



POWER, IDENTITY, AND THE PLURALITY OF VOICES IN THE DECOLONIZATION OF KNOWLEDGE IN AFRICAN UNIVERSITIES¹

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Abstract. *This paper critically examines the scope of decolonization in African higher education, focusing on how power, identity, and epistemic voice shape the struggle over knowledge restructuring. It engages Jonathan Jansen's caution against granting epistemic authority exclusively on the basis of identity, showing that such a move risk weakening academic rigor. At the same time, the paper argues that identity cannot simply be dismissed: it remains fundamental to decolonization, since it draws attention to the plurality of epistemic voices involved, including students, academics, indigenous communities, and administrators, each contributing perspectives shaped by history and lived experience. Focusing on case studies from South Africa, Kenya, and Ghana, selected for the distinct ways they illustrate identity-driven activism, indigenous knowledge recovery, and institutional curriculum reform respectively, the paper examines the tensions and possibilities that arise when these voices contest authority in curriculum reform and institutional practice. In the final analysis, the paper proposes a model of decolonization rooted in epistemic plurality and dialogue, in which the recognition of marginalized perspectives is balanced against intellectual rigor, offering a more inclusive and transformative approach to knowledge production in African universities. The paper adopts the methods of conceptual analysis and philosophical argumentation, engaging primarily with scholarship on decolonial theory and African philosophy of education.*

Keywords: *Decolonization, Epistemic authority, Identity, Plurality, Knowledge reform, Academic precision, Dialogue.*

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1. Introduction

There is no doubt that the decolonization of knowledge in African universities has become one of the most pressing debates in contemporary higher education. This can be traced from the RhodesMustFall movement in South Africa to student-led curriculum protests in Kenya and Ghana, all calling for the dismantling of colonial legacies in education that have deepened over the past two decades. As Achille Mbembe argues, these struggles are not simply institutional or political; they raise profound moral questions about power, legitimacy, and epistemic authority (Mbembe, 2016: 2-5). The central questions are these: Who has the right to speak about decolonization? What counts as legitimate knowledge in a postcolonial university? And how should universities navigate the tension between preserving scholarly rigor and recognizing marginalized views?

Jonathan Jansen, however, has maintained that appeals to identity as the primary basis for epistemic authority pose serious risks to the integrity of the university (Jansen, 2019: 15). According to Jansen, when identity, particularly membership in a historically oppressed racial group, is used as the key justification for leading decolonial reform, academic standards risk being conceded to majority demands (Jansen, 2019: 22-25). Yet Jansen's caution has its own limitations, since an uncritical dismissal of identity risks foreclosing the epistemic contributions that arise from the lived experience of marginalized groups. Identity, far from being irrelevant, can offer genuine insight into the blind spots of colonial knowledge systems (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018: 37-40). The real challenge, then, lies not in whether identity should matter, but in how it is positioned within a wider discussion about knowledge, authority, and reform.

In addressing these issues, this paper argues that the decolonization of African universities cannot be reduced to identity claims, nor can it disregard them. Instead, it requires acknowledging the plurality of epistemic voices involved, including students, academics, indigenous knowledge holders, and administrators, each offering diverse viewpoints shaped by history and lived experience. It is only by forming a dialogical space in which these voices can contest and complement one another that African universities can move towards a genuinely decolonized knowledge system.

Building on this argument, the paper pursues three specific objectives: first, to examine Jansen's critique of identity-based epistemic authority and its limitations; second, to analyze how identity and institutional power jointly shape epistemic struggles in African universities; and

third, to develop, through comparative case studies, an ethical-epistemic model of decolonization grounded in epistemic plurality and dialogical responsibility.

Methodologically, the paper adopts conceptual analysis and philosophical argumentation rather than empirical fieldwork. The literature engaged was selected on the basis of its direct relevance to the identity-authority debate in African higher education, drawing principally on the work of Jonathan Jansen, Achille Mbembe, Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni, and other leading decolonial theorists, alongside primary accounts of the case studies discussed below. To ground the conceptual analysis, the paper brings together case studies from South Africa, Kenya, and Ghana. These three countries were chosen because each illustrates a distinct facet of the decolonization debate rather than a single, uniform pattern: South Africa offers the clearest instance of identity-based student activism over curriculum reform; Kenya illustrates the challenges and possibilities of assimilating indigenous epistemologies into formal education under global academic pressures; and Ghana provides insight into institutional efforts to harmonize community participation with academic ideals and language policy.

Taken together, these cases allow the paper to test its emerging model against a range of institutional contexts, rather than relying on a single national experience. By drawing these cases into dialogue with the theoretical debate, the paper develops a model of decolonization rooted in epistemic plurality, one that seeks to merge recognition of marginalized voices with a continued commitment to academic rigor.

2. Colonial heritages and the struggle for epistemic reform

According to Mahmood Mamdani, the present-day African university is unmistakably a colonial creation. Institutions such as the University of Cape Town, Makerere University in Uganda, and the University of Ghana were originally modeled on British or European structures of higher education (Mamdani, 2007: 14-18). They were designed not primarily to foster indigenous intellectual traditions, but to reproduce colonial administrative and economic systems. As Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o puts it, the colonial institution of higher education became “the factory of the colonial mind,” privileging Western languages, histories, and sciences while disregarding African epistemologies (Thiong’o, 1986: 87). This legacy has persisted long after the formal end of colonial rule.

A continuing feature of this legacy is the dominance of Eurocentric curricula, in which subjects such as philosophy, history, and literature were presented as universal, yet in practice mirrored

specific European traditions and omitted African voices (Mudimbe, 1988: 65-70). African philosophy, for example, was long denied academic legitimacy, dismissed as folklore or myth rather than treated as a rigorous intellectual discipline (Hountondji, 1996: 21-25). In the sciences too, indigenous knowledge systems, such as traditional medicine or ecological wisdom, were relegated to the margins, if recognized at all. As a result, African students have frequently been educated to become “strangers to themselves,” trained in concepts and frameworks that fail to address their own social realities (Thiong’o, 1986: 44-45).

The struggle to reform these structures dates back to the earliest postcolonial decades. Prominent leaders such as Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana (Nkrumah, 1970: 78) and Julius Nyerere in Tanzania (Nyerere, 1967: 2-4) sought to transform education into a vehicle for national liberation and cultural renewal. These reforms, however, regularly met resistance from entrenched academic leadership and international donors, who preferred continuity with Western models. In many instances, efforts at curriculum indigenization were dismissed as ideological or politically motivated rather than academic (Falola, 2001: 112-115). As a result, the promise of decolonization in the 1960s and 1970s gave way to what has been called the “neo-colonial university,” in which African institutions remained dependent on foreign endorsement for academic legitimacy (Ake, 1979: 9-12).

As Boaventura de Sousa Santos argues, the insistence on decolonization in these debates is therefore not purely about representation but about epistemic justice (Santos, 2014: 21-23). This raises the question of how universities can recognize and incorporate different knowledge systems without sacrificing intellectual rigor. It is against this background that current student movements, faculty debates, and policy reforms must be understood. The legacy of colonial arrangements continues to shape the terms of engagement, making the struggle for knowledge reform both necessary and genuinely contested.

3. Identity and epistemic authority: Jonathan Jansen’s view

In his work *The Problem with Decolonisation: Entanglements in the Politics of Knowledge*, Jonathan Jansen raises pointed questions about how the call for decolonization has been articulated in African universities (Jansen, 2023: 139-141). He argues that although the demand to dismantle colonial epistemologies is legitimate, the manner in which it is often pursued risks undermining the intellectual integrity of the university. His central concern lies with the use of identity as a claim to epistemic authority, that is, the assumption that belonging to a historically

oppressed racial or cultural group automatically confers legitimacy in leading decolonial reform (Jansen, 2023: 139).

For Jansen, this shift from academic argument to identity-based entitlement represents a form of epistemic populism (Jansen, 2023: 142). He worries that academic discussion becomes reduced to questions of who speaks rather than what is claimed, thereby weakening the standards of justification that define the university as a site of critical inquiry. In this sense, the politics of identity threatens to displace the politics of knowledge. Jansen maintains that being Black, African, or indigenous, while significant, cannot alone constitute a warrant for epistemic authority; claims to knowledge must still be subjected to rigorous critique and intellectual evaluation (Jansen, 2009: 112-115).

One of Jansen's central examples is the South African RhodesMustFall movement, which called for the removal of colonial symbols and the transformation of curricula. Although he recognizes the symbolic and political power of these protests, he criticizes the tendency among some activists to conflate political representation with epistemic legitimacy (Jansen, 2023: 143). For Jansen, the mere fact of having suffered colonial or racial oppression does not guarantee that one's knowledge claims are correct or academically sound. What is required, instead, is an ongoing process of discourse, evidence, and intellectual exchange.

There is significant strength in Jansen's argument. His insistence on preserving the norms of critical inquiry protects the university from collapsing into an arena of competing identities in which scholarly standards are discarded (Jansen, 2023: 144). In an era where higher education risks becoming politicized, his warning against reducing knowledge to identity serves as a reminder that intellectual merit cannot be bypassed. The force of this argument becomes clearer when the alternative is spelled out concretely. Consider a doctoral committee that waives its usual standards of argument and evidence for a thesis on the grounds that the candidate's positionality as a member of a historically marginalized group already secures the thesis's legitimacy. The result is not empowerment but a quieter form of harm: the candidate is denied the rigorous engagement that would have strengthened the work, and the degree itself is devalued for every graduate who holds one, since credentials only retain their worth if they certify something real.

Jansen's later research on South African universities documents exactly this kind of institutional drift, showing how the erosion of scholarly accountability, once tolerated in the name of transformation, tends to metastasize into more general patterns of institutional dysfunction that

ultimately harm the very students the erosion was meant to protect (Jansen, 2023b). This is not an argument for leaving existing standards untouched; the case studies discussed later in this paper show standards themselves can and should be revised. It is an argument that whatever revision occurs must still be a revision of standards, arrived at through justification, rather than their quiet abandonment in particular cases.

Nevertheless, Jansen's critique is not without limitations, and it is here that the disagreement among scholars becomes most instructive. By focusing on the risks of identity politics, Jansen risks downplaying the epistemic value of lived experience and historical marginalization. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, for instance, argues that identity, shaped by colonial histories, offers a vital vantage point for identifying epistemic injustices and silences that a purely procedural standard of rigor may miss (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018: 42-44). On this reading, Jansen's emphasis on academic argument as a neutral standard understates how the very criteria of "rigor" have themselves been shaped by colonial epistemic hierarchies; abandoning identity altogether risks entrenching the very exclusions that decolonization seeks to undo. Mbembe pushes this disagreement further, insisting that decolonization is not about replacing one orthodoxy with another, but about expanding the horizon of knowledge to include voices historically rendered invisible (Mbembe, 2015: 9-11). Where Jansen treats identity claims chiefly as a threat to be contained, Mbembe and Ndlovu-Gatsheni treat them as an underused epistemic resource; the tension between these positions, rather than being resolved in favor of either, is what motivates the model developed later in this paper.

Jansen may therefore be correct to caution against the uncritical use of identity as epistemic authority, but his position requires supplementation rather than outright rejection. Identity should not be the sole basis for legitimacy, but neither should it be dismissed as a meaningful resource for epistemic insight. This tension between protecting academic rigor and recognizing marginalized voices constitutes the principal challenge of decolonization in African universities.

4. Identity, power, and the epistemic struggle

Debates over decolonization in African universities cannot be understood apart from the entanglement of identity and power in the production of knowledge. Identity is not simply an abstract label, but the product of historical processes of colonial domination, racial exclusion, and epistemic silencing (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020: 15-17). Colonial education systematically positioned European identities as universal bearers of truth while relegating African identities

to the margins of irrationality or folklore (Mudimbe, 1988: 64-68). In this sense, to question who has the right to speak in the university is also to question whose knowledge has historically been considered valid, and whose has been dismissed.

It is against this historical background that identity becomes fundamental to epistemic struggle. When students and academics invoke their Blackness, Africanness, or indigeneity in discussions about curriculum reform, they are not simply making essentialist claims; they are pointing to centuries of marginalization that denied their communities epistemic recognition (Jansen, 2023: 142). Identity here functions as a reminder of epistemic injustice, understood as the structural exclusion of certain groups from participating in knowledge-making (Fricker, 2007: 1-3). The appeal to identity can thus serve as a corrective, drawing attention to voices that have long been silenced in academic dialogue.

At the same time, identity can become a double-edged sword when treated as the sole basis of epistemic legitimacy (Jansen, 2023: 145). If the claim to authority rests entirely on identity, it risks collapsing into identity essentialism, the assumption that one's social position guarantees epistemic correctness. This can produce a new form of exclusion, in which alternative perspectives, even those from within marginalized groups, are delegitimized (Mbembe, 2017: 173-176). As Miranda Fricker argues, epistemic justice requires more than simply recognizing identity; it requires a fair distribution of credibility and recognition within epistemic practices (Fricker, 2007: 7-10).

The dimension of power further complicates matters. Universities are not neutral spaces; they are organized by hierarchies of administration, funding, and academic status that shape which voices are heard and which are marginalized (Mamdani, 1989: 19-22). Student movements regularly contest these structures, yet administrators and senior academics may exercise institutional power to define the boundaries of legitimate reform. Likewise, global academic networks, including journals, ranking systems, and funding bodies, continue to privilege Western epistemologies, subtly shaping what counts as "rigorous" or "academic" (Santos, 2014: 23-26). The struggle for epistemic authority within African universities is thus entangled with broader struggles against global systems of knowledge control.

Recognizing this entanglement allows for a more sophisticated understanding of identity in decolonization debates. Identity cannot be dismissed as irrelevant, since it reveals the historical wounds of epistemic exclusion; nor can it be absolutized, since doing so risks reproducing exclusionary practices. The challenge is to situate identity within a wider framework of

discourse and critical reflection, one in which power relations are exposed and interrogated, and in which epistemic legitimacy is not monopolized by any single group. It is in this space that the idea of a plurality of voices emerges as an essential condition for a genuinely decolonized institution of higher education.

5. Plurality of voices and epistemic authority

The central challenge in the decolonization of African universities lies in determining whose voices should be prioritized in restructuring knowledge systems. As Jansen cautions, identity-based claims risk devolving into an exclusionary politics in which authority is conferred not on the basis of epistemic merit, but on historical suffering or positionality (Jansen, 2019: 22-24). At the same time, dismissing identity altogether overlooks the epistemic resources embedded in lived experience and indigenous worldviews. What is needed is a framework that takes seriously the plurality of voices without reducing legitimacy to identity alone.

Furthermore, contemporary studies have moved in the direction of this pluralist position. Mbembe argues that the university must expose itself to a “plurality of epistemic traditions” if it is to recover its relevance in the Global South (Mbembe, 2015). Similarly, Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni contends that decolonization consists of more than the replacement of Eurocentric content; it requires acknowledging what he terms “epistemic diversity,” in which African, diasporic, and indigenous perspectives are engaged in genuine dialogue (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018: 67-69). This pluralist turn remains an active site of debate: writing more recently, Mitova (2023) questions whether epistemic decolonisation, as theorised, can meaningfully address the material problems facing African higher education, or whether the project risks becoming an end in itself. In practice, this means that the epistemic authority of students, scholars, indigenous leaders, and administrators should not be arranged into a hierarchy of voice, but instead negotiated in ways that foster inclusive participation.

This plurality, however, is not free of tension. As Tuck and Yang remind us, decolonization is not a metaphor but involves substantive shifts in power (Tuck and Yang, 2012: 1-40). Accommodating epistemic plurality therefore involves reconciling competing claims without erasing the material histories of dispossession that make decolonial demands necessary in the first place. It also requires safeguards against epistemic relativism, in which all voices are treated as equally authoritative regardless of rigor. Walter Mignolo’s concept of “pluriversality,” a world in which many epistemic traditions coexist without collapsing into a

homogenizing universalism, offers a useful guide for escaping this danger (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018: 135-139).

In this respect, an ethical-epistemic model of decolonization becomes appropriate. Such a model affirms the legitimacy of multiple epistemic voices while grounding authority in discourse, shared accountability, and academic integrity. This approach reframes decolonization not as a zero-sum contest between Eurocentric and Afrocentric knowledge systems, but as an ongoing negotiation that strengthens African universities by expanding their epistemic possibilities.

6. Country case studies: Examining experience in South Africa, Kenya, and Ghana

The tensions between identity, authority, and epistemic plurality are not merely speculative. They are visible in actual struggles across African universities, where debates over curriculum reform, student activism, and institutional transformation have taken center stage. Examining the experiences of South Africa, Kenya, and Ghana together illustrates both the challenges and the possibilities of pursuing decolonization within universities.

South Africa offers perhaps the clearest instance, with the RhodesMustFall and FeesMustFall movements of 2015-2016 sparking a global conversation about decolonization. Students called not only for affordable education but also for the removal of colonial symbols and the incorporation of African epistemologies into curricula (Habib, 2019). Although some progress has been made, critics such as Jansen maintain that much of the movement devolved into identity-driven politics, with limited long-term curricular restructuring (Jansen, 2017: 56-59). Mbembe, by contrast, insists that these movements effectively exposed the Eurocentric norms underlying South African universities and compelled institutions to confront the plurality of epistemic voices (Mbembe, 2015).

In Kenya, the struggle has taken a somewhat different form. Here, the central tension lies in reconciling global academic standing with decolonial imperatives. Universities such as the University of Nairobi have adopted reforms aimed at “Africanizing” curricula while still maintaining links to global accreditation standards (Zezeza, 2016). Scholars such as Henry Odera Oruka have long called for the retrieval of indigenous philosophy through Sage Philosophy, seeking to validate indigenous thought as legitimate rational discourse (Oruka, 1991). More recently, Kipkoech (2024) finds that debates in Kenyan universities continue to focus on whether this retrieval represents genuine epistemic development or a symbolic gesture

that leaves structural disparities intact, given that indigenous knowledge remains largely confined to lower levels of the education system rather than integrated at university level.

Ghana presents another instructive example. The University of Ghana, Legon, has experimented with African Studies as a required foundational course for undergraduates, aimed at cultivating a sense of historical and cultural grounding (Ampofo, 2008: 330-333). Nonetheless, faculty debates reveal a tension between promoting African epistemologies and ensuring that students remain competitive in the global academic arena. Kwame Gyekye and Kwasi Wiredu's earlier calls for conceptual decolonization in philosophy demonstrate the possibilities of a thoughtful engagement with both African and Western traditions, though more recent scholars warn against treating this balance as a straightforward synthesis (Wiredu, 1996: 20-23; Gyekye, 1997: 45-47; Inusah and Quansah, 2023: 61-65). In addition, as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o has argued, language policy, which continues to privilege English over African languages, remains an unresolved obstacle to epistemic plurality (Thiong'o, 1986: 11-13).

Given these, these cases show that decolonization is neither uniform nor linear. South Africa centers on the politics of student identity and activism; Kenya illustrates the problem of epistemic recovery under neoliberal pressures; and Ghana reveals the challenges of institutionalizing decolonial reform in curriculum and language policy. What unites them is a shared pursuit of an epistemic model that respects plurality while avoiding both Eurocentrism and an uncritical Afrocentrism. These case studies underline the need for an ethical-epistemic framework that treats decolonization as a process of discussion, negotiation, and transformation, rather than as a one-off replacement of content.

Examined side by side, the three cases also reveal a common structural pattern that the ethical-epistemic model developed below must address. In each country, identity-based demands, whether expressed as student activism, indigenous philosophical recovery, or curricular Africanization, achieved real institutional attention only when they were accompanied by sustained dialogue with existing academic standards, rather than by an outright rejection of them. Where this dialogue was absent or short-lived, as Jansen observes of aspects of the South African case, reform stalled at the symbolic level. Where it was sustained, as in Ghana's incremental curriculum experiments, it produced more durable institutional change, even if slower and more contested. This pattern suggests that epistemic plurality and academic rigor are not opposed poles to be traded off against each other, but conditions that must be pursued together if decolonization is to move beyond protest into lasting institutional transformation. It

is this insight, distilled from the three cases, that grounds the model proposed in the following section.

7. Ethical-epistemic model for decolonization

The foregoing discussion has shown that decolonization in African universities cannot be reduced to either an identity-based claim to authority or an abstract defense of universal values. Both approaches, pursued in isolation, fail to grasp the ethical and epistemic stakes of the debate. What is needed is a model that upholds the dignity of historically marginalized voices while also protecting the epistemic integrity of the academy. This section proposes such a model, here termed the ethical-epistemic model of decolonization.

Fundamentally, this model rests on two complementary values: epistemic humility and dialogical responsibility. Epistemic humility acknowledges that no single perspective, whether grounded in identity, disciplinary expertise, or institutional power, can claim exhaustive authority over truth. This value requires all participants in the decolonial process to remain attentive to their own fallibility and the partiality of their perspectives (Code, 2006: 45-48). Such humility guards against the excesses of relativism on the one hand and epistemic authoritarianism on the other. Epistemic humility is not merely an abstract disposition; it has concrete implications for how knowledge claims are evaluated in practice. Consider, for example, a biomedical researcher studying a plant remedy long used by traditional healers to treat a particular ailment. An arrogant epistemic stance would dismiss the healers' knowledge outright as mere superstition until it has been repackaged and "validated" through Western clinical trials, treating indigenous classification systems as raw data rather than as a form of knowledge in its own right.

Epistemic humility, by contrast, would lead the researcher to recognize that generations of careful observation may have identified ecological relationships, dosages, or contraindications that a first clinical trial could easily miss, and to treat the healers as co-inquirers rather than mere informants. José Medina (2013: 42) captures this distinction well, arguing that epistemic humility functions as a virtue precisely because it counters the arrogance and closed-mindedness that lead privileged knowers to dismiss unfamiliar perspectives without serious engagement, while equally guarding against an uncritical reversal in which every claim, regardless of scrutiny, is granted equal authority. Applied to the university, the same posture would require a curriculum committee revising a philosophy syllabus to engage seriously with Akan or Yoruba conceptions of personhood as philosophy in their own right, rather than treating

them as cultural artefacts to be studied from the outside by a discipline whose Western categories remain unquestioned. In each case, epistemic humility does not require abandoning standards of evidence or argument; it requires recognizing that those standards themselves must remain open to correction from perspectives that have been historically excluded from shaping them.

Dialogical responsibility foregrounds the duty to remain open to reasoned exchange across contested identities and knowledge claims. It stresses the ethical obligation of academics and institutions to foster spaces of inclusive engagement. Rather than favoring specific voices a priori, this value calls for processes that allow diverse epistemic positions, indigenous knowledge systems, critical traditions, and international scholarship, to meet one another in discussion (Santos, 2014: 188-190). It is in this dialogical encounter, rather than in exclusion or one-sided imposition, that the transformative possibility of decolonization depends.

Dialogical responsibility is best understood through its practical demands rather than as an abstract ideal. Consider a university curriculum committee tasked with revising an introductory course following student calls for decolonization. A one-sided imposition would take one of two forms: either the committee defers entirely to disciplinary convention and treats the students' demands as a public-relations problem to be managed, or it defers entirely to the loudest activist voices and rewrites the syllabus without engaging the substance of their claims. Dialogical responsibility requires neither. It obliges the committee to convene students, faculty, and where relevant indigenous knowledge holders as co-investigators in an actual exchange, each accountable to the others for the reasons behind their claims, rather than as parties to be placated or overridden. This is close to what Paulo Freire (1970) called "problem-posing education," in which teacher and student jointly examine the world as co-investigators, in contrast to a "banking" model in which knowledge simply flows one way from an authority to a passive recipient. Extended to the university as a whole, this means that indigenous knowledge holders invited into a curriculum review are treated as interlocutors whose claims must be engaged and, where warranted, contested, not merely as sources of "local content" to be inserted into an otherwise unchanged syllabus. Dialogical responsibility, understood this way, does not guarantee agreement; it guarantees only that disagreement takes the form of genuine exchange rather than silence, dismissal, or capitulation.

In practice, the ethical-epistemic model can be operationalized in three ways. First, curricular reform should be guided not by the wholesale elimination of Western thought, but by its critical

repositioning alongside African academic traditions and Global South epistemologies (Mitova, 2020: 195-198). Second, institutional governance should establish mechanisms for shared authority between faculty, students, and communities, ensuring that decisions about knowledge construction are genuinely participatory (Jansen and Walters, 2022). Third, research practice should move towards partnership with indigenous perspectives, recognizing indigenous contributions as legitimate bases of knowledge while still subjecting them to critical analysis in dialogue with other traditions.

These three measures are not merely aspirational; they are designed to respond directly to the institutional barriers already documented in this paper's case studies. Jansen's own research found that decolonization reforms typically stall not from a lack of goodwill but from an absence of what he calls a "theory of change": senate committees draft reports, resources are allocated for symposia, and then the political pressure passes, leaving the institutional curriculum untouched (Jansen, 2023: 152-154). The three measures proposed here are constructed precisely to close that gap. Curricular repositioning (the first measure) gives reform a substantive content beyond symbolic gestures, so that it cannot be satisfied by cosmetic changes such as adding a handful of African authors to an otherwise unchanged reading list. Shared institutional authority (the second measure) addresses the problem of momentum directly: where decolonization initiatives depend entirely on the goodwill of a single vice-chancellor or the urgency of a protest cycle, they collapse once that pressure lifts; embedding shared authority in governance structures, rather than in a temporary committee, is what allows reform to outlast the moment that produced it.

Partnership with indigenous knowledge holders (the third measure) closes the remaining gap between symbolic recognition and epistemic substance, ensuring that indigenous contributions shape the curriculum's content rather than merely decorating its margins. Taken individually, each measure could be dismissed as insufficient on its own; taken together, they form a structure in which content, governance, and epistemic partnership reinforce one another, which is precisely what the case studies in this paper show is missing when decolonization efforts fail to outlast their initial moment of protest.

In proposing this model, the aim is not to resolve every tension inherent in the decolonization project, but to offer a conceptual orientation that allows such tensions to become productive rather than paralyzing. By holding together, the ethical call for recognition with the epistemic demand for justification, African universities can move beyond the impasse between identity-

based authority and universalist evaluation (Gordon, 2022: 120-123). Understood in this way, the struggle for voice becomes less about who is entitled to speak and more about how different voices can speak with one another in the collective task of reimagining knowledge.

A possibly objection here is that this model, whatever its appeal, does no real work: if the model simply asks both sides to be humble and to keep talking, it risks becoming a way of avoiding hard choices rather than making them. This objection misreads what the model is for. It is not a decision procedure that tells a curriculum committee in advance which claims to accept; it is a standard against which competing claims can be tested and, where necessary, adjudicated. Return to the case, discussed earlier, of a student movement demanding the wholesale removal of a discipline's canonical texts on the grounds that they are colonial impositions. Judged by identity-based authority alone, the demand's legitimacy rests on the identity of those making it. Judged by universalist evaluation alone, the demand can be dismissed without engaging its substance at all.

The ethical-epistemic model requires something harder of both sides: the students must offer reasons, not only standing, for why specific texts obstruct rather than merely offend, and the discipline must be prepared to actually revise its canon where those reasons hold, rather than treating "rigor" as a permanent shield against change. This is adjudication, not evasion, and it is precisely because the model forces both sides to do this work that it can distinguish a demand grounded in a substantive epistemic grievance from one that is not, a distinction that neither identity-based authority nor universalist evaluation, taken alone, is equipped to draw. Lewis Gordon's account of the "disciplinary decadence" that results when a field defends its boundaries reflexively rather than in response to reasoned challenge is instructive here (Gordon, 2022: 120-123): it names exactly the failure mode the model is designed to prevent on the side of the university, just as identity essentialism, discussed earlier in this paper, names the corresponding failure mode on the side of the activist demand.

8. Conclusion

The struggle over decolonization in African higher education is, ultimately, a struggle over authority in knowledge, that is, over who speaks, who is heard, and on what grounds. Identity-based claims to authority foreground histories of silencing, but they cannot, by themselves, withstand the demands of rigorous scholarship. Abstract universalism, on the other hand, risks reproducing exclusion if it ignores colonial histories. The ethical-epistemic model proposed here reconciles this tension by combining epistemic humility, dialogical responsibility, and the

recognition of a plurality of voices. Decolonization thus becomes a continuing negotiation, one that maintains rigor while widening participation. The task, at this point, is not to substitute one orthodoxy for another, but to build a dialogical academy in which multiple traditions can contest, correct, and learn from one another. In this approach, plurality is not a threat to truth but its very condition.

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