





## Rethinking decolonized universities: a case for proverbs (Dika le Diema) and Ubuntu in humanizing South African universities

 Lesiba Tumishang Ledwaba <sup>(a)\*</sup>  Sandiso Mahlala <sup>(b)</sup>



<sup>(a)</sup> North-West University, Vanderbijlpark Campus, South Africa.

<sup>(b)</sup> Durban University of Technology, Pietermaritzburg Campus, South Africa.

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 11 May 2024

Received in rev. form 21 June 2024

Accepted 22 July 2024

#### Keywords:

Proverbs, Dika le Diema,  
Epistemologies, Pedagogy,  
Decoloniality, Racism, Ubuntu

#### JEL Classification:

T30

### ABSTRACT

*The debates over the decolonisation of higher education in South Africa have resulted in differing perspectives on epistemologies and pedagogical techniques. While discussions rage about the conceptualisation and methods of decolonising higher education, as well as the practical efficiency of applying nuanced epistemologies, students continue to face racism, discrimination, and exclusion in higher education institutions. In its broadest sense, the foundation for the conversation on inclusion is founded on the elephant in the room, apartheid, which has been an Achilles heel in the change of South Africa's educational landscape. The apartheid curriculum, in all of its stages, largely prepared workers for low-wage, exploitative work. It showed little concern for emphasising Afrocentric foundations that expanded Black communities' cultural and traditional value systems. Bantu education's harsh social engineering prowess attempted to sidestep African philosophical frameworks (Ubuntu), which are crucial for motivating pupils' confidence, consciousness, and self-actualization. Against this backdrop, this study views decolonisation as a chance to include African languages, value systems, histories, customs, beliefs, cultures, and experiences in higher education. This paper argues that the abstract inclusion of African languages devoid of intrinsic depth and essence is a patronising exercise purposed to vaguely position African languages alongside English and Afrikaans; doing so prohibits a deeper humanistic appreciation and knowledge of African traditions and indigenous systems. This paper emphasizes the crucial role of African languages and indigenous knowledge systems in addressing racism and inequality, and encourages their gradual and benign incorporation into higher education curricula.*

© 2024 by the authors. Licensee SSBFNET, Istanbul, Turkey. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

## Introduction

The #Feesmustfall, #Rhodesmustfall, #OpenStellenbosch movements, and the sporadic and planned student protests that engulf/ed higher education in South Africa are/were unsurprisingly inevitable. The government of the democratic dispensation under the leadership of Rolihlala Nelson Mandela was tasked with the onerous ambition of reconciling a country besieged with racial and cultural intolerance coupled with segregated physical landscapes whose remnants are haunting reminders of the past (Hlatswayo, 2020, p. 166). Some of these historically colonised landscapes contained segregated universities whose cultures had been heightened by their allegiance to Afrikaner and Calvinistic ideologies and worldviews that advocated for racial superiority, privilege (excess government funding), and toxic masculinity. Closest to their intellectual proximity were the 'liberal' universities, which despised the hegemonic positionalities of white Afrikaner universities in South Africa but benefited financially from government financing (Bunting, 2006, p.40).

This paper contends that until recently, 'African universities' did not exist in the South African higher education scene, while 'other' universities, known as Bantu institutions, remained on the margins of higher education. Bantu universities, funded, managed, and administered by the government, were intended to develop Black professionals at or below white-certified levels, with the express objective of replicating a problematic style of education in various Bantu services such as health and education. Universities

\* Corresponding author. ORCID ID: 0000-0001-6194-5612

© 2024 by the authors. Hosting by SSBFNET. Peer review under responsibility of Center for Strategic Studies in Business and Finance.

<https://doi.org/10.20525/ijrbs.v13i5.3467>

established in colonial South Africa, especially Bantu universities, were predominantly European constructs devoid of Afrocentric ideals (Ubuntu/Botho), pedagogies, and epistemic foundations (Tabata, 1960, p. 37).

The paper vehemently enunciates the impossibilities of complete decolonisation and the Africanisation of former colonial institutions of higher learning. To do so would require the physical demolition of colonial structures ‘brick by brick’ until the foundation is no more. However, this is not a panacea; the amicable compromise by colonial universities amid readjustments of institutional values and practices seemingly signals tolerance instead of the much-needed acceptance of the racial diversity, multiculturalism, principles, epistemologies, pedagogies, and identity evolution that languages instil in universities. This paper posits that universities can achieve social cohesion and *ukuhlambulula*<sup>1</sup> by holistically embodying the complex and multifaceted student body and their experiences, with Indigenous languages as a gateway to addressing epistemic violence. *Dika le Diema* (proverbs) are gateways into the dynamism of cultures and allow for a deeper understanding of Ubuntu and some of the contestations and complexities embedded in African communities that transcend through the agency of the student body into universities.

## Conceptual Framework: Ubuntu/Botho

The Apartheid education system, engulfed by separate development principles, exposed students to Eurocentric perspectives that forcefully broadened their knowledge base on European cultures, beliefs, and economic and political systems. Black academics were largely susceptible, exposed, and succumbed to Eurocentric educational landscapes that had little space for Afrocentric, epistemic, and ideological frameworks that informed their complex societies. Ubuntu/Botho, in the context of African communities, informed the knowledge systems that shaped informal teaching and learning outside the classrooms in the homes, neighbourhoods, initiation schools, lessons from elders (oral histories), and the traditional governance systems of African communities led by chieftaincy rule. Ubuntu, an African philosophical framework firmly entrenched in the constitution of the Republic of South Africa, is pivotal in understanding the moral compass and ethical conduct that guide students’ experiences and conduct in institutions of higher learning. Ubuntu encompasses a strong inclination towards a collaborative/community approach to a way of life that vanguards the interests and well-being of the community as paramount.

Essentially, the notion of *motho ke motho batho* (I am because we are) emphasises the inseparability of an individual from society. Human beings are products of their communities and continuously acquire knowledge and culture from community members and their interaction with the environment. Letseka posits that Ubuntu is a learned behaviour, and participants are inducted into its framework in various tangible and intangible informative structures (Letseka, 2013, p. 337). Similarly, (Menkiti, 2017, p. 466) enunciates Ubuntu simply as “I am because we are” (Dauda, 2017, p482); on the other hand, he is vehement that “the practical aspect of Ubuntu derives from the interdependence of the individual on her/{his} community”. Thus emphasising allegiance to the concept that it takes a village to raise a child. In general, Etieyibo’s analysis of Ubuntu and the environment (Etieyibo, 2017, p.638), like Letseka and Mentiti, endorses the importance of ethos of care and respect for humanity and the environment; without the health and well-being of the environment, society is prone to life-threatening exposure to global warming, deforestation, and the extinction of endangered species, among other concerns. For instance, hunter-gatherers and pastoralists in southern Africa strived for symbiotic relations with the environment by occupying environments temporarily. Depending on the seasons, they relocated to various localities, allowing the previously occupied territory to regenerate to its previous capacity. Ubuntu cannot be limited to people but how people interact with their built and natural environments.

Ubuntu opposes individualism inherent in capitalistic modalities entrenched in self-enrichment and betterment tendencies, usually to the detriment of the community or, in Etieyibo’s argument, the environment (Etieyibo, 2017, p.638). Universities in the context of Ubuntu are extensions of their communities and are fundamentally purposed to scholarly and pragmatically contribute viable solutions that enhance the well-being of humanity. This paper is concerned with the erosion of the principles of society within institutions of higher learning and how the notion of *motho ke motho ka batho* seems to lack a pragmatic and meaningful footprint. Furthermore, using Ubuntu as a conceptual framework, this paper seeks to interrogate incidents of inhumanity as a clarion call for decoloniality scholars to engage in deeper, robust, and meaningful deliberations on intolerance in institutions of higher learning in the global south.

## Observations of Ubuntu/Botho in South African Universities

This paper is concerned with the production, maintenance, and fragmentation of Ubuntu/Botho in universities in South Africa; regardless of its institutional fragmentation, Ubuntu/Botho is produced, practised, and maintained by like-minded students and staff composition of universities. Case studies are taken from observant perspectives that accentuate the practice of communality, a principle of Ubuntu, in five universities in South Africa, Gauteng. Using participant observation over three years, the observers visited student centres/cafeterias to analyse broader student behaviour and assess change over time in how students socialise in these spaces and consciously and unconsciously, if at all, reproduce Ubuntu. The observers were overwhelmed with the complexity of behavioural patterns displayed by students but chose to focus on eating patterns, methods, and behaviours for this research. The

---

<sup>1</sup> *Ukhlambulula*, to cleanse, in the cultural sense accentuates cleansing oneself from the spiritual and physical grasp of unwanted spirits, practices and strongholds. From an academic vantage point, conversations with Dr. Paul Maluleka conceptualised *ukhlambulula* as a pivotal process universities need to implement to obliterate the old and parochial ways of being and doing. *Ukhlambulula*, it is suggested, can take place when meaningful and robust interactions take place in an environment fertile for discourse and engagement.

gastronomy culture in student centres or cafeterias in various universities revealed a remarkable sense of commonality, community, and identity re/production.

African students have been observed to enjoy their food in large and small groups; in one observation, the largest group of students comprised ten individuals. In most instances, individuals have been observed contributing money to purchase food that often includes chips, loaf/s of white bread or rolls, and a two-litre fizzy cool drink. Depending on the size of the group, the quantity of the food often increased to include extra-large chips and an additional loaf of bread or two. The clubbing together of finances is a common practice amongst South Africans; in student circles like in Black communities, it is infamously known as *ukugazata*. *Ukugazata* finds commonalities with the age-old tradition of societies (Verwoef, 2001, p505) and other collective supportive structures in African communities; these organisations were established to achieve unity, a sense of belonging and to offer financial assistance to one another in times of need.

*Ukugazata* suggests that an individual may have insufficient funds to purchase an item or a taxi fare to a predetermined location and, therefore, would require financial assistance from the community of passengers. The university students observed, contradictory to the pivotal reason for *Ukugazata* participated in communal luncheons for various reasons: preference for eating in large groups because of eating practices in large Black families, food 'tastes' better when shared, the enhancement of group solidarity, identity, and a sense of belonging. In contrast, others assumably participated because of financial limitations. The occasional jokes and laughter as Black hands competed for the slices of bread and chips is a deliberate attempt to slow down a participant who is seemingly eating speedily or consuming large quantities of chips in relation to the slice of bread. A ratio and balance between the number of slices of bread and chips was a social code everyone must abide by; in an observation, students protested against a participant for consuming too many chips. The key here is to be mindful of the rations of bread in relation to the chips and the number of participants. Once again, communal eating is not unique, nor does it originate in universities; students adopt these practices from their communities and extend them to the university to diversify its social and cultural landscape. For instance, it is common practice in African communities to slaughter livestock to appease ancestors during specialised ceremonies or to set the precedence for weddings, thanksgiving ceremonies, and funerals.

These celebrations are typically extended to the entire community. To test the validity of sharing, Ubuntu, and community, we asked to participate in five random communal luncheons; participants willingly shared their food in all luncheons without contributing to the finances that procured the food. What was fascinating, especially with funeral cuisine, was serving meat for men on a corrugated galvanised sheet commonly known as *lezenke*. Scores of men were seen feasting as a community directly from the *lezenke* without any need for a plate or eating instruments. Similarly to the students feasting in groups, this requires precision, speed, and accuracy; a slow eater or a person concerned with hygienic practices will cease to satisfy his hunger and commonly opt to stand in long queues, historically/usually designated for women. The consumption and presentation of food after a funeral proceeding, much like communal eating patterns in student cafeterias, has been observed to separate men and women. Food consumption is therefore influenced by longstanding cultural practices, perceived to be separatist, that have found normality in African communities.

These norms, influenced by Ubuntu, are not neglected by students, especially during the consumption of alcohol amongst male students. Once again, students, regardless of their ability to purchase alcohol individually, collectively contribute money to buy cases of beer or liquor; often, they have been observed to drink from the same quart of beer until the depletion of the case. The collaborative consumption of food and alcohol hides socioeconomic inequalities among students. This practice contributes towards a student body/group concerned with accentuating the notion *motho ke motho ka batho*. The African university should be mindful of the diverse social practices, principles, survival mechanisms, and identities that students implement in universities to cushion the harsh experiences of being a student. Student centres should be aware of Ubuntu and African cuisine and strive towards meeting the standards of cuisine in African communities as a mechanism to embrace diversity and inclusion. To better understand Ubuntu in the context of South African communities as a naturalised practice among like-minded individuals, analysing its positionality and patterns in universities amid decoloniality, racial intolerance, and economic inequality is pivotal. Ultimately, universities are environments heavily embedded with Ubuntu amongst its African student populace, but to what extent is Ubuntu relevant in achieving decoloniality, especially in universities that continue to experience racism?

### **Decoloniality**

The decolonisation of higher education in South Africa is a fundamental mechanism engineered to obliterate the systematic culture of oppression inherent in universities in South Africa. Positive strides have been made in diversifying the student population of universities by adding people of colour who were socio-economically disadvantaged by apartheid into previously white institutions under the banner of a democratic dispensation. Universities now resemble the 'rainbow nation'. However, progress must be made in embracing students' diverse cultures, languages, Ubuntu, and identities.

The lack thereof has culminated in a lack of belonging to institutions that still harbour racism, intolerance, cultural hegemony, and white privilege, often at the detriment and disadvantage of non-white students. University policy frameworks under the auspices of the White Paper on Higher Education in South Africa strive to advance the principles of democracy and Ubuntu that resemble the South African political context. Snail-paced in cascading to students and the staff composition of most universities in South Africa, these principles remain, in some universities, theoretical constructs with little pragmatic value. The absence of a robust, pragmatic

effort towards implementing institutional policies is arguably a stimulus for inconceivable behaviour by staff and students in higher education institutions.

Regardless of institutional efforts at circumventing the ills of the past, South Africa's institutions of higher learning harbour the physical, spiritual, and cultural significance of racist figures (Murriss, 2016, p.275). The Rhodes statue has not fallen; it has instead been removed with meticulous engineering and safely stored elsewhere. The names of imperialists and colonisers may be removed from university buildings, but their legacies remain spiritual artefacts. Essentially, the demolition of colonial and apartheid structures does not obliterate the spiritual, cultural, and emotional ambience created by colonialists. Some universities exude colonial and imperialist ambiances that students from previously disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds manoeuvre daily while attempting to identify with and belong to universities whose ambiances ostracise their holistic being. While others consciously and unconsciously disconnect from the oppressive ambiances of the universities as a survival mechanism, others embrace a sense of belonging to white hegemony and are imbued by nostalgia for the familiar, warm and enticing embrace of racism, white superiority, and oppression. In this context, decoloniality must be geared towards a process of 'cleansing' if universities are to identify with non-whites.

Unsurprisingly, On 28 February 2008, News24 published an online article detailing the 'initiation' of 5 Black cleaners by White university students who 'coerced' them into consuming urine-infused beverages.<sup>2</sup> In articulating the gruesome conduct, the article read:

The cleaners participate in a "boat race" (a beer-downing competition), a dance, a sprint race, a mock rugby practice, and finally, they are given a mixture to drink. The video shows garlic being put into a dish full of what looks like dog food. "We know they're less privileged so we're adding a bit of meat," says the narrator. Another student puts the bowl on the toilet and urinates into the mixture. The brew is then distributed in plastic glasses to the cleaners. All five of them spit out the first mouthful but try to finish it amid loud encouragement from the students. The video ends with the words: "That, at the end of the day, {this} is what we think of integration" (News24, 26 February 2008)

The deliberate dehumanisation of Black workers at the hands of White students amplifies the disregard for humanity and the conception of Blacks as unworthy of constituting a place in 'white' universities as cleaners and students. The coerced consumption of human urine infused with alcoholic beverages attests to the normalised emotional, social, mental, political and economic oppression experienced by people in the Free State region. The psychological oppression of apartheid and its generational transcendence within the Black community requires immense interrogation, especially from an African philosophical framework. The notion of Blackness as a subservient and inferior constituency drives the misconception that everything associated with whiteness is superior. More concerning, however, is the prevalence of 'Baas mentally' in regions vested in the agricultural economy and within which the Free State is arguably a part.

'Baas mentally' reveres the White boss and everything in his immediate geography, including his family, land, property, and animals, as superior to Blacks and to be respected accordingly. Regardless of age, the 'Baas's' offspring embodies the 'Baas' demeanour and is often called 'Klein-bass'. In the context of the incident at the university, the young men performing the unfathomable ritual of coercing Black employees to consume the vile concoction of human excretion and alcohol purposefully used the opportunity to display 'Baas' authority and domineer over Blacks who are obtrusively relevant as nothing but mere labourers. Thus, urine consumption and its demeaning symbolism serve as a reminder that they are not human enough to acquire the prestigious status Whites enjoy in their universities and communities. Their place in urban areas, normalised by separate development during apartheid, is to provide labour, evident in words, "That, at the end of the day, {this} is what we think of integration" (News 24, 26 February 2008)

In a similar case elsewhere, a student was recorded excreting urine on a university student's belongings; Naidoo states:

The racist incident at Stellenbosch University in which white student Theuns du Toit urinated on the belongings of black student Babalo Ndayana has elicited strong condemnation from across society. Every black person and the majority of white people are appalled and in disbelief that this incident could occur in a residence of a prestigious university.<sup>3</sup>

Ubuntu/Botho is a philosophical, moral framework (Kesi et al., 2020, p.275) that accentuates the efficacy of "human relations" in sustaining, dismantling, and replicating systems of power. The case studies of Ubuntu in food consumption and the racist behaviour displayed by the university students attest to the replication of power that derives from social behaviour and the spectrum of systems that students experience within and outside the university environment. Within these systems are normalised behavioural patterns and conduct that may be deemed appropriate by those who sympathise with such behaviour towards non-whites that transcend into universities unabated. On the other hand, the eating patterns observed may be a continuation of masculinity and traditional practices that separate men and women, especially in public events such as funerals.

The commonalities of the atrocities committed by white students are worthy of interrogation; the excretion of urine as an expression of toxic masculinity, power and dominance dominates those consuming or experiencing urination as subservient human beings. Naidoo posits that "every black person and the majority of white people are appalled..." The word selection insinuates that while

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.news24.com/News24/UFS-horror-race-video-surfaces-20080226>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2022-06-01-racist-incidents-provide-case-studies-for-learning-and-teaching/>

many White people detest Theun's conduct, there is, however, a minority that still celebrates this conduct (and apartheid) and perpetuates the inhumane treatment of Blacks in white universities. While many have labelled these separate events brutal and gruesome, they occurred in prestigious universities. Therefore, they are suitable vantage points from which social scientists and decoloniality scholars must vehemently critique the absence of effort to decolonise hegemonic cultures and conduct in institutions of higher learning that find rooting in apartheid.

Apartheid tentacles stretched beyond education and into every sphere of the community; apartheid education was captured to instil inequality, separateness, and disparities among people. On a similar note, the underpinnings of decoloniality are oriented toward addressing epistemological and pedagogical frameworks, mainly from a theoretical perspective that does not prioritise students' experiences outside the university. Unsurprisingly, discourses are elaborate on the systematic changes that must take place in universities and not so much on how the exact changes must materialise within universities and the larger society. The decolonisation process should be spearheaded by the historically marginalised, and they must amplify their historical oppression, poverty, exclusion, landlessness, and voicelessness as a mechanism for self-actualisation in institutions of higher learning (Freire, 2020).

Post 1994, many academics in white institutions had to evolve with institutional changes by transitioning from apartheid-oriented pedagogical influences to democracy and inclusion. The transition comprised minuscule change management strategies; academics entered (from historically white and non-white universities) into the new era of higher education with the shadow of the past in their teaching and learning methods. Some of these institutions whose environments embrace racism, academic exclusion, tribalism, and degrading human conduct, as seen with the racist incidents, should cleanse to create friendly environments for a frank talk on the state of universities and the self.

(Heleta, 2016, p4) theorises that "epistemic violence persists in post-apartheid South Africa, where the higher education system, rooted in colonial and apartheid exploitation and racism, has obliterated nearly all linkages that Black students may have with the prescribed texts, propagated narratives, debates and learning on their side and their history, lived experiences and dreams...." The notion of a 'futuristic' university "... is socially responsible and banishes epistemicides, linguicide, racism, sexism, patriarchy, tribalism, xenophobia..." (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 238, p.2018). Gatsheni's 'futuristic vision' is far from realisation; the culture of intolerance entrenched and galvanised by apartheid is symbolised by ancient university architecture that exudes colonialism and imperialistic endeavours that disempowered and reduced Africans to servitude. The great celebrated figures, the founders of universities in South Africa, are White men whose physical artistic remains share little to no cultural commonalities with the new diverse enrolment, a staunch reminder that universities in South Africa are accessible to non-white bodies but resistant to their cultures, beliefs, epistemologies, and values.

### **Language**

The paper has thus far articulated some of the conundrums and limitations experienced by universities in South Africa and how decoloniality scholars in the global south can play pivotal intermediary roles in obliterating the social, economic, and political disparities experienced by students in universities. Furthermore, racial inclusion, accentuated by university policy frameworks, is a fundamental step toward diversifying universities. This section extends the discourse on decoloniality by expounding the role of languages and proverbs as mechanisms that can be used to instil cultural awareness, cohesion, commonality, and humanity (Ubuntu/Botho) within universities.

(Heleta, 2016, p.2) argues that "...universities have done very little since 1994 to open up 'to different bodies and traditions of knowledge and knowledge-making in new and exploratory ways". Similarly, scholars (Kesi et al., 2020, p.271 and Ramoupi, 2014, p.57) have reiterated the importance of exploring alternative ways of knowing that are moulded by the experiences of the previously marginalised, particularly by oppressive education systems such as Bantu education (Kesi et al., 2020, p.271). Heleta is confident that "the epistemological transformation also depends on the significant increase of black, coloured and Indian academics at universities" (Heleta, 2016, p.6). Essentially, academics represent the cultural and knowledge systems of their wider communities. In an ideal academic environment comprising of academic freedom, these experiences shape teaching methods and approaches and thus diversify, in many ways, the content that is delivered.

Academics are, therefore, in a privileged position to influence and align learning material to encourage critical thought on issues experienced by the wider community and the global context. This can only become attainable when the learning material is decolonised, and the student's prior experiences and knowledge systems are placed at the core of teaching and learning. Thus, Heleta's standpoint on racial diversity and transformation is fundamental to introducing diverse teaching and learning methods (Heleta, 2016, p.6).

Gatsheni asserts that "the first casualty was the mother tongue of African people that was replaced with colonial languages" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018, p.229). Indigenous languages did not enjoy a strong cultural presence in apartheid's institutions of higher learning. He further argues that language and culture are intrinsically always interwoven and echo their interdependence on each other. Language expresses culture, traditions, oppression, violence, power, and customs. Alexander equates language proficiency to economic power and furthers the assumption that fluent people in the language that dominates financial transactions in their contexts are most likely to achieve economic growth (Alexander, 1997, p.83). A deeper analysis of this reality yields the complexity embedded

in an economy such as South Africa, where English may be deemed the dominant economic language. However, there are many sectors in the economy, particularly agriculture, where Afrikaans dominate the market, as was the norm under apartheid.

So, it is not surprising that in former Afrikaner universities, Afrikaans played a critical role in discouraging/prohibiting non-Afrikaner speakers' access to Afrikaner universities that used their exclusivity to enhance Afrikaner nationalism (Plessis, 2006, p.97). Ultimately, Afrikaans had to be intellectualised (Prah, 2009, p.49). For decades, native languages have experienced relevance in higher education as subjects/modules instead of a medium of instruction; this means:

It is also now common knowledge that education is best conducted and most effective when undertaken in the mother tongue; that where different cultures and people huddle together in a common citizenship, a spacious multiculturalist and multilingual approach to education allows better the cultivation of tolerance and co-existence (Prah, 2009, p.47).

An education system discouraging learners from speaking their native languages in learning environments only obliterates native languages, cultures, and identities (Prah, 2009, p.54). Thus, it is no surprise that the lack of mother tongue presence in basic education has moulded learners who shun their native languages and, in essence, deem cultural practices as 'uncool' and irrelevant to the social and economic demands of the modern world. Fundamentally, institutions of higher learning should strive towards the gradual inclusion of native languages in their teaching and learning policy frameworks and towards the pragmatic implementation of diverse languages in teaching and learning material.

### A Case for Proverbs

Proverbs/*Dika le Diema* are essential in understanding the principles of Ubuntu/Botho and the basic tenets of humanity that are critical in shaping human relations in South African universities. Meaningful and robust decolonised learning material can circumvent the absence of meaningful cultural interactions because of historical institutional cultures, class, race, religion, and hate. This material should accentuate knowledge systems, skills, and ways of knowing that can be cascaded to students to enhance deeper appreciation, sympathy, and understanding of diversity and Ubuntu. What do Proverbs do? "Proverbs and idioms in a language are like indexes to the culturally embedded experiences, meanings, values, local knowledge and wisdom of language users" (Louw & Schenck, 2002, p.98). In other words, proverbs are essential gateways and navigation systems to culture and traditional practices heavily embedded with the principles of Ubuntu. Proverbs are an essential mechanism that students can use to fathom the content taught about their everyday experiences, thus creating linkages and commonalities between theory and practice (Le Roux, 2004, p.96). Proverbs fundamentally address experiences and provide a moral and ethical framework to circumvent unfortunate situations in student-relevant and pragmatic contexts.

Unsurprisingly, a plethora of old and new proverbs developed in African contexts to explain changes and human being's experiences. In addition to preventing moral degeneration in African societies, they are a source of strength and comfort in tribulation; most importantly, proverbs have been used to explain the supernatural and to give meaning and understanding to events and situations. Kosch asserts that "the suggestion that proverbs are more prevalent in spoken than in written language makes sense, as proverbs have a communicative function and entail the importation of wisdom, caution or admonition, generally by one person to another or to an audience in a verbal exchange (Kosch, 2016, p.150). The magnitude of old and new proverbs renders the collection and publication almost never-ending. Coupled with contextual, cultural, and spiritual ambiguities, proverbs are flexible and susceptible to multiple meanings and usage (Mapadimeng, 2018, p.5). For instance, the infamous proverb:

*Mosadi o tswara thipha ka bogaleng*

Directly translated as "women hold the sharp side of the knife", it is often understood to accentuate women's strength and ability to withstand trials and tribulations. In a different context, certain idioms and proverbs perpetuate women's insubordination by encouraging them to tolerate social ills, infidelity and disregard committed by society and their male counterparts. In the context of South African universities, this proverb encourages women to persevere in male-dominated institutions where their managerial skills are often questioned. For the female student, it is a source of strength and encouragement to endure the harsh realities of being a Black female student who is constantly susceptible to Gender Based Violence (GBV), rape, kidnapping, and harassment. Amid all these tribulations, the proverb reminds women to remain determined, courageous, and brave in their quest for self-determination.

Proverbs have also been noted to encourage gender stereotypes and perpetuate the longevity of attitudes towards men and women (Le Roux, 2004, p.34). Often, proverbs refer to men in a masculine tone that denotes braveness, courage, wisdom, and leadership. *Dika le diema* express a similar tone for women often associated with gender roles in African households and communities, thus limiting women to the domestic sphere. Le Roux's analysis expounds this argument by accentuating how *dika le diema* often associates and stereotypes women with "...weakness, {witchcraft}, craftiness and insolence" (Le Roux, 2004, p.38). In some instances, *dika le diema* encourages and condones promiscuous behaviour by men in traditional societies, and there is a plethora of proverbs to substantiate this:

*'Monna ke thaga oa naba'* (Men are like grass, they spread)

*'Monna ke selepe oa gadimishana'* (A man is an axe borrowed by everyone)

The above proverb stereotypically normalises men's promiscuous behaviour, the notion that *monna ke thaga* refers to the ability of grass to spread widely and cover vast amounts of land. This means that men, like grass, can extend their reach to multiple women. *Monna ke selepe* connotes a similar understanding; in a village where only a few households have an axe, it is essential to share it with those who need it, particularly for gathering firewood and other domestic obligations. Men are viewed as axes that the community of women can utilise. The latter is problematic; it insinuates that women who embrace the proverb encourage promiscuous behaviour and the wrecking of the family structure. On the other hand, women are prohibited from promiscuous behaviour and are encouraged to strive for marriage; thus, the double-edged proverb.

*lebitla la mosadi ke bohadi*

Directly translated (a woman's grave is marriage), marriage in the African context is revered as a traditional practice that not only brings honour and respect to families but also constructs and extends ancestral connections between families. For this reason, marriage is perceived as a lifetime commitment. Still, the emphasis of this commitment is primarily on women who are expected to persevere in marriage regardless of the hardships promulgated by promiscuous behaviour from men.

As seen above, proverbs' functionality, flexibility, and diverse meanings are complex and problematic. Academics that use proverbs to enunciate Ubuntu as a mechanism to address social ills in universities must, in their selection of *dika le diema*, unpack their complexity and the contexts in which they were constructed. *Dika le diema* provide a vantage point to analyse the communities' attitudes, practices, cultures, and belief systems that inevitably enter the university environment and influence students' perceptions of universities' pedagogies and epistemologies. Most importantly, by emphasising humanity, the following proverb has been strategically selected to assist in broadening the understanding and appreciation of Ubuntu:

*Makhura a Kgosi ke batho/ motho ke motho ka batho*

This proverb strongly emphasises the notion that I am because we are and that a chief or an individual in a leadership position is deemed irrelevant without the will of the people. In the context of the university, Chancellors and Vice-Chancellors and the broader levels of management in universities are functionless without the student populace. In the context of the case studies provided earlier, students shared meals because of the realisation that human beings depend upon each other for their economic, psychological and emotional well-being. Communal eating symbolises the strengthening of Botho (humanity); though found to be shared among Black students, food sharing symbolises concern for others regardless of race, class, language, nationality, and culture. Furthermore, *motho ke motho ka batho* does not differentiate nor embody race; it simply accentuates interdependence, respect, and collegiality as a fundamental recipe for humanity. In essence, food should be deliberately used to unite different cultures; the Africa Day celebrated by one of the universities observed used the event to showcase Africa's beauty and talent through song, dance, fashion, and food. The observers tasted various foods from the plethora of stalls; food mirrored and accentuated the commonalities that African society shares. Exposure to different cultures is a gateway to eradicating racial, sexual, and cultural intolerance prevalent in universities.

## Conclusion

This paper recommends that South African universities and decolonial scholars implement pragmatic solutions to the social ills in higher education. To achieve this mandate, universities and academic staff concerned with decoloniality should implement compulsory interdisciplinary first-year modules across all faculties that enunciate the elementary history of South Africa and its socioeconomic consequences on South Africans<sup>4</sup>. Racism, tribalism, homophobia, xenophobia, sexism, and gender-based violence must be interrogated. At the module's core, this paper suggests, there should be discourses on Ubuntu and its diverse underpinnings; it should ultimately address the essence of humanity: What does it mean to be a human being? How am I connected to other human beings? What are the conceptions, misconceptions, stereotypes, violence, and attitudes students bring into universities, and how do they affect other human beings? Moreover, how can the university, in collaboration with the student body, circumvent social ills in higher education? The module design should be geared towards understanding students' experiences and how they will likely influence teaching and learning strategies. In other words, students' cultural, spiritual, and traditional backgrounds must be understood by academics and university policymakers who must design policies that speak to the broader student populace.

South African universities should strive to embody the diverse character of the country in their endeavour to produce professionals and academics who will provide innovative solutions to the country's socioeconomic challenges. To do so, this paper has suggested considerations for Afrocentric epistemic and pedagogical approaches influenced by Ubuntu and the appreciation of humanity. Undoubtedly, university policy frameworks in the context of South Africa embrace the principles and values of Ubuntu and strive towards the protection of human dignity. Unfortunately, and as shown by the case studies on racism in higher education, these efforts are seemingly unimpactful in addressing social ills that permeate the boundaries of the university through attitudes, violence, and disregard for the moral fibre of society. Universities' policy framework, in general, should be a moral compass that instils pride and belonging for everyone.

---

<sup>4</sup> The authors are designing a first year first semester module on Ubuntu, the module will be presented to students to assess the efficacy on discourses on Ubuntu as a mechanism to disrupt the continuation of racial intolerance and other issues in higher education. The process, findings and limitations will be discussed in a separate paper.

## Acknowledgement

**Author Contributions:** by authors with equal participation.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Ethical review and approval were waived for this study, due to that the research does not deal with vulnerable groups or sensitive issues.

**Data Availability Statement:** The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest

## References

- Alexander, N. (1997). Language policy and planning in the new South Africa. *African Sociological Review/Revue Africaine de Sociologie*, 82-92.
- Bunting, I. (2006). The higher education landscape under apartheid. In *Transformation in higher education: Global pressures and local realities* (pp. 35–52). Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands.
- Dauda, B. (2017). African humanism and Ethics: The cases of Ubuntu and Omoluwabi. *The Palgrave Handbook of African Philosophy*, pp. 475–491.
- Etieyibo, E. (2017). Ubuntu and the Environment. *The Palgrave Handbook of African Philosophy*, pp. 633–657.
- Freire, P. (2020). Pedagogy of the oppressed. In *Toward a sociology of education* (pp. 374–386). Routledge.
- Heleta, S. (2016). Decolonisation of higher education: Dismantling epistemic violence and Eurocentrism in South Africa. *Transformation in Higher Education*, 1(1), 1–8.
- Hlatshwayo, M. N. (2020). Being Black in South African higher education: An intersectional insight. *Acta Academica*, 52(2), 163–18.
- Kessi, S., Marks, Z., & Ramugondo, E. (2020). Decolonising African Studies. *Critical African Studies*, 12(3), 271–282.
- Kosch, I. M. (2016). Lemmatisation of fixed expressions: the case of Proverbs in Northern Sotho. *Lexikos*, 26, 145-161.
- Letseka, M. (2013). Educating for Ubuntu/botho: lessons from Basotho Indigenous education. *Open Journal of Philosophy*, 3(02), 337-344
- Louw, H., & Schenck, R. (2002). Learning through rediscovery and reclaiming local/indigenous knowledge and skills. *Africanus*, 32(2), 93-108.
- Machobane, M. M. (1996). Gender stereotypes in Sesotho proverbs. *Southern African Journal for Folklore Studies*, 7(1), 34-41.
- Mapadimeng, M. (2018). Youth theory in South Africa: an indigenous African perspective derived from Sepedi idioms and proverbs. *Southern African Journal for Folklore Studies*, 28(1), 1-13.
- Menkiti, I. (2017). Community, communism, communitarianism: An African intervention. *The Palgrave Handbook of African Philosophy*, pp. 461–473.
- Murriss, K. (2016). # Rhodes must fall: A posthumanist orientation to decolonising higher education institutions. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 30(3), 274–294.
- Ndlovu-Gatsheni, S. J. (2018). *Epistemic freedom in Africa: Deprovincialization and decolonization*. Routledge.
- Plessis, T. D. (2006). From monolingual to bilingual higher education: The repositioning of historically Afrikaans-medium universities in South Africa. *Language policy*, 5, 87-113.
- Prah, K. K. (2009). Mother-tongue education in Africa for emancipation and development: Towards the intellectualisation of African languages. *Languages and education in Africa: A comparative and transdisciplinary analysis*, pp. 83–104.
- Ramoupi, N. L. L. (2014). African Languages Policy in the Education of South Africa: 20 Years of Freedom or Subjugation? *Journal of Higher Education in Africa/Revue de l'enseignement supérieur en Afrique*, 12(2), 53-93.
- Tabata, I. B. (1960). *Education for barbarism*. Pall Mall.
- Verhoef, G. (2001). Informal financial service institutions for survival: African women and stokvels in urban South Africa, 1930–1998. *Enterprise & Society*, 2 (2), 259–296.

**Publisher's Note:** SSBFNET stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.



© 2024 by the authors. Licensee SSBFNET, Istanbul, Turkey. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

*International Journal of Research in Business and Social Science* (2147-4478) by SSBFNET is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.