

University of Zimbabwe and the Struggle for Humanising Philosophy: 1980 to Present

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Abstract

In this paper we expose the colonial baggage that was inherited by the University of Zimbabwe in 1980 when the country attained its political independence. In particular, we expose the deficiencies of philosophical racism which informed the philosophical framework of colonial education, highlighting how the University of Zimbabwe has tried over the years to deal with these deficiencies. Coming from the discipline of philosophy, our position is that the lack of a well-articulated philosophical framework grounded in cultural history has led to misconstrued educational goals, misplaced priorities, warped educational concepts and the churning out of graduates that are morally deformed and/or morally deficient. Hence, we trace the history of colonial education in Zimbabwe and delineate efforts made by the University of Zimbabwe's Zimbabwean philosophers (past and present) of African descent to debunk this colonial history by producing scholarly works that speak to the needs and aspirations of the people of Africa.

Key words: colonialism, philosophical racism, ubuntu, humanising education and cultural history.

The Nature and Scope of Colonial Education in Africa

From the advent of slavery down to colonialism and imperialism, African people were treated as sub-human species. This Eurocentric conviction was exhibited in all social institutions, including educational institutions. In scientific and humanities scholarship, theories were postulated and literature was produced to substantiate the inferiority of the Black race and to reinforce the supremacy of the white race, with a complete and strategic thrust to keep the African a passive and subservient instrument of labour. Immanuel Kant, Charles Darwin, GWF Hegel, David Hume and Lucien Levy-Bruhl were among notable Western thinkers who made no small contribution to philosophical racism, which had far reaching consequences on Western colonies. In *On National Character*, David Hume expresses this philosophical racism in a very vivid and graphic manner as follows:

I am apt to suspect the Negroes to be naturally inferior to the whites. There scarcely ever was a civilised nation of that complexion, nor even any individual eminent in action or speculation. There are no ingenious manufacturers amongst them, no arts and no sciences. On the other hand, the most barbarous of the whites, such as the ancient Germans, the present Tartars, have still something eminent about them. Such uniform and constant difference could not happen ... if nature had not made original distinction between these breeds of men (Eze, 1997: 116).

The same strand of thought can be read in Immanuel Kant when he says:

The race of Negroes, one could say, is completely the opposite of Americans; they are full of affect and passion, very lively but vain. They can be educated but only as servants (slaves), that is, they allow themselves to be trained. They have many motivating forces, are so sensitive, are afraid of blows and do much out of a sense of honour (Kant cited in Eze, 1997: 116).

Kant argued that his position was based on appeal to nature or biological quality. On this basis Kant:

Discerns four races in a racial pecking-order. The “white” on the top followed by the “yellow” and the “negro....” The pecking-order is defined by a decrease in mental and general ability (1997: 116).

Mogobe Ramose locates this arrogance and the prejudices of Western thought in what he termed “the struggle for reason in Africa.” In this work, which attempts to debunk philosophical racism, Ramose (1999: 15) traces the problem back to its colonial roots, and Eurocentric superiority complex when he argues:

Despite so many indications that the other (people of non-European descent) appeared to be the same as them, the voyagers still retained doubt that the other was fully human and truly human. Upon this doubt was erected the myth that the other could not be fully and totally human since their otherness was characterised by total and complete lack of reason. Because rationality was the distinctive and decisive characteristic of being human, it was thus inferred that the other was at best sub-human, but certainly not human.

The myth that cultural differences are inborn and not acquired, which is propagated by the abovementioned philosophy, can also be traced back to the Western evolutionary theories developed by Charles Darwin and adopted by others such as Auguste Comte. And Levy-Bruhl also had a similar view of African people, prompting him to design the concept of a *primitive mentality*. Levy-Bruhl argued that the rationale for what he termed ‘the bizarre, strange and surprising deeds of primitive people’ should not be sought in a philosophy, that is, in a particular form of rationality, but in a specific kind of mentality or psychic constitution (Van der Walt, 1997: 5). According to Levy-Bruhl, primitive people are not governed by reason, but their behaviour is determined by their emotions.

When judged according to the Western model of rationality or logic, the primitive (African) mentality is basically irrational and pre-logical, according. Levy-Bruhl described a pre-logical thought “as one that is unscientific, uncritical and one that contained evident contradictions” (Oyeshile cited in Mangena, 2014: 98). The idea of comparing African thought systems with Western thought systems did not begin and end with Levy-Bruhl and those from his generation, as decades later, we encounter Western philosophers masquerading as African philosophers, such as Thaddeus Metz (2007), also trying to determine the appropriateness (or lack thereof) of African ethics by comparing them with Western ethics. Hence, Metz (2007 321) argues:

The field lacks a well-defended general principle grounding particular duties that is informed by such values and that could be compared to dominant Western theories such as Hobbesian egoism or Kantian respect for persons.

The basis of the comparison cannot be easily established given that the two philosophies being compared are totally different as they are not products of the same culture, if we are to borrow from Makinde (1988: 17) who argues that philosophers are effects of their cultures.

Franz Fanon (1986:7) also captures this philosophical racism when he says, "...the white man had a myth that the Negro is a stage on the slow evolution of monkey into man." Because of this ethos, the colonial master designed an education that would ensure that African people would not develop critical awareness.

Walter Rodney (1981: 264) also noted that colonial education became an exercise "... for subordination, exploitation, the creation of mental confusion and the development of underdevelopment ... a series of limitations inside other limitations." One of the icons of African emancipation, Kwame Nkrumah (1970: 93) also observed similar deficiencies in colonial education when he said, "education in the colonial context is an exercise of domination; it stimulates the credulity of students with ideologies intent on indoctrinating them to adapt to the world of oppression."

Because of this European superiority complex, African people were condemned and relegated to lesser roles in all socio-economic and political activities. The minority European elite put in place systems and mechanisms that barred African people from participating on par with them. In fact, education became a vehicle of marking and entrenching race and class distinctions. Hence, the colonial masters introduced an education that was deliberately and strategically tailored to keep African people under subjugation and domination of the colonial master. To this end, Rodney (1981:272) remarks thus:

Unfortunately, the colonial school system educated far too many fools and clowns, fascinated by the ideas and way of life of the European capitalist class. Some reached a point of total estrangement from African conditions and the African way of life...and they chirped happily that they were and would always be "European."

Concepts like "Pikinini" (which means little boy) or "Bhoyi" (Boy), which were used in Southern Rhodesia by the white colonial master with reference to the Black people homes belonging to whites, who were doing manual work at farms and, in the mind of the white man, meant that the Black mind was not capable of developing to the level of an adult for as long, and was thus to be educated only to perform menial tasks for the white man. Their education was to end at primary school. As Rodney (1981: 268) aptly puts it, "to give them secondary education was like asking a young child to chew meat when he should be eating porridge."

Besides, giving the Black people little education and besides the fact that the education was incompatible with African culture, colonial education provided African people with limited occupational choices and opportunities for upward mobility (Murphree et al 1975). Even entry into educational institutions was not a right, but a privilege for a few.

In addition to limited access into educational institutions, the content, method and aims of curricula designed for African people were issues of great concern. Early researchers in education found that colonial educational goals were subordinated to evangelisation, and the primary aim was to detach African people from their ethnicity. The missionary system of education was aimed at replacing and supplementing traditional African patterns of belief, ceremonial organisation, family and marriage practices (C.A. Rogers and C. Frantz 1962: 152).

Despite Africans' insatiable appetite for the new Eurocentric education (in an effort to adjust to the new world order as a matter of necessity for purposes of survival), "many Europeans preferred to keep the African as raw, untutored menials uncontaminated by the knowledge and values of western culture" (Rogers and Frantz 1962: 159). Even where few African people were allowed access into schools and colleges, the curriculum was designed in such a way that it would train them for servitude.

This colonial legacy was not peculiar to Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), but common across European colonies. Commenting on colonial education in East Africa, for example, G.A. Bennaars (1994: 28) noted that "education in colonial Tanzania was not designed to prepare young people for the development of their own country, but instead it was motivated by a desire to inculcate the values of the colonial society and train individuals for the service of the colonial state." This adulteration of educational values was rightly captured by Rodney (1981: 273) when he said, "colonial education had warped values that the African was to accept without questioning."

This unfortunate trend was observed in Zimbabwe by J.T. Nhundu (1989) when he remarked, thus, "...colonized people became so acculturated that they even despised their own indigenous names in favour of European names." Certain Western foods, as well as certain dances, dress codes, mannerisms and lifestyles were preferred ahead of indigenous foods, dances, dress codes, mannerisms and lifestyles as the latter were considered to be backward, parochial and old fashioned. Valentine Mudimbe (1988) called this attitude, the "domestication" of African people. Franz Fanon (1967: 35) made similar observations when he said, "colonial education leads the Black school boy to identify himself with all white truths."

One senior Zimbabwean nationalist, Ndabaningi Sithole (cited in Flora Veit-Wild 1993: 46) also expressed the poverty of colonial education when he mentions the misconceptions and complexities it created:

We erroneously held to the view that education meant exemption from all forms of manual work; to us education meant reading books, writing and talking English, and doing arithmetic. We thought that the ability to do these things was the only true education. To use one's own hands to earn one's living, we thought, was below one's dignity.

Such attitudes prevail in parts of Zimbabwean society today. All this emanates from the conviction that everything European is superior to everything African. This cultural confusion is also depicted in Franz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1986: 12), who argues that the desired destiny of Black people is to be white. In *Relevant Education for Africa*, K. Ndeti (cited in Kaba and Rayapen 1990: 33) ask pertinent questions that are designed to address the Afrocentric-Eurocentric dichotomy and ambivalence, hence, which of the transforming forces should Africa embrace and which one should she ignore?

What criteria should be used in making these choices? Whose epistemologies and logical systems should Africa use in deciding the choices? How much of the African traditions should be discarded altogether in accepting modernity?

Thorough research on colonial education will show that it produced morally flawed mechanisms to preserve sectional privileged positions for Europeans and these sectional privileges further evoked a generally accepted and corresponding set of racially determined beliefs to explain the situation. Hence, Mitchell (Cited in Murphree et al 1975:6) aptly noted that:

--- beliefs about the inability of Africans to think abstractly and hence to be occupied in managerial or technical posts, to lay a line of bricks on the level or set the frame of a door squire and hence to be employed as craftsmen, to understand the principles of democracy, to apprehend fully the tenets of Christianity, to appreciate art, music and literature, or to become civilised people in general have been accepted by whites in central Africa.

Mitchell also contends that these views are linked with the above-mentioned evolutionary point of view which holds that African people have not yet reached the developmental stages to be able to follow a civilised way of life (Mitchell cited in Murphree et al 1975: 6). Through education and political machinations, the colonial master ensured that the cultural foundation and the intellectual capacity of African people remained at their lowest ebb for purposes of perpetuating Euro-centric supremacy. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire (1972) illustrates this point explicitly when he laments the blindness covering the oppressed when they fail to see the inhuman status quo that defines their situation preferring to be assimilated in the culture of the oppressor, thereby "fearing freedom" which is a result of praxis and the need to liberate themselves from the oppressor. The "fear of freedom" is characteristic of the colonial mentality which is cultivated by an education tailored to maintain dependence on the colonial master. According to Nash (1966:107), students who are kept in a sense of infantile dependency fail to exercise freedom even if they were offered it. Colonial education emphasised over-dependence on the colonial master for purposes of perpetuating domination over African people.

The effects of colonial education for contemporary society should never be underestimated. Colonial education, in conjunction with other forces of cultural transformation which are not of major importance in this exercise, was targeted at ensuring minimal development of the African.

The corrupting of the thinking and sensibilities of the African and his/her infilling with abnormal complexities led to myopia; a shallow, short sighted and sensational appreciation of what one does not even understand; passivity and meekness; over-dependency on others for both ideas and general subsistence; lack of self-concept, self-efficacy, self-confidence/esteem and self-actualisation; creation of a pseudo Euro-African elite (alienated from the “real world”) whose main aim was to live like Europeans; a conviction that Europeans were indispensable, omniscient and omnipotent, and that African people were inherently inferior to Europeans; and lack of the basic knowledge of one’s socio-economic, cultural, political and historical background. In short, one can say that, colonial education was aimed at producing a person who was intellectually, socially and economically mediocre and over-dependent on the colonial master.

Further analysis of education in Africa continues to suffer an Afrocentric-Eurocentric ambivalence, decades after political independence from the West. Ambivalence as a situation with no decidable solution, with no fool-proof choice, no unreflective knowledge of how to go on (Bauman 1991). Pascah Mungwini (2005: 8) describes ambivalence as having contradictory attitudes inhibiting the expression of another, as some sort of uncertainty. Concerning ambivalence in German education, H.N. Weiler gave a graphic picture of ambivalence when he said:

But we are, I know not how, of two minds in ourselves, which is why what we believe we do now believe, and cannot disengage ourselves from what we condemn (Cited in Mungwini, 2005: 8).

Weiler’s statement captures this ambivalence on the African continent, where the general populace often condemn in strong terms ‘the white man’ for corrupting the sensitivities of African people, but in boardrooms continue to talk of development that is defined and modelled along Western curricula. There is a strong sense of “loving what we hate,” and “condemning what we desire.” Dilemmas arise in dealing with how to avoid the “evil” that has brought “what we cannot resist.” While the desire for what is one’s own is understandable, there is a great difficulty faced in trying to search for those central pillars of *ubuntu* which are foundations of old-world Africa’s epistemic, axiological and metaphysical dispositions (Nziramasanga Commission, 1999). This is the kind of African that has been created by colonial philosophy of education, in general. It is, however, important to look at the role of Universities in creating and solving this problem, in particular, we look at the role of the University of Zimbabwe, which was the only university at independence.

Like every other educational institution whose umbilical code was linked to the colonial era, the University of Zimbabwe (born as the University College of London in 1955) had its metaphysics, epistemology and ethics deeply rooted in the philosophical racism of the West. This was also the case in the first one and half decades of Zimbabwe’s independence.

Ezra Chitando and Fainos Mangena (2015: 2) argue that the composition of the teaching staff in the first one and half decades of independence bore testimony to philosophical racism as the teaching staff was pre-dominantly white: Barney Dickson, Nigel Dower, Len Brewster and William Shaw among others were the lecturers responsible for designing the course content and as well as instruction. Chitando and Mangena (2015: 2) maintain that during this period, the emphasis was on the teaching of “standard” philosophy courses where “standard” meant those courses that are couched in Western cultures such as Metaphysics, Epistemology, Ethics and Logic.

At its birth, the University had its umbilical code inextricably connected to London, to serve the interests of the white minority in the British colony (Rhodesia). Black people that made their way into the elite institution were “trained for servitude,” not to develop into creative, innovative and inventive politicians and captains of industry and commerce (Murphree et al 1975).

The colonial master’s attitude, which was based on misconstrued metaphysics and social anthropology concerning African people, determined how African people were treated, governed and subsequently how their educational goals were designed, and thus, African people were considered inferior to whites in every sense of the word, and everything African was condemned as primitive, barbaric, redundant, unsophisticated and unpalatable (O. p’ Bitek 1971).

Sowing the Seeds of a Truly Humanising Philosophy at the University of Zimbabwe

Despite the fact that philosophical racism was still evident during the first one and half years of Zimbabwe’s independence owing to the composition of the staff across all faculties of the University, in general, and in the philosophy section of the department of Religious Studies, Classics and Philosophy, in particular and the emphasis on the teaching of “standard” philosophy courses; Zimbabweans of African descent such as David Kaulemu and Jameson Kurasha were among the first to be appointed as permanent full-time lecturers in the aforementioned department in order to ignite the flame of African intellect and break free from the colonial past. More Zimbabwean philosophers of an African heritage such as the late Cosmas Ncube, the late Simon Zivanai Mawondo, Munyaradzi Madambi, Tarisayi Andrea Chimuka, Sobantu Njini Sibanda, Fainos Mangena, Francis Mabiri and Isaiah Munyiswa would later join the department as permanent full-time lecturers.

Today, the philosophy section of the department of Religious Studies, Classics and Philosophy has produced scholarly works that are relevant to Africa, unlike colonial education which has failed to address the needs of Africa. Elsewhere I argue that, Western philosophy has struggled to permanently set its roots in Africa, for the simple reason that, it has failed to speak to the needs and aspirations of African people (Mangena 2016: 5). This point is further corroborated by Ramose (2003: 4) who remarks, thus:

For too long, the teaching of Western philosophy in Africa was de-contextualized precisely because both its inspiration and the questions it attempted to answer were not necessarily based on the living experience of being-an-African in Africa.

But having said that, have the current University of Zimbabwe practitioners of philosophy and those who have since departed, done enough to debunk colonial education and sow the seeds of a humanising philosophy?

In answering the above question, one needs not to look further than the works of Mawondo entitled *In Search of Social Justice: Reconciliation and the Land Question in Zimbabwe* published in 2008, the chapter by Kurasha entitled *Issues in Shona religion: A Metaphysical Statement and Dialogical Analysis* published in 1999, the chapter by Munyaradzi Madambi entitled *Education at Cultural Crossroads: The Struggle for Meaningful Education in Zimbabwe* published in 2008, as well as the article by Mangena entitled *Hunhu/Ubuntu Dialogical Moral Theory* published in 2012. All these works are an attempt to construct a truly indigenous and humanising philosophy which is totally divorced from the philosophy of subjugation that was propagated by white colonisers in colonial Zimbabwe.

Just to expand a bit on the works of these University of Zimbabwe philosophy practitioners, it is important to note that the various themes that they address are weaved together to form a humanising philosophy that relevantly tackles the challenges faced by Africa, in general and Zimbabwe, in particular as well as promote the needs and aspirations of its peoples. Kurasha (1999: 200-2001), for example, argues that the metaphysics of relationality and identity is a function of totemism and spirituality as defined by the Shona religious worldview, and that relationality is “participatory” in nature. Kurasha does not look to the West to define and conceptualise the metaphysics of relationality and identity.

Mawondo (2008: 9), in apparent reference to the land question and Prime Minister Robert Mugabe’s reconciliatory gesture at independence, argues that the concept of reconciliation cannot be complete without addressing the historical imbalances of colonialism. Mawondo questions the idea of extending the hand of reconciliation to the former white coloniser before land is equally distributed to the Black majority. We have no doubt in our minds that in Mawondo’s thinking, the philosophy of identity in Africa also revolves around the issue of land where our *rukuvhute* (the umbilical code) is buried and the remains of our ancestors are interred (cf. Mangena 2014: 83). This kind of discourse was not found in colonial philosophies where the emphasis was on uprooting the African from his or her cultural roots in order to use him or her as beast of burden.

Madambi (2008: 104), while defining meaningful education and distinguishing it from colonial education, argues that meaningful education begins with a deliberate planning that should lead to the creation of an awareness of students of the importance of their own culture “and the need for careful sifting and selection of substance from chaff.”

As Madambi would put it:

Meaningful education must continue with inculcation into children, a deep understanding of political, racial, economic, scientific and technological realities that confront their very survival as an African people locally, nationally and internationally (2008: 104).

Madambi thinks that identity formation and national consciousness require a deliberate effort to educate children about the importance of cultural rootedness and the need to break free from alien cultures. To this end, Madambi avers, “education must be recognised as an instrument that should reflect people’s interests as a cultural nation and be grounded in cultural history” (2008: 104).

Mangena (2012: 2) challenges the tendency by many African people to take Western normative/moral theories as applicable across cultures as standards for human action when he argues that:

...it is problematic to apply these normative theories in non-Western cultures such as those in sub-Saharan Africa, since these (normative theories) usually face problems of cultural acceptance and validation because of their emphasis on ...individualism.

Mangena argues that only a dialogical moral theory which is anchored on spirituality, dialogue, consensus and the idea of the Common Moral Position (CMP) perfectly addresses the moral challenges facing Africa today rather than the Western normative strands of moral philosophy which are far removed from the realities facing African people (cf. Mangena 2012: 8-10 and 14). Mangena defines the CMP, as the moral imperative of *hunhu/ubuntu* philosophy which provides the standard for human action. The CMP holds that moral action should be judged against the moral rules and principles produced by the elders of the community who are the fountains of moral wisdom. Here Mangena is challenging the Western views earlier propagated by the likes of Metz and others who regard moral action as normative, and a preserve of the self. Thus, his philosophy is humanising as it speaks to the metaphysical, epistemological and moral realities facing indigenous Africa today.

It is, however, important to note that while there have been significant strides in the publication of scholarly works that celebrate the beauty of “Being African” and more specifically “Being Zimbabwean,” the current philosophy curriculum offered at the University of Zimbabwe still reflects the legacy of colonialism given that courses like Epistemology, Logic, Rationalism and Empiricism and others are still being taught from the point of view of the West. However, we have no doubt that as more and more Black philosophers realise the importance of context and concepts as well as the importance of celebrating the idea of “Being African/Zimbabwean,” these courses will soon reflect the needs and aspirations of Black people. We believe that the project of de-colonizing the minds of a people will always be a gradual process.

Conclusion

In this work, we argued that the effects of colonialism continued to be felt at the University of Zimbabwe even after independence. In fact, for more than one and half decades the composition of the teaching staff in most faculty departments at the University showed that whites were still dominating, and the “standard” courses which were being taught did not speak to the needs and aspirations of the Black population. We argued that the gradual appointment of Zimbabweans of African heritage as philosophers, especially in the Philosophy section of the department of Religious Studies, Classics and Philosophy resulted in a paradigm shift as these slowly embarked on the project to Africanise philosophy. Today, a lot has been done by philosophy practitioners in the department to reclaim their territory as custodians of a genuinely African philosophy. We saluted the efforts of pacesetters, Jameson Kurasha and David Kaulemu who were very instrumental in Africanising philosophy during the formative years. The works of the late Mawondo, Kurasha, Madambi and Mangena were also given special mention. We began the work by re-visiting the nature and scope of colonial education before looking at the subtle nature of philosophical racism at the University of Zimbabwe during the early years, and the efforts made by the University in to identifying and training staff that would debunk this philosophical racism by producing scholarly works that celebrate the beauty of ‘Being African’, instead of disparaging the African vision.

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