African Indigenous Education in Kenyan Universities
A Decolonizing and Transformational Tool

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Introduction
Since 1963, when Kenya attained her political independence, the government took seriously the question of education for all. The effort to provide education for all Kenyans is evidenced in the various policy documents and development plans commissioned by the government during the past fifty years (see reports on The Development Plans and commissions from 1964–2018). Some of the commissions called for complete restructuring and overhaul of education (GoK, 1964). One document even suggested that education should also take into account African Indigenous education—its philosophy and pedagogy. Unfortunately, several decades later, there is no trace of African Indigenous knowledge at any level of education in Kenya.

Although some people might argue that we have made great strides since our colonial independence, our emphasis is that the process of recolonization persists, particularly through Eurocentric education. Using a historical trajectory, this chapter examines the evolution of the university mission from the colonial epoch, the post-independence period era, along with the contemporary period to argue that university education as it stands now is bereft of attributes pertaining to African Indigenous knowledges. In our discussion, we acknowledge that people of African Descent are not homogenous and there is cultural diversity, and that African Indigenous systems have been subjected to different forms of colonialism and distortion. We situate our arguments on anti-colonial thought and indigenous theoretical framework.

Anti-colonial and African Indigenous Knowledge (IK) and Education
Anti-colonial thought is a form of intellectual and philosophical response to colonial ways that were imposed on colonized peoples. Anti-colonial thought is a complex ideology that takes different forms to resist colonial indoctrination. It is an undertaking that forces the colonized subjects to question their subjectivity and the subordination of their knowledge (Nkomo, 2011). The colonizers goal was to make the colonized subjects view and experience themselves as the ‘Other’ and to see themselves as an inferior race. Wane argues (2009) that the colonizers knew any form of seduction would keep the African people interested in the European lifestyle, and many fell for formal Western education. Many Africans acquiring literacy in English or French were quick to realize that university education opened up prospects for economic and individual advancement (Wane, 2014).
The discourse of anti-colonial nationalism, then, reveals the complex and slippery slope for those who attempted to forge a means of resisting the hegemonic effects of European colonialism on the subjectivities and representations of colonial African subjects. However, at the same time, it demonstrates why anti-colonialism is essential to understanding the particular form of colonialism in Africa and the means of resisting it.

**Indigenous Knowledge**

Indigenous is a loaded terminology with its coinage inextricably linked to colonialism. Semali and Kincheloe (1999) explain that the term Indigenous and the concept of IK has often been associated in the Western context with the primitive, the wild, and the natural. According to Wane (2009), making reference to Maurial (1999), Indigenous knowledge (IK) is an outcome of interactions that occur among families and communities. IK is holistic, and all forms of learning and teaching are intertwined with everyday interactions. Members of the community generate this form of knowledge, then this knowledge is passed on to the next generation through storytelling, observation, songs, ceremonies, or traditional rituals. There are many definitions of what constitutes indigeneity, but most agree that Indigenous people have a common group history of traditions, culture, and language and continue to depend on the environment and land of their ancestors (Wane, 2014). This is not to imply that Indigenous people are homogenous. Quite the contrary, Indigenous people are spread throughout the world, and are often dispersed over large segments of land.

Growing up in Kenya, our teaching was anchored on our ancestors’ knowledge. It was not an unusual phenomenon for our parents to use proverbs, idioms, or myths. As educators teaching at various universities, we feel it is our responsibility to revisit our African Indigenous ways of knowing and demonstrate its scholarly benefits for young scholars. How would this type of education look? The Indigenous education would entail the core values of African people as set out in the section below.

Fafunwa (1974) described African Indigenous education (AIE) as an integrated experience that combined physical training with character building and intellectual training. The goal of AIE was to develop the whole person and emphasized social responsibility, job orientation, political participation, and spiritual and moral values (Fafunwa, 1974), in addition to the importance of generosity, hospitality, respect for self, family, community, and environment (Adeyemi & Adeyinka, 2003). AIE is based on philosophical foundations and principles that include preparationism, functionalism, communalism, perennialism, holism, and social politics (Adeyemi & Adeyinka, 2003; Futhwa, 2011). For instance, the principle of preparationism prepared children to develop a sense of obligation to the community, while functionalism prepared them for their life. This was done through participation in work, plays, and oral literature. The principle of communalism referred to the communal spirit, while perennialism was a vehicle for maintaining and preserving the cultural heritage and traditional societies. Holism was viewed as multiple learning, and spirituality was taught to ensure that children were aware of the Supreme Being and other spiritual beings that were the immediate receivers of prayers, sacrifices, and active religious worship (Futhwa, 2011). The principle of apprenticeship included participation in all family and community activities (Adeyemi & Adeyinka, 2003). Included in apprenticeship was participation in religious ceremonies for traditional priesthood or divination (Kingsley, 2010). The principle of social politics was essential, and the elders felt the importance of the children being equipped with good knowledge and understanding of traditional institutions, which included kingship, chieftaincy, and the family unit. This is the type of education we do not find in our universities today.

The dilemma is this: Why should educators and governments who shunted aside IK for five decades, embrace it now? As Nkomo (2011) states, colonization was not just about a scramble for markets, labour, and other resources. It also meant the newly acquired colonies had to be reinscribed in European discourse. The colonizers’ goals were to ensure that anything African or Native was
represented as negative while everything positive was European (Nkomo, 2011). The colonizers succeeded in making sure that Eurocentric knowledge would reproduce itself at every level of education in Africa.

Universities in Kenya

An appreciation of the extenuating factors that impede Kenya’s universities from incorporating IK systems in their pedagogy and curriculum content requires that we take a historical look at the development of the contemporary university. A historical analysis provides an opportunity to critically account for a developmental context that made it impossible to incorporate African-centered approaches into university development. It also allows us to ponder where we need to go from here if we are to reform the university sector in order to make it holistic and relevant to the new dispensation that calls for a higher education system that is in consonance with Africa’s needs. The four historical epochs that are worthy of this introspection are: (a) the medieval university, (b) the colonial university, (c) the developmental university, and (d) the multiversity. As we undertake the analysis, two key questions remain at the back of our minds: For whom was the university developed? How relevant is the university to the prevailing needs of the Indigenous people?

(a) The Medieval University

Truth be told, universities had their origins in Africa. The medieval universities, the precursors to the modern Western universities, had their roots in Africa. The similarities between the two have led skeptics to deny the existence of higher education in Africa before the conquest by European invaders, as Lulat (2003) has rightly observed:

Given the high degree of resemblance between African and Western higher education today, there is often the assumption that higher education in Africa is a Western colonial invention . . . one must begin a historical survey of African higher education by asking whether or not higher education existed in pre-Colonial Africa. . . . Ashby (1966) states that they did but emphasizes they are of no relevance to the development of modern higher education in Africa today.

(p. 15)

Though there is no documentary evidence that Kenya had any of the medieval universities, it makes sense to critically examine their existence in North and West Africa in order to understand how well they were connected with the prevailing IK systems. The medieval university archetype that existed included a research library at Alexandria and Egypt founded in third century BC (Munene, 2015a).

The Medieval era also includes religious universities that appeared in Africa around the eleventh century AD, such as the Al-hazar in Egypt, Sankore at Timbuktu in Mali, Quaraouiyine in Morocco, and Ez-Zitouna in Tunisia. The most prestigious of this group was the university of Timbuktu, which had more than 100,000 manuscripts stretching from pre-Islamic times to the twelfth century AD, and it covered such diverse subject areas as astronomy, botany, history, law, science, and music. In terms of knowledge development, these universities pioneered the systematic advancement of scholastic traditions involving the collection and preservation of academic information through research and dissemination of knowledge.

In the context of Indigenous education, medieval institutions exhibited a close nexus with the socio-cultural, political, and religious environment and knowledge systems. The modes of knowledge production, preservation, and transmission were congruent with the prevailing epistemological traditions. Local religion, culture, customs, and natural environment provided the raw materials upon which knowledge was constructed. The universities permitted academics to experiment with
local knowledge and resources uninhibited by social hierarchies, obligations, and highly regimented social roles (Munene, 2010).

Assie-Lumumba (2006) and Lulat (2003) aver that even though Africans did not set up institutions of higher learning that were akin to what we have as universities today, they had systems that fulfilled missions that were not radically different. They note that the Nile Valley civilization, for instance, was a great beneficiary of the existence of early universities and other centers of higher learning in Egypt. It is in this context that questions of educational relevance arise when colonial universities were established in the continent once Africa was colonized by European powers. The origins and nature of colonial universities, along with their relationship to African IK systems is the subject of our next section.

(b) The Colonial University

The contemporary Kenyan universities, like the rest of Africa, have their beginnings in the colonial period. If the medieval university represented the best synergy between IK and higher education in the continent, the colonial university epitomized the first intellectual assault on this synergistic engagement. The colonial university was never meant to empower the Indigenous people and address challenges confronting their lives. Rather, it was incorporated to serve the interests of the colonial masters. In Kenya, the colonial university’s footprints were marked by the establishment of the Royal Technical College, Nairobi in 1956, the precursor to the current University of Nairobi. In 1964, it was renamed University College Nairobi, which was part of the federal University of East Africa.

The establishment of colonial universities in Africa was a by-product of the colonial economic development. As colonies grew in complexities, they required skilled manpower to run them: State bureaucracy had to be managed, the native populations had to be controlled administratively, social services had to be planned and delivered, and economic growth had to be sustained. The maintenance and sustenance of colonies was henceforth to be a process of acculturation, and higher education was used to acculturate the local population.

As is evident from the foregoing, the colonial university in Kenya, and Africa for that matter, was in no position to incorporate IK systems in the teaching approach as well as in the content. The university was subsumed within the entire colonial architecture, whose prime motive was the cultural and economic conquest of the Indigenous people of Kenya rather than empowering them through the harnessing of their knowledge base. The university functioned as a powerful instrument of cultural conquest through instruction in English (and other European languages), university culture, and organizational forms which were imported from the University of London. Colonial universities were, on the whole, cultural tools at the disposal of the colonial state to perpetuate their dominance over the territories they occupied. Their programmatic focus on occupational training for the management of the colonies accentuated their inability to harness local knowledge that had long enabled Indigenous people to exist harmoniously with the prevailing reality.

(c) The National Development University

Kenya attained independence in 1963. How was the colonial university going to fit in the new dispensation? This question confronted many newly independent African nations, due to the foreignness of their higher education institutions. Their establishment and continued existence was inimical to the aspirations and development goals of the newly emergent nations. The national liberation movements that championed independence sought to reclaim African values, political autonomy, and economic empowerment, which the colonial universities sought to suppress. It is
in this context that Kenya opted to pursue a development strategy focused on eradicating hunger, illiteracy and diseases, as encapsulated in the 1965 Sessional paper No. 1 (Go K, 1965).

In this post-independence period of optimism, Kenya, like many African countries, transformed the colonial university into a national development university in order to assist the government in fulfilling its development agenda. These invigorated universities were “... to train and develop the skills and high-level manpower to replace the erstwhile colonial officials ... [and] to staff the new and expanded political, administrative, social, and economic institutions” (Yessufu, 1973, p. 4). To provide a framework for steering universities into the development path, the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), helped establish the Association of African Universities (AAU), which was founded in Rabat, Morocco, during the 1967 conference on African Education.

The transformation of the colonial universities required that they fit the role of a modernization program of nation building. From the late 1960s to the mid-1980s, Kenya had only three universities, namely: University of Nairobi, Kenyatta University, and Moi University (Alperovitz, Dubb, & Howard, 2009; Weerts & Sandmann, 2010).

In spite of the optimism accorded to national universities, the institutions largely failed to deliver on the promise. A decade after independence, serious questions arose as to their viability in transforming society and inculcating African values. The universities still continued to espouse European values. The universities had simply mutated into elite institutions that catered to a small number of state-sponsored students mesmerized by Western lifestyles and consumption habits. The universities retreated to their pre-independence role of perpetuating Western cultural dependency (Mazrui, 1992).

This description of the national development university model in Kenya reveals certain salient reasons why the universities never embraced African IK systems in their programs. First, the university did not aspire to radically alter the Western epistemology and methodological approach to knowledge. Rather, it sought to build upon the approach as an instrument of turning Kenya (and Africa, for that matter) into a European-like country in all spheres of human development. There was no attempt to capture or recreate in the academic programs those aspects of African spirituality and knowledge that enabled the Indigenous people to survive and prosper for centuries. In the words of Dani Nabudere (2003):

[Universities] have continued to reproduce dependent Eurocentric knowledge, a knowledge that is dependent on its actualization in centers that exploit the African people and utilize African resources freely ... The models of Western Universities, which Africa adopted, have proved completely unsuitable for Africa’s needs.

(p. 5–6)

Second, rather than conceptualizing development as a holistic attribute that encompasses social and economic transformation based on complex cultural and environmental factors, it was viewed as merely extending the process of economic development that had been initiated by the colonial authorities (Assie-Lumumba, 2006; Munene, 2010). With university education expected to reinforce this skewed view of development, state universities were hamstrung in any attempt to redefine their role and activities to tap the rich repertoire of African knowledge systems. An African-based epistemology ought to have been the foundation upon which a truly transformative African university should have been founded.

The alienation effect of the national development universities has been documented widely. Mazrui (1975) has argued that the universities are akin to multinational corporations; they are channels through which Western culture, attitudes, and dispositions are transmitted to the young generation, leading to cultural dependency. Okot p’Bitek (1967) captured similar effects in the following terms:
We blame colonialists and imperialists and neo-colonialists; we blame Communists both from Moscow and Peking, and sent their representatives packing. We blame the Americans and the CIA. . . . Another, but contradictory phenomenon is the belief that the solution to our social ills can be imported. Foreign 'experts' and peace-corps swarm the country like white ants. Economic 'advisers,' military 'advisers' and security 'advisers' surround our leaders.

(1967, p. 47)

Therefore, expecting the rebranded colonial universities to operate as national development universities to resuscitate Indigenous African knowledge systems was to be widely optimistic. Hope turned into despair, as African nations, including Kenya, looked to the outside to rebrand the failed national universities into market institutions.

(d) The New Multiversity

To ameliorate the failure of the development university, Kenya, since the early 1990s to the present, has embraced neo-liberalism as the policy to guide the development of universities in order to make them more responsive to the needs of the society. Under neo-liberalism, the state role in higher education development will be largely restricted to policy development, accreditation, regulation, and access. The market will shape the growth and direction of university development, since the institutions will be expected to generate resources from the marketplace. Academic programming and related activities will be a response to the market needs rather than state policy. Within this neo-liberal policy, privatization will be central, as some aspects of public universities will be privatized as private universities are encouraged and promoted (Munene, 2015b). Under neo-liberalism, public universities would be state-owned but largely privately financed. This neo-liberal policy, which was adopted across the length and breadth of the African continent, had a dual impetus: (a) pressure by multilateral donor agencies such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund as part of the broad structural economic reforms, and (b) perceived failure of state universities in terms of providing market-relevant education (Munene, 2015b).

The government's position on the neo-liberal policy in university development was articulated by the minister for education, Hon Prof. George Saitoti, when he asserted the following:

This is a turning point in the development of our public universities, where they are being called upon to adopt business-like financial management styles. It is also a point in time when universities have to plan well ahead about resources expected to be coming from sources other than the exchequer . . . Time has come to seriously take account of the universities potential to generate income internally . . . Income from such sources should be exploited and treated as definite sources of university revenue.

(cited in Kiamba, 2004, p. 55)

Put simply, the state expects the universities, public and private, to be entrepreneurial in their academic programming and other activities. The results of this policy has been the massification of higher education in the country, as seen in the surge in the number of universities and in student enrollment. From a paltry three state universities in 1985, the country now boasts 32 (2018) accredited public universities, a growth of around 966% in 32 years. Equally, the number of private universities has grown, with 13 of them authorized to operate while awaiting accreditation (Commission for University Education, 2018).

The move towards increased marketization of universities has inspired “academic capitalism”, efforts to develop, market, and sell research products, educational services, and consumer goods in the private marketplace (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). In terms of knowledge production and transmission,
we have witnessed an increased commodification of knowledge. This is epitomized by the vocationalization of the curricula, which involves offering more academic programs as opposed to basic and fundamental programs and short-term training courses, applied and contract research as opposed to basic and fundamental research, and more teaching and less research. The new market regime has not only altered the nature of academic work but has also led to institutional identity crises. Kenyan universities are in a dilemma as to how they define themselves and their role as vanguards of knowledge creation and dissemination.

It goes without saying that the market university is a bad candidate for incorporating African IK in the curricula. Increasing African knowledge and developing rural areas as centers of African knowledge does not feature prominently in the vocationalization agenda of the neo-liberal university. Codifying science and technology in epistemological and linguistic terms that are in tandem with rural communities, where the majority of Kenyans live, have not been prioritized nor articulated as central objectives of university development in the current era. Without significant attention to basic and fundamental knowledge in the curricula, it is difficult, if not impossible, to tap into the rich repertoire of African IK to re-orient university education towards African culture and values.

Furthermore, in the neo-liberal era of higher education development, we continue to see footprints of earlier university developments which made it impossible to inculcate African IK in academics. The continued reliance on Western models of development, along with Western paradigms of understanding society, has meant that Kenyan universities hardly question Western epistemologies and methodologies of knowledge production. Universities do not problematize Western theoretical constructs but, rather, elevate them and use them to critique and analyze African societies. This has become more pervasive now that internationalization and globalization shape the development of universities in the market era. For Kenyan universities, becoming a global and international university means becoming more and more like a Western university and less and less of an African one.

Like the three previous eras of university development that we have analyzed, the neo-liberal epoch is foreign-initiated. Transforming a higher education system that had foreign roots with additional foreign concepts in order to make it more relevant appears to miss the point about the maladies affecting the university sector. The failure of the university in national development is rooted in its foreignness, or foreign origin. Treating this illness requires a reconceptualization of the university with an African IK system being the center and focus of the emergent institution. It requires a consideration of the following pertinent questions: Where is the country moving? What is the role of university education in the context? By doing this, or by considering these questions, we can begin the process of harnessing African IK to advance a university education that develops the whole person, fully integrated with the spiritual and moral forces that have bound African societies for centuries.

**Implications**

This chapter is advocating mastery and understanding of Africa’s education from within. We argue that this becomes possible only when the teachers are empowered through Indigenous ways of knowing to re-imagine African education as existing outside of Western educational thought. We argue that, ultimately, Africa’s development should be measured by African peoples’ ability to articulate their philosophical thought from an Afrocentric standpoint. This can only happen when African people conceptualize who they are and what they stand for, from a 100% African-centered position; when their education priorities and implementation tools are not regulated from outside, but from within; when the African people are proud of their Blackness and embodiment of everything that comes with it and they do not make excuses for being African. Of course, we do know, as educators, that there is no one way of achieving this; it is a process, it is a journey, that might not happen even within our lifetime. What we are advocating here is an entry point for an ongoing discussion.
of Africanness and all that it entails. We do not want to provide a list of do’s and don’ts, because this will close the door to dialogue (Sium, 2014).

A critical dialogical engagement with educators, activists, and learners involves a process of transformation, unlearning, learning, and decolonizing one’s way of seeing and being in the world and, in particular, in the world of education. Our aim, therefore, is to move the transformative learning debates beyond the goals of bringing African Indigenous education, that focuses on integration to an emphasis on critical self-reflections and re-examinations that would allow for the interrogation of individual’s beliefs, values, biases, and, hence, work towards decolonizing the mind. The implication in this kind of engagement is to ensure that the dialogues take into account the social, political, and cultural changes that impede inclusion of African Indigenous education and to rethink and re-imagine a renewed vision and tools for analyzing the dominant seductive ideologies that serve to marginalize African ways of knowing. This chapter is therefore pointing to different ways to conceptualize and engage with the education process that do not negate African people’s core values and beliefs. We want to rupture the normative thinking that has been embedded in the African education system and challenge the status quo, in addition to offering alternative ideas and interpretations that would allow for dismantling the persistent ambiguous relationships between African Indigenous education and Western education; known and the unknown; the self and the constructed other.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have provided the reader with an overview of why African Indigenous education is not taught in African universities and, in particular, in Kenya. This is despite the fact that Africa is known to have had the earliest universities in the world that had emphasized a holistic form of knowing. These earlier institutions exhibited a close nexus with the socio-cultural, political, and religious environments and the modes of knowledge production and transmission were congruent with the prevailing cultural traditions of the people. We situated our arguments in anti-colonial and Indigenous frameworks as a way of decentering Eurocentrism. In addition, we have also provided some aspects of how African Indigenous education would look like. Employing a historical analysis, we were able to reflect on where we were before colonization. During the process of writing this chapter, we had more questions than answers because, challenging the current status quo requires more than writing a paper. We need to engage in a dialogue with all stakeholders involved with issues of education.

References


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