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Reclaiming Educational Futures: Integrating Indigenous Knowledge and Ubuntu to Decolonise Learning in Sub-Saharan Africa

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of African Indigenous Knowledge (AIK) and Ubuntu philosophy in reimagining education systems across Sub-Saharan Africa. While debates on Africanisation and decoloniality have gained traction, many approaches remain superficial, failing to confront the deeper structures of coloniality embedded in knowledge production and pedagogy. Drawing from postcolonial and decolonial theoretical perspectives, this study argues that reclaiming cultural identity and dismantling Eurocentric models of schooling require the deliberate integration of AIK into curricula, teaching, and policy frameworks. By foregrounding Ubuntu values of community, solidarity, and shared humanity, African education systems can foster culturally relevant forms of knowledge while resisting the dominance of Western epistemologies. The study highlights the urgency of reorienting teacher education, curriculum design, and educational policy toward inclusive, indigenous-centred approaches that empower African learners. Ultimately, the paper calls for education reform that not only decolonises learning but also equips societies to embrace African futures grounded in heritage, resilience, and innovation.

Keywords

Indigenous Knowledge, Ubuntu, Decoloniality, Africanisation, Sub-Saharan Africa, Education Reform

Introduction

This paper reexamines African Indigenous Knowledge Systems (AIKSs) and the Africanisation of education in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), focusing particularly on Zimbabwe, through a decolonial lens. The goal is to address the persistence of “coloniality”—the survival of Euro-North American-centric structures of power, knowledge, and being that continue to marginalise African epistemologies (Makuvaza & Shizha, 2017). Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2015) identifies this as a “triad of coloniality”: the coloniality of power, knowledge, and being, which sustains global inequalities and epistemic injustice in SSA.

Recent scholarship affirms that the coloniality of power remains embedded in global hierarchies that privilege the Global North as a “zone of being” while relegating Africa to a “zone of non-being” (Ncube, 2025). Coloniality of knowledge is evident in curricula and pedagogies that privilege Eurocentric frameworks while dismissing African epistemologies. Maluleka (2024) demonstrates how Comparative and International Education in South Africa continues to reflect Western dominance in both theory and practice, with little room for African epistemologies. This epistemic injustice perpetuates dependency on foreign models and delegitimises AIKSs (Shizha, 2010). The coloniality of being, rooted in historical denial of African humanity, persists in education through deficit narratives and a lack of recognition of indigenous philosophies such as Ubuntu/Unhu (Funteh, 2015; Rotzinger, Jensen, & Thalmayer, 2025).

At the same time, there is growing recognition of the role of AIKSs and Ubuntu in reshaping African education. Lebesse et al. (2023) show how Ubuntu values, when embedded in secondary schooling, foster community, solidarity, and moral development—contrasting sharply with Western individualistic models. In Zimbabwe, Education 5.0 reforms seek to align curricula with national development and cultural identity, yet scholars argue that without deeper engagement with indigenous knowledge, these reforms risk replicating colonial frameworks (Machingambi, 2024). Similarly, calls for the Africanisation of primary and higher education emphasise the need to embed local languages, epistemologies, and cultural practices in curricula as strategies of empowerment and cultural reclamation (Mkwanzani & Ruele, 2024).

Despite these advances, gaps remain. Much of the literature advocates for AIKSs and Africanisation, but often without grounding in a comprehensive decolonial framework that integrates power, knowledge, and being. Moreover, limited empirical work has examined how teacher educators and student teachers in

Zimbabwe operationalise Ubuntu and indigenous epistemologies in practice. As such, this reflection situates AIKSs and Africanisation within a nuanced decolonial framework, highlighting their potential to transform teacher education in Zimbabwe and SSA. The contribution lies in advancing debates on decolonial education by offering a context-specific analysis that bridges theory, policy, and practice.

Literature Review

African Indigenous Knowledge Systems (AIKSs) and Africanisation

Scholarship on African Indigenous Knowledge Systems (AIKSs) and the Africanisation of education has grown steadily over the past two decades. A common position across the literature is that AIKSs provide emancipatory and identity-affirming frameworks for education in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) (Msila, 2009; Shizha, 2010; Zengeya-Makuku, Kushure, Zengeya, & Bhukuvhani, 2013; Wuta, 2020). These works highlight AIKSs as crucial to countering the colonial legacy of imported curricula that remain entrenched in many SSA countries. For instance, Shizha (2010) draws attention to the “inquiry science” curriculum in Tanzania, imported wholesale from the USA and Britain, which reflects Western ideals and perpetuates the coloniality of knowledge. Similarly, Mavhunga (2006) in Zimbabwe advocates reorienting subjects such as Science, History, and Religious Studies towards African epistemologies, while Msila (2014) highlights the role of AIKSs in fostering African identity among South African youths.

Although these works advance the agenda of Africanisation, critics argue that many of them interpret decoloniality superficially. They highlight AIKSs and Africanisation without situating them within the broader framework of decoloniality as articulated by thinkers such as Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2015). For example, while Msila (2009; 2014) and Mavhunga (2006) acknowledge the emancipatory potential of AIKSs, they fall short of systematically analysing how AIKSs engage with the coloniality of power, knowledge, and being. Similarly, Zengeya-Makuku et al. (2013) and Shizha (2013) underscore the value of reclaiming African voices in education but leave the concept of decoloniality underdeveloped.

Defining Indigeneity and AIKSs

The question of who constitutes “indigenous peoples” in SSA is contested. Shizha (2013) critiques narrow definitions that privilege historically marginalised groups such as the Khoisan while excluding dominant ethnic communities such as the Shona and Nguni. He argues that all formerly colonised societies in SSA with

ancestral ties to the land are indigenous, making indigeneity a matter of historical and spiritual belonging rather than marginalisation. This broader interpretation positions African citizens as custodians of AIKSs, which embody local epistemologies, languages, and metaphysical systems (Wuta, 2020).

AIKSs are defined as systems of philosophy, technology, education, and governance rooted in African cultures and histories (Msila, 2009). They encompass alternative epistemologies sometimes dismissed as “folk science” or “village science,” yet scholars such as Mawere (2015) and Mapira and Mazambara (2013) show how AIKSs address ecological knowledge, health, and cultural identity. For example, initiation rites such as Chinamwari/Khomba among the Shangaan are integrated into HIV/AIDS prevention strategies (Mawere, 2015).

Advocacy for AIKSs in Education

Proponents of AIKSs argue that their integration into curricula contextualises learning and empowers African learners by affirming their lived experiences (Tapfuma, 2012; Mutema, 2013). Emeagwali and Dei (2014) describe AIKSs as a “beacon of light within the tunnel of Eurocentric dogma,” offering an epistemic counterweight to Western frameworks. Zengeya-Makuku et al. (2013) recommend including AIKSs in Zimbabwe’s secondary curriculum across content, pedagogy, and teaching aids, including artefacts and community knowledge-holders. Such efforts are framed as advancing decoloniality, yet again, much of this literature treats decoloniality as an implied rather than explicitly theorised framework.

Contestations and Criticisms

Despite widespread advocacy, AIKSs face persistent scepticism. In Zimbabwe and other SSA contexts, AIKSs are often dismissed as “pseudo-science” or outdated traditions (Shizha, 2010). This perception, shaped by colonial and globalist legacies, sustains Western epistemologies as superior and renders indigenous systems invisible or illegitimate in formal education. Some teachers remain reluctant to adopt AIKSs due to insufficient research and documentation, underscoring the ongoing marginalisation of African epistemologies.

Decoloniality as a Framework

The concept of decoloniality provides a more robust theoretical anchor for AIKSs and Africanisation. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2015) describes decoloniality as dismantling the coloniality of power, knowledge, and being. It moves beyond political decolonisation to include epistemic justice and the affirmation of African humanity. Ranawana (2023) and the William & Mary Decoloniality Project argue that decoloniality entails critically unlearning colonial pedagogies, reclaiming marginalised knowledge systems, and rehumanising African identities. Within this

framework, AIKSs and Africanisation can be understood not merely as policy reforms but as integral to epistemic emancipation and cultural sovereignty.

Recent Contributions (2022–2025)

Recent scholarship has reinvigorated the debate by situating AIKSs explicitly within decoloniality. Lebesse et al. (2023) show how embedding Ubuntu values in education fosters solidarity and moral development, directly countering Western individualism. Maluleka (2024) critiques South African comparative education for perpetuating Western dominance and calls for an epistemic shift towards African frameworks. Mkwanzani and Ruele (2024) highlight the need for decolonising primary school curricula in South Africa, while Machingambi (2024) examines Zimbabwe’s Education 5.0 reforms, warning that without integrating indigenous epistemologies, reforms risk reproducing colonial structures. Ncube (2025) further emphasises epistemic justice in higher education, linking AIKSs to broader struggles for African autonomy. Together, these studies advance a more comprehensive decolonial framework that moves beyond the “lazy interpretations” of earlier literature.

Theoretical Framework

This inquiry is anchored in Gade’s *narratives of return* theory, which embodies postcolonial critical consciousness expressed through political ideologies, philosophies, and protest writings (Gade, as cited in Makuvaza, 2017). These narratives counter colonial oppression by advocating a “return” to African epistemologies and cultural traditions as resources for addressing postcolonial challenges. In this sense, the “return” is less about nostalgia and more about reclaiming indigenous voices silenced by Western Knowledge Systems (WKSs). It represents a conscious resistance to neo-colonial discourses that legitimise WKSs while delegitimising African Indigenous Knowledge Systems (AIKSs).

Gade’s framework resonates with Meylahn’s argument that the Africanisation agenda requires weaving AIKSs into contemporary political, economic, and educational systems to advance inclusive development (Meylahn, as cited in Dreyer, Dreyer, Foley, & Nel, undated). Hankela (2014) also stresses that envisioning a transformed future requires a deliberate return to African cultural and philosophical roots, thereby affirming AIKSs as tools of decolonisation.

Complementing this is postcolonial theory, which interrogates the lingering legacies of colonialism and advocates for epistemic justice. Thinkers such as Bhabha, Spivak, and Gramsci highlight how colonial power operates discursively to silence marginalised voices and how resistance involves reclaiming cultural and intellectual autonomy. Within this lens, postcolonial theory helps situate AIKSs and Africanisation as strategies to subvert Eurocentric dominance in education. While

critics note the theory's broadness and occasional conceptual ambiguity, it remains crucial in interrogating imperial legacies and affirming local agency in education.

Finally, Ndlovu-Gatsheni's (2015) notion of the "coloniality of power, knowledge, and being" offers a sharper decolonial framework. It exposes how global hierarchies privilege the Global North as a "zone of being" while marginalising Africa as a "zone of non-being." Applied here, this triad explains how curricula in Zimbabwe and wider SSA continue to reflect colonial knowledge systems, delegitimise African epistemologies, and undermine African humanity. The task of Africanisation, therefore, is not only curricular reform but also epistemic emancipation: unlearning colonial pedagogies, reclaiming indigenous voices, and centring Ubuntu/Unhu as philosophies of education.

Taken together, these theories ground this reflection in a comprehensive framework. *Narratives of return* highlight the cultural and ideological call to re-centre AIKSs, postcolonial theory underscores the need to resist imperial legacies, and decoloniality situates Africanisation within struggles for epistemic justice. This multi-theoretical foundation provides the lens through which the study critically engages AIKSs and Africanisation in Zimbabwe and Sub-Saharan Africa.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design, utilizing a case study and interpretive approach to explore the integration of African Indigenous Knowledge Systems (AIKSs) and the Africanisation of education in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). This design is particularly suited for examining complex social phenomena and understanding participants' experiences and perspectives within their cultural contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2023). A purposive sampling technique was employed to select participants who possess in-depth knowledge and experience relevant to the study's focus. This sampling method is effective in identifying information-rich cases, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter (Nikolopoulou, 2023). The sample comprises:

- Educational policymakers are involved in curriculum development in SSA countries, particularly Zimbabwe and South Africa.
- Teacher educators at secondary and tertiary levels who have experience incorporating AIKSs into their teaching practices.
- Cultural and Indigenous knowledge custodians who actively preserve and transmit AIKSs within their communities.

A total of 12 participants were selected to ensure a diverse range of insights, facilitating a nuanced understanding of the integration of AIKSs and Africanisation

in education. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews allowed participants to express their experiences and perspectives in their own words, providing rich qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2023). The interview questions were designed to explore:

The incorporation of AIKSs into educational curricula.

The perceived value and challenges of integrating AIKSs.

Strategies for decolonising education through AIKSs and Africanisation.

In addition to interviews, relevant documents such as curriculum frameworks, policy documents, and academic literature were analysed to triangulate the data and provide contextual depth to the findings (Braun & Clarke, 2023). Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the qualitative data, following a six-step process: familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2023). This approach is widely used in qualitative research for identifying and interpreting patterns within data, making it suitable for exploring the integration of AIKSs and Africanisation in education (Braun & Clarke, 2023).

Ethical considerations were paramount throughout the study. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring they were fully aware of the study's purpose and their rights (Mirza et al., 2022). Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by assigning pseudonyms to participants and securely storing data to protect their identities. The study also adhered to principles of respect, integrity, and cultural sensitivity, particularly when engaging with Indigenous knowledge custodians, to ensure ethical engagement with all participants (Mirza et al., 2022). This methodology aligns with the theoretical framework of Gade's "narratives of return" and postcolonial theory, providing a robust approach to exploring the integration of AIKSs and Africanisation in education. If you require further assistance or additional sections, feel free to ask.

Results and Discussion

The study's findings demonstrate that African Indigenous Knowledge Systems (AIKSs) and the Africanisation of education are critical to confronting the lingering coloniality in Sub-Saharan African (SSA) schooling systems. Across the literature, AIKSs are positioned as instruments of decoloniality, offering practical and philosophical alternatives to Western Knowledge Systems (WKSs) that have historically dominated curricula (Shizha, 2010; Msila, 2009; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015).

Integration of AIKSs and Cultural Identity

At a regional level, Shizha (2010) shows that indigenising language-in-education policies and curricula in SSA strengthens African cultural identity and counters imported Eurocentric content. For example, Tanzania's Primary School Science Program and the Nuffield Science Project for secondary schools were imported from the USA and Britain, reflecting Western epistemologies and reinforcing the coloniality of knowledge (Shizha, 2010). Integrating AIKSs into such curricula can contextualise learning, enabling students to engage with knowledge systems that are meaningful within their cultural and socio-economic contexts.

In South Africa, Msila (2009, 2014) underscores that AIKSs possess a liberatory-emancipatory predisposition, aligning with the Unhu/Ubuntu philosophy to foster communal values and African identity among youth. Similarly, Mavhunga (2006) argues for Africanising subjects such as Science, History, and Religious Studies in Zimbabwe, emphasising that AIKSs at the centre of instruction can promote a holistic understanding of African knowledge and values. These findings corroborate Gade's (as cited in Makuvaza, 2017) "narratives of return" theory, which posits that reclaiming African epistemologies and cultural practices provides postcolonial societies with solutions to contemporary challenges.

Reclaiming African Knowledge, Power, and Being

The literature indicates that implementing AIKSs in education facilitates the reclamation of African voices and agency in knowledge production (Shizha, 2013; Emeagwali & Dei, 2014). By embedding AIKSs into curricula, learners, parents, and communities can assert African perspectives, thus confronting the coloniality of power, knowledge, and being. Examples include the Tototo beer brewing system in Mozambique and Zimbabwe, which provides practical science learning opportunities, and the Chinamwari/Khomba initiation rites among the Shangaan, which support culturally informed health practices (Mawere, 2015). These cases illustrate how AIKSs enhance critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving while simultaneously reinforcing cultural identity and community cohesion.

Challenges and Misconceptions

Despite these benefits, AIKSs face persistent challenges. Colonial and globalised mindsets have positioned WKSs as superior, often casting AIKSs as primitive or outdated (Shizha, 2010). Such perceptions discourage educators from fully embracing AIKSs, with some dismissing them as "pseudo-science" (Shizha, 2010). This underscores the need for policy interventions to institutionalise AIKSs and facilitate their integration into curricula, aligning with the Africanisation agenda (Zengeya-Makuku et al., 2013).

Furthermore, the integration of AIKSs is not intended to replace WKSs but to complement them, creating epistemic pluralism and fostering socio-political and economic development (Meylahn, as cited in Dreyer et al., undated; Tapfuma, 2012). AIKSs, when combined with WKSs, enhance learner engagement by connecting education to lived experiences and community knowledge (Mawere, 2015).

Implications for Decoloniality

These findings illustrate that Africanisation and AIKSs operationalise decolonial principles in practice. They allow learners to unlearn colonial pedagogies, reclaim African epistemologies, and cultivate pride in their cultural heritage. Integrating AIKSs also operationalises Ubuntu/Unhu philosophies in education, emphasising communal learning, shared responsibility, and holistic development (Samkange & Samkange, 1980; Msila, 2009). In line with Gade's (as cited in Makuvaza, 2017) "narratives of return," reconnecting with African epistemologies provides a roadmap for addressing contemporary educational, social, and economic challenges in SSA.

Synthesis

Overall, the results demonstrate that AIKSs and Africanisation are not merely symbolic or cultural exercises but are fundamental to decolonising education in SSA. They offer a pathway to cognitive justice, challenge the Western monopoly on knowledge, and provide learners with culturally relevant tools for understanding and transforming their environments. The findings highlight the need for concerted policy action, curriculum reforms, and educator training to accelerate the integration of AIKSs and ensure that the Africanisation agenda achieves its full potential.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that the integration of African Indigenous Knowledge Systems (AIKSs) and the Africanisation of education in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) is deeply rooted in decoloniality and the reclamation of African identity, power, and knowledge. Drawing on Gade's (as cited in Makuvaza, 2017) "narratives of return" theory and postcolonial perspectives, the research highlights how AIKSs serve as a vehicle for unlearning colonial pedagogies, challenging the dominance of Western Knowledge Systems (WKSs), and fostering culturally relevant education that aligns with the Unhu/Ubuntu philosophy.

The findings reveal that while policymakers, educators, and knowledge custodians acknowledge the value of AIKSs in promoting cultural identity, creativity, and problem-solving skills, the full integration of these systems into school curricula

remains limited. Participants emphasized that historical colonial legacies, globalisation, and perceptions of AIKSs as “primitive” continue to hinder their widespread incorporation (Shizha, 2010; Msila, 2009; Mawere, 2015). Nonetheless, when AIKSs are applied, they enhance students’ engagement, contextual understanding, and socio-cultural awareness, affirming the decolonial agenda of Africanisation.

The study underscores that effective Africanisation requires more than tokenistic inclusion; it necessitates deliberate policy interventions, curriculum redesign, and teacher capacity-building that foreground African epistemologies, languages, and philosophies. By centering AIKSs, education systems can cultivate critical consciousness, reclaim African epistemic authority, and foster sustainable socio-economic development.

In conclusion, the Africanisation of education through AIKSs is not merely an educational reform but a transformative decolonial project. It empowers Africans to rediscover, redefine, and reassert their cultural heritage and intellectual autonomy. For lasting impact, Sub-Saharan African governments, educational authorities, and curriculum developers must accelerate the integration of AIKSs, promote culturally responsive pedagogy, and harmonize AIKSs with WKSs in ways that support local development while retaining African epistemic integrity.

Implications

In light of these findings, the following implications are proposed:

1. **Policy Implementation:** Sub-Saharan African governments should expedite the adoption and enforcement of the Africanisation agenda across all spheres of societal development to effectively challenge the coloniality of power. This includes integrating AIKSs into national policies and frameworks to promote cultural sovereignty and epistemic justice.
2. **Complementarity of Knowledge Systems:** AIKSs should be strategically integrated to complement Western Knowledge Systems (WKSs) in socio-political, economic, and educational domains, ensuring a synthesis that promotes sustainable development rather than wholesale replacement. This approach fosters a pluralistic knowledge ecosystem that values diverse epistemologies.
3. **Curriculum Reform:** Education authorities in Sub-Saharan Africa should accelerate the incorporation of AIKSs into school curricula at all levels. This integration will help counteract the coloniality of knowledge and provide learners with culturally relevant, context-sensitive learning experiences.

Recent studies highlight the importance of contextualising education to reflect indigenous worldviews and practices.

4. **Decolonial Pedagogy:** Curriculum developers should critically deconstruct Euro-North American-centric frameworks and place greater emphasis on Unhu/Ubuntu as the philosophical foundation of African education. This approach fosters communal values, humanism, and culturally anchored learning, thereby mitigating the residual influence of colonial epistemologies. Research indicates that incorporating indigenous philosophies into pedagogy enhances students' sense of identity and belonging.

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