re-construct these things. In social justice education, in the area of social justice in the social sciences, what we speak about, for example, includes the concepts and perspectives that come from well-known thinkers in the West like Nancy Fraser, Axel Honneth, and Charles Taylor from Montreal. In social justice, we talk about it as if it is something that is simple, that if everybody agrees upon social justice, and then tomorrow morning we are going to have social justice. A lot of people even have not engaged with the complexity of social justice. Social justice actually can be colonizing itself. For example, if you read the theories of justice from people like Rawls and others, it is very

---

17 Adesanmi (2020).

18 See: https://newsroom.carleton.ca/story/carleton-mourns-loss-of-professor-pius-adesanmi/

liberal, even neoliberal. However, the new things that have come from people like Nancy Fraser and Taylor, which can also be applied to context that we are talking about, especially of knowledge, are what we what we call re-distributive and re-cognitive restructuring of knowledge. We actually need to recognize the achievements of people. That is what Sandra Harding talks about when she talks about the constructions of knowledge and the histories of knowledge. If whatever I am achieving is not recognized by the power structures, then I can be the best at the University of Addis Ababa or Mekelle University or somewhere else, but the recognition is not going to come.

This is also attached to what is happening in global power relations or knowledge power relations. One example I can give you is the idea of postmodernism and post structuralism. Who actually invented that? It is a very interesting question. So much credit is given to the French thinkers (Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard, Baudrillard) and in the North American context people like Fredric Jameson and others. Interestingly, the claims of multi-centric knowledges, multi-centric epistemologies, and the need to recognize or multi-culturalize knowledge was actually established before them by anticolonial African intellectuals and others. In 1952, 1956 to 1958, that was when these people writing, people like Chinua Achebe,[19] Franz Fanon (from Martinique, in the African diaspora),[20] Aime Cesaire,[21] and Amilcar Cabral for the many years when he was in the struggle, and so on and so forth. But if your cultures and your knowledges are devalued then what happens is that even those claims would be given to those whose cultures and knowledges are valued higher. In my own argument, yes, we can give the French scholars some credit for

---

19 Achebe (1958).

20 Fanon (1952).

21 Cesaire (1955).

expanding the ideas, but the origins of these should be given to those who actually firstly came up with them.

Logan: In your engagement with these questions and advocacy around decolonization, throughout your years of work, have you seen or can you share with us some examples where institutions of higher education or curricula have been transformed that we might look to for inspiration or as pathways of change?

Dr. Ali A. Abdi: Some places have been struggling to achieve this, and it is not easy. One of the examples is Julius Nyerere in 1968. He was determined to create the Ujama program, or famili-hood philosophy of education and social development.[22] That is what it was about. He created the systems, the systems were opera-tional, everything was more or less in place in some practical terms, and there was a governance policy commitment. But, as some im-portant thinkers talk about, he was exposed to a massive onslaught by monocentric learning and by colonial education, but specifically by global capitalism. You must remember, everything we are talking about is also either directly or tangentially attached to global capital-ism. Many African thinkers believe that the Tanzanian program is not lost, the ideas are not lost.

Other examples are community-oriented institutions, for exam-ple the University of the Western Cape in South Africa.[23] It is highly communally or community oriented or community attached. There is a revival of community cultures and community knowledges. In Somalia, in 1974, there was a massive campaign to establish the So-mali language as not only a medium of government functions but

---

22 See: Nyerere (1987).

23 The University of the Western Cape has a unique history, as it was active in the liberation struggle: https://www.uwc.ac.za/Pages/About-UWC.aspx

also to take it into the educational programs.[24] That was, relatively, very successful. That success was so much so that today Somalis write massively in Somali language, with the Latin script. In high schools and in primary schools, Somali became the main medium of instruction. This included some colleges and some higher learning spaces. With the collapse of the state, that system fell into disrepair. But, is it still the medium of instruction in most schools, even in the current state of Somalia with all the fragility. Another example is in Ethiopia, which has local language instruction until Grade 6, but I do not know what has happened recently.

Logan: After the government in Ethiopia changed in 1991, in the early 90s, one of the policy changes that the Government of Ethiopia made was decentralized decision making around language of administration and language of education.[25] At a certain level of governance, they could make a decision regarding this. As a result, you find some parts of the country have decided to have their languages of administration and their languages of instruction at primary level in local languages while others kept it at as the federal language of Amharic. Other examples from Ethiopia that are promising are the introduction of academic journals that are published in Amharic and Afan Oromo. People are beginning to re-value the language of publications and re-think knowledge production in other mediums.

Dr. Ali A. Abdi: These things take so much time to be restructured because once the mind shift happens, you have to do so much to re-structure the system. It is the same thing in Canada when you look at the indigenous peoples. The revival of cultural, linguistic, social, economic, well-being efforts have been suppressed, and

---

24 See: Biber and Hared (1994) and Warsame (2001).

25 See: Dea (2005), Milkias and Kebede (2010), Cochrane and Bekele (2019).

depressed intergenerationally, and therefore reviving it will take so much effort and it will take time.

Logan: You have thought about these questions throughout most of your career, is there something that you would give to us, to push us to think about or future directions that you would like us to go in, as we work to further these objectives of decolonizing institutes of higher education and curricula?

Dr. Ali A. Abdi: I think one thing that many of us, including myself, might have missed in our analysis and description is the complexity of educational of systems and the advanced structures of education and development that were in place in precolonial traditional Africa. It may be that these were not structured in the European ways of doing things, but there were informal and quasi-formal systems of education that were very advanced. This existed at all level of education, including higher education. By understanding that, and by understanding the levels of education and levels of development that African countries have achieved, I think that itself will give us more confidence and more energy to aim for the decolonization of education, knowledge and social development. Without that understanding, there are millions of young people in Africa who are only exposed to what is now available and they are not exposed to that historical achievement. They are not exposed to the knowledge, ideas and scientific achievements of historical Africa. By understanding that, by reading that, and by knowing that we can probably have a more structured confidence to respond to the hegemonies of eurocentric, monocentric education and learning as well as defining and practicing development.

Logan: Thank you very much.

Dr. Ali A. Abdi: You are welcome. Thank you.

References

Abdi, Ali A. (2008). Europe and African thought systems and philosophies of education: 're-culturing' the trans-temporal discourses. *Cultural Studies*, 22(2), 309-327.

Abdi, Ali A. (2013). Decolonizing educational and social development platforms in Africa. *African and Asian Studies*, 12 (1-2), 64-82.

Abdi, Ali A. (Ed.) (2012). Decolonizing philosophies of education. Leiden, Netherlands: Brill|Sense.

Achebe, C. (1958). Things fall apart. London: Heinemann.

Achebe, C. (1977). An image of Africa. *The Massachusetts Review*, 18(4), 782-794.

Achebe, C. (1988). Anthills of the Savannah. New York: Penguin.

Achebe, C. (2003). Home and exile. Edinburgh: Canongate.

Achebe, C. (2013). Arrow of god. London: Penguin.

Adesanmi, P. (2020). Who owns the problem? Africa and the struggle for agency. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press.

Amin, S. (1988). L'eurocentrisme: Critique d'une ideologie. Paris: Anthropos.

Biber, D., & Hared, M. (1994). Linguistic correlates of the transition to literacy in Somali: Language adaptation. *Sociolinguistic perspectives on register*, 182.

Cabral, A. (1979). Unity and struggle: Speeches and writings of Amilcar Cabral (Vol. 3). New York: NYU Press.

Cesaire, A. (1955). Discourse on colonialism. New York: Monthly Review Press.

Chabal, P. (1983). Amilcar Cabral: revolutionary leadership and people's war (Vol. 37). Cambridge: CUP Archive.

Cleghorn, A. (2005). Language issues in African school settings: Problems and prospects in attaining education for all. In

Issues in African education (pp. 101-122). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Cleghorn, A., & Rollnick, M. (2002). The role of English in individual and societal development: A view from African classrooms. *Tesol Quarterly*, 36(3), 347-372.

Cochrane, L., & Bekele, Y. (2019). Politics and power in southern Ethiopia: Imposing, opposing and calling for linguistic unity. *Language Matters*, 50(3), 26-45.

Dea, D. (2005). Enduring issues in state-society relations in Ethiopia: A case study of the WoGaGoDa conflict in Wolaita, southern Ethiopia. *International Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, 141-159.

Fanon, F. (1952). Black skin, white masks. New York: Grove Press.

Ghosh, Ratna & Abdi, Ali A. (2013). Education and the politics of difference: select Canadian perspectives, 2nd edition. Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press.

Hebert, Yvonne & Abdi, Ali A. (Eds.) (2013). Critical perspectives on international education. Rotterdam, Netherlands: Sense Publishers.

Ibrahim, Awad & Abdi, Ali A. (Eds.) (2016). The education of African Canadian children: Critical Perspectives. Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press.

Kane, H. (1963). Ambiguous adventure. New York: Walker & Co.

McCulloch, J. (2019). In the twilight of revolution: the political theory of Amilcar Cabral (Vol. 39). New York: Routledge.

Milkias, P., & Kebede, M. (2010). Education, politics & social change in Ethiopia. Los Angeles: Tsehai.

Nyerere, J. K. (1987). Ujamaa: The basis of African socialism. *The Journal of Pan African Studies*, 1(1), 4-11.

Plonski, P., Teferra, A., & Brady, R. (2013, November). Why are more African countries adopting English as an official language. In African Studies Association Annual Conference (Vol. 23).

Rodney, W. (2018). How Europe underdeveloped Africa. London: Verso Trade.

Said, E. W. (1979). Orientalism. Vintage.

Shizha, Edward & Abdi, Ali A. (Eds.) (2014). Indigenous discourses on development in Africa. New York: Routledge.

wa Thiong'o, N. (1992). Decolonising the mind: The politics of language in African literature. Nairobi: East African Publishers.

wa Thiong'o, N. (2009). Something torn and new: An African renaissance. New York: Basic Civitas Books.

wa Thiong'o, N. (2014). Globalectics: Theory and the politics of knowing. New York: Columbia University Press.

wa Thiong'o. N. (1993). Moving the center: The struggle for cultural freedom. London: James Currey.

Warsame, A. A. (2001). How a strong government backed an African language: The lessons of Somalia. *International Review of Education*, 47(3-4), 341-360.