Chapter 1

Fighting for Relevance:
The Revitalization of African Knowledge in the Learning Sphere in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

South Africa's recent higher education protests around fees and decolonizing institutions have shone a spotlight on important issues and have inspired global discussion. We witnessed similar resistance during apartheid, where African languages and ideas were limited. The educational space was the most affected by clashes between languages and ideas; we saw this in the prioritizing of English and Afrikaans over indigenous African languages and the prioritizing of Western medicine, literature, arts, culture, and science over African ones. This chapter will show how formal education and knowledge production in South Africa has been used as a tool to repress Black people, while discrediting their knowledge systems. This discussion will draw from impepho, which is rejected by Christians because its main use is for communicating with ancestors. The herb has many other medicinal uses, but it is still rejected. African practices are used and revitalized by AIC like the Shembe Church and revolutionary movements like FMF.

INTRODUCTION

African knowledge systems, science, philosophy and culture have been sidelined from mainstream educational institutions. African inventions and uses have largely been written out of history and left out of school syllabuses. This has been done

through the use and abuse of power; Western settlers decided what information was valuable and should be taught. Historically the driving factor has been the Western mission church, which pushed the agenda of the inferiority of Africans and alienated people from their culture for colonial and capitalistic reasons. The "othering" and sidelining of all that is African was perpetuated through vulgar and ethnocentric racism, which Frantz Fanon discusses as having taken place in stages. Bantu Biko believes that this racism has gone as far as instilling self-hatred in black Africans, an issue that has been a huge hurdle in South Africa's development and in the development of black identity as a whole.

Racism as a controlling tool worked its way into schools and was used to destabilize any system that challenged the Western Christian Church, capitalism or white privilege. Historically this can be seen through the repression of African Independent Churches like the Shembe Church, where missionaries and the state used educational systems and the media to push false propaganda, which put members at odds with schools and earned members the unfair reputation of being backward and uneducated.

The 1976 and more recent #FeesMustFall student protests further showed the oppression directed at black students, African knowledge systems and culture. Students have called for decolonized education that puts more relatable African ideas first, in the hope of restoring cultural identity and dealing with developmental challenges. Indigenous knowledge, like the uses of important herbs like Helichrysum or *impepho*, remain largely unutilized, despite its functions, accessibility and medical benefits. This chapter will discuss these themes while highlighting the benefits and challenges to decolonizing educational institutions and using indigenous knowledge as a tool to do so.

METHODOLOGY

The discussion on decolonization and the relevance of indigenous knowledge is not one that should only be explored on a curriculum or content level. We should be mindful of it even in teaching methodologies and how we conduct research and produce knowledge. This research will use qualitative methods. Qualitative research is unstructured, flexible and relaxed and aims to describe and explain a situation, phenomenon, problem or event (Mason, 1994: 101). This method, while Western, does in some ways lead us closer to decoloniality because it gives the participants room to shape the narrative and the direction the research should take and allows for the inclusion of rich history and background the researcher might have overlooked. It is important to consider the historical background of the research topic, people's opinions of and responses to issues and detailed descriptions of research issues

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