# The 7th Annual Stephen Ellis Lecture

African Studies Centre Leiden (ASCL)

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## Decolonizing the Mind?

## *Stadig oor die klippers*

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Decolonizing the Mind?

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1. We are here to honour one of the greatest scholars of African Studies who left an indelible mark on African scholarship in subjects ranging from organized crime in Nigeria to the politics of exile South Africa. From his early years Africa was for Stephen Ellis a personal and professional commitment. At the age of 18 he was a teacher in Cameron and his doctoral work (published as a famous book) was on Madagascar—where he also served as a lecturer, at the University of Madagascar. It was of course a matter of great pride for many South Africans who know his work, that Stephen was appointed Desmond Tutu Professor at the Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam.

2. No story of Stephen can be complete without acknowledging his dear wife, friend, and intellectual partner in African Studies, Professor Gerrie te Haar, a world-renowned expert in her own right on religious traditions in Africa. One of their famous books, done jointly, is of course *Worlds of power: Religious thought and political practice in Africa*. I would like to thank Gerrie for the enormous privilege of being able to deliver this 7th Stephen Ellis Lecture at this renowned centre for African Studies in the world today.

3. I have a confession to make. I changed my topic. I was going to speak about the post-apartheid education legacy exposed (unmasked) by COVID-19, but that is what happens when organizers ask me for a title months before I could think about the Lecture. So bear with me, please, and my apologies if you came because of the abstract; happy to send you

that paper. What I will deliver tonight, though, has to do with another pressing concern in the present, and that is the re-awakening of decolonisation in the public consciousness from Europe to North America and of course, South Africa.

4. In this respect I want to do a shout-out to ASC Leiden for the timeliness of next month's *Africa 2020 Conference: Africa Knows*! It is also a courageous act, to ask of the Netherlands itself, about its own complicities in the colonial project and the enduring legacies of that history within the present as far as the politics of knowledge (my theme for the evening) is concerned.

5. I hold as my reference point Stephen's remarkable Inaugural Lecture of 2009 at VU University of Amsterdam, titled *South Africa and the decolonization of the mind*.

6. But let us take a step back to reflect briefly on two momentous and inter-related events of recent times.

7. The one event (2015) was the singular act of a postgraduate student throwing a bucket of human excrement on the statue of the imperialist CJ Rhodes whose bronze memorial enjoyed prominence on the upper campus of UCT. Weeks later, the statue fell and was removed from campus. That single act of human defiance sparked an intense period of protests across university campuses in SA and inspired decolonization moments in other parts of the world, notably at Oxford University in the UK.

8. The second event (2020) was the extra-judicial murder of George Floyd in Minnesota when a white policeman dug his knee into the soft tissue of the neck of the black man for 7 minutes and 46 seconds; the man died shortly afterwards. That single act of human depravity re-energised the Black Lives Matter movement bringing down confederate statues in the American South, the statue of slaveholders Edward Colston in Bristol and Robert Milligan in London), and the statues of King Leopold II such as the one in Antwerp (Belgium).

9. I want to however limit my focus to the South African moment with decolonisation in 2015 and do a deeper analysis of what happened, why it happened, and what that event might mean for Dutch-South African relationships in research and development.

10. I begin by sharing the results of a five-year study of the decolonization of the curriculum done jointly by myself and a colleague, Dr Cyrill Walters, with a book on the subject hopefully in print in 2021. The focus was on how decolonization was taken up in the curricula of ten South African universities; the title of the book is *The decolonization of knowledge: radical ideas and the settled curriculum*.

11. To begin, South Africa did not represent the classical model of the colonial state, as Stephen Ellis deftly outlined in his Inaugural Address referring to “the pan-African chronology” of transition from colonial rule.

12. The Dutch and British settlers became natives. Since 1910, with Union, South Africa was a self-governing dominion with uneasy ties to the colonial authority but that in 1961 declares itself an independent republic. Just before then, the principal liberation movement, declared through its Freedom Charter (1955) that "South Africa belongs to all who live in it, black and white." There was of course pushback against this flattening role of citizenship. One argument was that South Africa could be described as "colonialism of a special type" (CST)—an "invented expression," says Ellis---while another formulation held that apartheid was simply "a generic form of the colonial state in Africa" (Mamdani). Their analytic efforts notwithstanding, neither CST or the "generic form" arguments carried much weight in the broader public or political consciousness about South African-ness.

13. As a result, South Africa never did raise in its long history of resistance politics the language of decolonization. Protests were bannered as anti-apartheid, never anti-colonial. Education activism came with many resistance labels from alternative education, anti-apartheid education, education for liberation, liberation before education. But never decolonization.

14. It was therefore a complete surprise that in the 2015 protests, *decolonization* would be invoked as the language of resistance on campuses around South Africa. We found three reasons for this. One, decolonization was selected as the antidote to *transformation* which had since the 1990s become the post-apartheid government's language for change. But the country was mired in corruption, deepening inequalities,

and a very real struggle for affordable access to higher education. Transformation did not crack these problems and so decolonization became the *language of replacement*.

15. Two, decolonization invoked a *language of nostalgia*, from times when the threat was more tangible (colonial government) and the solutions much simpler (eject the foreign power) as in the 1960s and 1970s. It did not surprise therefore that the writings of choice among activist students were those of anti-colonial fighters like Fanon (Algeria) and decolonization activists like wa'Thiongo (Kenya).

16. Three, decolonization, at least in its Latin American derivations as decoloniality, gave activists an undiluted *language of lament*. The world was divided into good and evil. The colonizer and the colonized. The global north and the global south. The west and the rest of us. Nothing better characterises this literature than its repetitiveness marked by the recitation of old laments. But they provide a hard line of distinctions---good and evil---that served the political cause.

17. Since decolonization was invoked as primarily a *political* instrument in the student struggles of 2015 onwards, there was relatively little attention to its *educational* consequences i.e. how exactly would the politics of decolonization translate into decolonizing knowledge in universities?

18. Given the overriding focus on decolonization as a political strategy, there was little investment in defining what decolonization could mean for changing curriculum (the encoded form of knowledge) within

universities. As a result, academic teachers made up their own meanings for decolonization.

19. Some saw decolonization as meaning remediation in the form of academic development; others saw it as simply good teaching e.g. fairer assessments or adjustable timetables; and more than a few saw the uses of African examples, here and there, as satisfying the demand for decolonization of knowledge.

20. The crucial point here is that radical interpretations of decolonization that dealt with issues of power, inequality, authority, oppression, and injustice were scuttled in favour of these politics-lite interpretations of a potentially powerful intervention in the curriculum of universities.

21. To be sure, there were academics who did bring more radical interpretations to the curriculum change project but these initiatives existed prior to the rupture of 2015—and existed on the margins of institutional life; we call these enclave curricula.

22. Most academics, however, gave their own meanings to decolonization in ways that fit comfortably with what was within their capacities (remediating knowledge) and within their ideologies (conserving knowledge).

23. With respect to the interpretations of decolonization within their ideological comfort zones, there is the interesting example of indigenous knowledge systems (IKS).

24. Consider a book titled *The decolonization of the curriculum project: The affordances of indigenous knowledge for self-directed learning*. On its cover is the apartheid bushman, now named the San. Its authors mainly from the historically white Afrikaans universities, writing with familiar condescension and paternalism about indigenous actors and constantly drawing firm distinctions between western knowledge (e.g. the individualistic knowledge philosophy of North West University) and the "relational ontology" of the San Code.

25. It is a seductive interpretation of decolonization given the obvious need to recognize, in a more emancipatory context, the suppression of indigenous knowledge such as reflected in fields like ethno-botany or ethno-mathematics. This, however, is something else---the *continuation* of an apartheid epistemology that lay emphasis on the "ethno" --- the racial and ethnic *differences* in the cultural production of knowledge as distinct from white knowledge. In these accounts white knowledge is advanced and indigenous knowledge is singularly presented in primitive forms.

26. There is no reference in these IKS stories to the suppression of indigenous people (let alone earlier genocides) or the exploitation of their knowledge (such as the San deployed by apartheid military intelligence) let alone the indigenous properties of white knowledge or the common bonds of knowledge across racial or ethnic divides. What you have, instead, is a gross romanticization of indigenous knowledge outside of critical readings of their racialized histories, politics, economics, and

anthropologies that subjugated first peoples. This is what someone called "domesticating decolonization" where guilt is relieved, complicity disavowed, and where power relations remain unaddressed.

27. Given these rather shaky starting points, what does decolonization look like in South Africa today? That is, has the curriculum across universities been decolonized? Before I share what we found, another important point needs to be made.

28. When decolonization marched onto South African university campuses in 2015, it seemed as if all the planets were aligned for a powerful impact on institutions and the curriculum in particular. For example:

29. It was a national student protest movement. It had a clear and compelling cause --- decolonize universities in which the composition (mainly white professoriate), content (European dominated), and cultures (institutional culture), it was claimed, were unchanged since the democratic transition of the middle 1990s.

30. It had a university leadership that responded with speed and agility to the demands, setting up Tasks Teams to make sense of decolonization and to present plans for implementing this radical idea. Resources were set aside, seminars and symposia convened, consultations undertaken, and commissioned reports delivered.

31. Five years later, what happened?

32. Not much, really. Our research found that the university curriculum prior to the revolt of the students looks more or less the same today as it did five years ago. The physics curriculum looks the same. The urban planning curriculum has not changed much. The theology curriculum is the same as before.

33. Why?

34. We suggest a few reasons:

- The decolonization moment was primarily a political moment concerned more about broader social discontents about the country as it reflected on campuses such as in the prohibitive costs of higher education and inadequate student accommodation. As a political moment its primary production was in the form of the political spectacle, those routines of protest in South Africa concerned with the dramatic public performances of discontent.

- There was little sustained deliberation on the question of how to achieve deep change in institutions and, in particular, changes to the curriculum. Change, it seems, was supposed to happen by virtue of the sheer force of the moral arguments for decolonization if not the direct pressure of the political activists themselves.

- The political management of the crisis by university leadership was another reason for the poor take-up of decolonization. University leaders would outwit and outwait the student protests and its

politics of spectacle and, as soon as the pressure subsided, returned to what the feminist scholar Sarah Ahmed calls, "institutional as usual." The initial reaction was institutional posturing in response to unprecedented pressure for change.

- The activist agenda did not grapple with the power of institutions to maintain the status quo---the complex set of regulatory agencies that govern knowledge, the bureaucratic processes of institutional compliance with pre-set standards, the approvals regime for sanctioning new curricula (*programs*), and the socialization of mainstream academics within their disciplines.

35. What does this experience of the radical change project mean for the prospects of decolonizing knowledge (curriculum) in universities?

36. There are four implications.

37. That the project of radical curriculum change requires deliberation, leadership, and a long-term strategy for embedding deep changes within institutions

    That the project requires reframing the curriculum change project as a broadly critical approach to change rather than one narrowed down to the limiting language of decolonization. In this view, the hard distinctions of North/South or European/African must be regarded as antiquated and anachronistic for describing cross-border knowledge relationships in the 21st century.

38. That the resuscitation of a 1960s dependency framework view of knowledge and power has two principal limitations.

    - It places Africans in the position of perpetual victims.

    - It misrecognizes the many ways in which research statuses in cross-border collaborations have changed.

39. Three examples will suffice: poverty and cardiovascular diseases research (Mayosi); African mining histories (Phimister); HIV/AIDS and infectious diseases (Karims).

40. What does this mean for the future of Dutch/South African research and development relationships into the future?

41. It means, as Stephen Ellis correctly called it, a *decolonization of the mind* by Europeans as much as by Africans. We need to see each other differently, compose our problems collaboratively, and assume authority for research leadership jointly. The fact that money comes primary from the North (that is a hard, economic reality) should not mean the intellectual subjugation of research or researchers from the South.

42. This means that African (or Asian, Latin American etc.) scholars must be much more assertive in this new era and not subject themselves to self-inflicted wounds using the language of victimhood from a bygone era.

43. And it does mean that European scholars must---and here I given Stephen Ellis the last word---:

> “draw data from outside Europe…respect the authority of thinkers in other traditions…appreciate the ways in which others see the world…[and] cease believing almost instinctively that ideas emanating from Africa must be wrong…This will break the habit of decades, even centuries.”