Stories of decolonising research education and practice: experiences from my Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) research

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ABSTRACT

The need to challenge and disrupt the colonial legacy of research and education in African contexts is an urgent one although voices and experiences of decolonisation in action/practice are still scanty in this context. Drawing from the African oral storytelling tradition where lived experience is extolled as a powerful teaching tool, in this article, I share experiences of how and when I came to align my Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) research to a decolonising agenda. Deeply listening to my research participants was central in challenging me to engage in decolonising research practices and epistemologies. The process of having to explain my research to the participants, in our indigenous language, led me to a journey of re-valuing, recognising, and drawing on indigenous African epistemologies as the foundation for the methods, ethics and methodology for my research. The main lesson from this experience and the major message for researchers and research educators is about the urgent need and responsibility to challenge and disrupt the ongoing colonial thinking and teaching where African indigenous knowledges, languages, ways of knowing, are continuously marginalised, if not erased. Discussions of ongoing colonisation in research education and practice are presented, followed by examples of decolonised African research methods and ethics. A call to action to decolonisation concludes the article.

KEY TERMS: African storytelling, Doctor of Philosophy (PhD), decolonisation, ethics, research

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

There is a troubling thinking that colonisation is a thing of the past implying that there is no need for decolonisation in the current era. However, as this article shall demonstrate and building on what other African authors like Bulhan (2015), Mbembe (2016), Chilisa (2012), Wa Thiong'o (1986) have argued, colonisation is still ongoing and it has gone beyond dispossession of lands and peoples to colonisation of people's minds, their being and knowing. Colonisation continues to manifest in situations where the knowledges, beliefs, worldviews of colonisers continue to be imposed on other societies, consequently devaluing, marginalising, disregarding, eroding the knowledges, beliefs, values, of the colonised.

Colonisation in research practice and education continues to manifest in several ways. First is through the ideology of the colonised which means that the colonised are now their own 'colonisers' whereby they are engaging in perpetuating the devaluation and marginalisation of their own local or indigenous cultures and knowledges by believing and presenting white western knowledges as universal or 'the standard'. Most institutions of learning in Africa are still "westernised" as "all that they aspire to is to become local instantiations of a dominant academic model based on Eurocentric epistemic canon…a canon that attributes truth only to the Western way of knowledge production" ignoring and devaluing other epistemic traditions (Mbembe, 2015, n.p). Therefore, to decolonise in African context is not necessarily about de-westernisation or total rejection of European knowledge traditions but it is about "defining clearly what is at the centre". As Ngugi Wa Thiongo (1986) elaborated, decolonisation is about re-centering, that is, putting Africa, its knowledges, cultures, mother tongues/indigenous languages, African people, at the centre, before extending outwards to learn about European and other knowledge traditions, ways of being and doing, which are needed only if they are relevant for Africans to understand themselves and to move forward.

Decolonisation is not something new, but the gap and challenge for Africa remains in articulating clearly what it is all about and coming up with propositions of what the alternative to Eurocentric model could look like (Mbemba, 2016). In social work education and research, although the commitment to decolonisation is growing rapidly, examples of how decolonising practices are operationalised remains an important gap for researchers (Tusasiirwe, 2022). This is the gap that this article seeks to respond to as it provides lived experiences of epistemic colonisation and how decolonisation happened during the author's pursuit of PhD research at an Australian university but with field work in a Ugandan context. I share my story of how in the process of doing my PhD, I was taken back to reflect on how colonisation and colonialism in research education and practice remain an unfinished business unless we engage in two critical decolonisation steps of *un-learning* deficit colonial views and *re-learning* to re-value what we know, believe, and value as Africans. By way of structure, I will first discuss ongoing colonisation in research education and practice. Then I will explore decolonisation drawing on my experiences during PhD research. I discuss African indigenous oral storytelling and the African research methods of individual, communal conversation and observation that can be used in African research. Decolonising ethics and alternative Obuntu/Ubuntu ethics are discussed and lastly, call to action to decolonise is presented.

ONGOING COLONISATION IN RESEARCH EDUCATION AND PRACTICE

Western languages, research methodologies and methods predominated all my research education and practice. In my foundational education at primary level in Uganda, we were forced to speak English and punished for speaking our own indigenous languages at school. While learning English was compulsory, none of the indigenous languages was (is). I never got a chance to learn to write my own indigenous language which I learnt to speak only while in my local community. Erasing our indigenous languages meant erasing all the epistemologies and culture embedded in them. At university level, non-African texts, literature on research have been taught as the legitimate ways of doing research and knowing, leaving our lit/orature in the margins. Unsurprisingly, when it came to conceptualising my PhD research proposal in Australia, I framed my research in what I was taught were the legitimate methods and methodologies in research and academia. I had originally planned to use western methods including interviewing, observation and Focus Group Discussions and my methodology was grounded in feminist phenomenology.

In my proposal, I stated that I would use life story interviewing as I read it from Atkinson (2002). As with the strategy of colonisation where western texts are often read or presented as legitimate, I had struggled to find texts where my African oral storytelling methodology was written about yet I was told that I must provide a written reference to the methods and methodology I finally choose to use in my PhD research. Being situated in an Australian tertiary education system that predominantly privileges western ways of doing research and academic writing, it was regarded not authentic to say I would use my indigenous storytelling method learnt from my local village, without showing previous researchers/scholars who had written or used the method. Owing to the predominant availability of knowledges from the North, texts documenting western knowledges are overwhelmingly available in university libraries as compared to texts documenting knowledges on methods and methodologies from the South (Chilisa 2012). It is easier for teachers to refer students to read western literature

because this is 'available' but also it is what most of the teachers have also largely read. By university libraries not stocking literature or referencing orature from the South and by teachers in universities not including literature from authors in the South on their reading lists, our knowledges from the South are erased and are not within reach in our institutions of learning. Also, coming from an oral society, most of my learning in the community was passed on orally using orature like stories, proverbs, folklore, songs. This is rich orature that also remains in the margins as universities privilege literature/written work as the 'legitimate' sources of knowledge. Therefore, in my research proposal, I easily referenced that I would follow life story interviewing method by Atkinson because I could not reference my mother who had taught me African indigenous oral story telling since this was not written about anywhere. Having successfully defended my proposal, I set out to seek ethical clearance from three ethical committees in Australia and Uganda. Having obtained ethical clearance, I set out to conduct my fieldwork in Uganda. It was during this field work, in my face-to-face interactions with the participants, using our indigenous languages, that I was, unexpectedly, led to the process of decolonisation.

DECOLONISING RESEARCH METHODS AND METHODOLOGIES

Importance of indigenous languages

In decolonising research, it is important that the research methods used build on the epistemologies and languages of the participants and that they are understandable to the researched (Chilisa, 2012). Decolonisation process has the ultimate goal of recovering, restoring and re-valuing indigenous ways of knowing and local and indigenous people's languages. My PhD research project targeted exploring and learning from experiences of three subgroups of participants, that is, social policy makers, community workers and older women living a local community in Uganda. Social policy makers and community workers were formally educated and therefore could speak English during our conversations. Although we sometimes stumbled upon concepts or words in our local languages (Luganda and Runyankore) which we would not easily translate into English, since we understood both English and the local languages, our conversations were mostly smooth even when we spoke a mixture of these languages. However, when it came to conversations with the older women, I could only use Runyankore/Rukiga because the older women did not understand English. The fact that I had to communicate purely in my local language was the turning point that led me to recognising how I had been drawing on our indigenous ways of knowing and being without giving due acknowledgment to these epistemologies and the culture they are embedded in.

During my field work with older women, I needed to explain to them what the research I was doing was all about as well as the methods I was intending to use to collect data. Although I had stated in my proposal that I was using interviewing method, when it came to translation of interviewing method to Runyankole/Rukiga, the concept of interviewing did not translate well to mean the type of conversations I was intending to have with the older women. In our local context in Western Ugandan communities, interviewing is generally understood as a method of gaining data or information from someone through strict question and answer. This interviewing method is often used by institutions like police during their criminal investigations. Also interviewing method is often used when applicants go for interviews when seeking employment. In this interviewing, there are unequal power relations between the interviewers and the interviewees and there is no meaningful relationship. In the process of self-reflection and translation of interviewing into my context, I came to the realisation that I was not going to 'interview' older women, but I was going to have 'conversations' with the older women. Conversations in Runyankole/Rukiga language are called *okuganira. Okuganira* is about story telling in a conversational and relational way. When I explained this method of having conversations and the reasoning behind my request for stories from older women, it became very clear to me that I was actually drawing on the African oral storytelling tradition where we sit with older people who tell us stories from their experiences with the goals of teaching moral lessons and imparting knowledge, norms, values and ways of survival. Although I had read about life story interviewing, I did not feel connected to the way this method was being written about, but I knew, followed, and explained African oral storytelling because this translated in my local indigenous language; it resonated, I knew it because I had experienced it; it was my frame of reference.

Reclaiming African indigenous oral storytelling: methodology and methods

African indigenous storytelling is a long-held tradition and powerful pedagogical tool for communicating knowledge and wisdom (Chinyowa 2001, Utley 2019). It is through stories that acceptable behaviours, morals, expectations, cultural values, and worldviews are transmitted across generations (Chilisa 2012, Chinyowa 2001, Utley 2019, Wa Thiong'o 1986). African stories are often told not just for entertainment but with the intention that listeners or readers learn a moral lesson from the experiences being shared. Through story telling is how African philosophies like Obuntu/Ubuntu, values, societal expectations, norms have been passed on from generations to generations. During my research, I was not only drawing on my indigenous knowledge about oral storytelling but I was also drawing on and remembering my experiences of how my mother and the community I

grew up in in rural Uganda had taught me through stories, told at the fireplace, in the evening, after a day's work. Having conversations with older women in my local language was my 'ahaa' moment where I was able to connect myself back to my language and epistemologies embedded in, the ways of knowing and being of people in my community who were now participating in the research. I suppose I would not have come to this moment of connection had I conducted my research in English language only. I experienced a critical moment of learning and relearning that had not happened in my 20 years of formal education. The lesson learnt and the main argument in this article is the illustration of the importance of indigenous languages and ways of knowing in connecting us back to what Chilisa calls 'the non-academic knowledge system of the researched [that] has survived despite the best efforts of colonisation to devalue it' (Chilisa, 2014, p.5). The non-academic knowledge system is often distinguished from the so-called academic knowledge system which is informed by western disciplines, but this may not necessarily resonate with the researched (Chilisa, 2014). Decolonisation theory and process requires connection to the researched's and African frames of reference and epistemologies.

African indigenous storytelling informs three research methods that can be adopted in research in African context, that is individual or one-on-one conversations; communal participatory conversations; learning by observations. I adopted these methods in my research by first having one-on-one conversations with older women where we talked about stories of their lives and the lessons we can learn from them. I did a preliminary analysis of these individual conversations and made a report of common themes or stories the older women shared. Then following our communal storytelling approach, I organised group conversations with the older women where collective stories were shared in a group set up. I invited the 10 older women who had participated in the individual conversations to come for a communal conversation. I felt obligated to establish a communal fireplace where shared stories would be told and collective knowledge co-produced from those experiences shared. However, also as a researcher on a decolonising agenda, I felt obligated to organise a communal fireplace where I would get a chance to go back to the older women to share with them the knowledge and lessons that I was going to write about in the PhD thesis. I had been engaged in most research projects conceptualised in western ways of knowing where we as researchers went into the communities, we collected data and therefore knowledge from them but we never went back to the researched communities to explain what knowledge it was we were writing about them. We produced reports often for funders of the research. The reports were written in English which most of these local communities would never have access to because of the foreign language. This was the 'dirty' research I wanted to disrupt (Smith 1999) by sharing with the older women the knowledge I had gained from the conversations with each of them. During our group *okuganira/*conversations I shared with them the messages I had learnt from listening to their stories and reading the transcripts from those individual conversations. The women validated, expounded, and deeply analysed the preliminary lessons in a communal set-up, co-producing collective stories.

Apart from co-producing knowledge with the participants, African individual and group conversations are unique in that they are relational and non-hierarchical. Each one's story and contribution is valued. Genuine, non-manipulative relationships that go beyond the research project are formed and built during these conversations. While in most western research set-ups, relationships should be terminated or even avoided to encourage objectivity, African conversations, trust and relationships are a means and end in the research process. The women's group *okuganiira* were unique compared to western focus group discussions because they were rooted in indigenous African epistemologies. First, the group *okuganiira* regarded the rituals and taboos of the participants as vital parts of the research process. Second, they involved older women empathising, counselling, and supporting each other. To illustrate the first point, during the group conversations, we introduced ourselves to each other to be aware of each other's self-definition but also to affirm our connection and confidence in our culture. I introduced myself, the village I come from, my clan, the totem of my clan, my marital status and the village and clan I married into. This was to establish any connections, for example, if there were any of my clan's mates or women who came from my village or older women who could have some relatives married in my village. One of the older women had a relative married to someone in my village and she had been to my village to visit. This was the beginning of a relationship that would go beyond the group *okuganiira* and my PhD research. Even if my research project ended, when I am in Uganda, I visit these older women as they are now part of my communal family and network.

In relation to the second point, older women empathised and supported each other during the *okuganiira*. At the beginning of the group conversation, as we set rules to guide the conversation, I came with the rules and conditions I had committed to in my ethics application. I told older women that they should keep all the information discussed in the group confidential and that they should share their personal experiences in a passive voice or third person voice to avoid social harm. The older women agreed with this initially. However, as the conversations went on, it was evident that the older women, although coming from different parts of the village, knew each other's experiences and stories and it was impossible for women to follow my rules that required them to share their stories in a passive or third person voice. During the group conversations, the women comforted one who had no grandchildren. While at the beginning of the *okuganiira*, this older woman introduced herself as childless, the other older women knew that she was not a barren woman. They gave her reassurance, and

empathised with her, while demonstrating deep understanding that she could have been feeling the stigma that is often experienced by older women with no children and grandchildren, in a community where children are a vital source of status and identity, particularly to women. The older women supported each other and together brainstormed possible strategies to use to live in harmony with family members, particularly some stubborn daughters-in-law. The group provided space where older women talked about their lives and where they affirmed and supported each other. These were healing experiences which could have been missed had the women heeded my requests that they use the passive third person voice to talk about their personal experiences. As African indigenous scholars Chilisa & Ntseane (2010, p. 629) remind us, there is a need "to move to healing research methods that allow research participants to name and share pain and to collectively envision strategies for resistance, resilience and survival."

African individual and group conversation research methods were supplemented by observation method. This observation method involved following the participants and actively interacting, participating, and observing their everyday actions and inactions. We talked about their experiences and feelings, their frustrations and enablers as we observed them. The observations and conversations took place everywhere, anytime making learning and knowledge creation boundaryless and timeless. Through this method of following participants, I had the opportunity to tell the story through lived experience and real encounters with the participants and their communities. Adopting such African research methods required decolonising research ethics.

Decolonising ethics

Decolonising research goes hand in hand with decolonising ethics which should be contextual and not a one-size-fits all. From my experience, attaining ethical clearance from ethical committees does not guarantee or mean ethical research. Rather what is defined as ethical behaviour for researchers in African contexts should be defined by African ways of being and doing instead of an imposition of western ethical frameworks which tend to be top down and prioritise documentation over people and relationships. For example, informed verbal consent was more appropriate for oral societies and participants who cannot read and write instead of imposing written forms of demonstrating consent. Because how informed is consent demonstrated by thumb printing forms that the participant her/himself cannot read? Also, regarding confidentiality, participants should be given the option of choosing or waiving confidentiality as some participants were willing to have their real names appear against their stories instead of imposing use of pseudonyms for all. Beyond documentation and paperwork, ethical behaviour enshrined in Obuntu/Ubuntu philosophies was more appropriate for communities for example the ethics of mutual respect and responsibility, mutual empathy and concern for what the communities were experiencing, and the researcher taking on the responsibility of ensuring that something is done to change or address the social problems/challenges the community was experiencing. Ethical research should be one that makes a difference in the communities rather than one that benefits the researchers and their funders.

Decolonising as a difficult process requiring courage: Use of orature in data analysis and writing

Decolonisation is a possible but difficult process because it requires coming to know through ways that have been trivialised as backward while questioning western ways of knowing that we have been indoctrinated to revere. While I knew that I had used and drawn on the long-held African storytelling traditions to collect life stories and experiences of my participants, I was also aware that in academia which is dominated by western epistemologies, such indigenous ways of knowing have been labelled as illegitimate. I was aware that around the world, indigenous methodologies and knowledges are not accepted by most western researchers and scholars (Smith 2012). That it is still hard for students to conduct research from their perspective, and even when supported by their supervisors, students who have used indigenous methodologies have been criticised for not using the so called 'bona fide' research methodologies (Bessarab and Ng'andu 2010). Being honest about the African oral storytelling tradition meant putting up with the risk and pressure that my PhD may be marked down because a western method and methodology has not been used. Decolonisation and disrupting the status quo in our research education system requires both knowledge and courage. I was courageous from with in because I knew that I was standing up against an education system that had devalued our indigenous knowledges, languages, philosophies. Thus, my thesis references African indigenous storytelling and I use African proverbs, stories like the story of the humming bird, and I acknowledge community people like my mother as sages, oral scholars whose indigenous knowledge I was drawing on in my PhD. This is a disruption of the status quo by acknowledging that people who may not have university qualifications have legitimate knowledges that must not be silenced. As Kenyan decolonization author Wane (2008) has argued, indigenous knowledge, orature and literature are a living experience and the most crucial form of anti-colonial resistance.

Decolonising as a liberatory experience

My experience in decolonising research methodologies is that the process is so beneficial that it results into a liberatory research and education. The process results into research and education that connects rather than isolate students from who they are, their worldviews, cultural values and generally their way of being and doing, which does not represent just the individual students but whole communities, generations and generations. The individual experience becomes a collective one that makes communities, their philosophies visible, indeed demonstrating how the personal is political. The decolonising moments can be quite emotional, tearful, confronting, full of anger, but also freedom after finally realising an oppressive education system that alienated, and isolated you from your cultural values, languages. The realisation also gives you courage to take further action to share the experience and invite others (colonisers, colonised) to engage in decolonisation to create an education system that embraces rather than tolerates diversity of epistemologies, experiences, all students bring in academia.

As my PhD examiners noted, my thesis contributed to providing a critique of hegemonic western research traditions, an area we still need more voices in, especially coming from colonised's contexts. We need more research projects that disrupt the marginalisation of knowledges of the colonised. Liberatory research and education is not one that is just about upholding the dominant ideological systems, research methods and methodologies but one that allows us as students to connect deeply with ourselves and communities and allows people especially from western contexts to question, challenge, reflect on their assumptions, as my examiner highlighted:

> As an examiner and a researcher from a Western and European paradigm I have had, of course to question some of my own assumptions and to apply critical reflexivity within the examining process. Here I have drawn on my adherence to a radical and progressive tradition in social work and in qualitative research (both of which have a commitment to rejecting individualistic and pathologising discourses and to centralising structural factors and marginalised voices). I have also drawn on my work with researchers in Zambia, Nigeria and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, which have hopefully sensitised me to some of the profound issues raised in your dissertation about colonization and the long shadows that it casts. On this basis, I have identified some areas that could be extended or strengthened and these are indicated below (minor revisions and corrections) (Examiners report).

A CALL TO ACTION: THE ENDURING NEED TO DECOLONISE RESEARCH EDUCATION AND THE ROLE OF EDUCATORS AROUND THE WORLD

All researchers and educators need to teach and encourage students to use their own indigenous ways of knowing and researching in their bachelor's, masters or PhD projects. It is therefore imperative that all educators and researchers in the North and South acquaint themselves with decolonisation and indigenous ways of knowing so that they can be able to support better the students everywhere they are. Educators and researchers especially those teaching and supervising international students including African students in the North need to challenge themselves from within including questioning the thinking that western methods and methodologies are superior or the best everywhere. There is need for openness, learning about non-western ways of thinking and being to support better students from diverse backgrounds. To evaluate how complicit or not in perpetuating colonisation and colonialism, educators and researchers should gauge themselves by looking at how much they have read or endeavoured to know and teach about indigenous ways of knowing at any level.

The call to action to decolonise research and education in African and global contexts is that educators wherever they are must critically examine their own teaching and research starting with their reading lists. The reading lists show whose knowledges and voices teachers are privileging and therefore whose they are marginalising. In my education in Uganda, Sweden, Australia, there is still very little attempt in the curriculum to incorporate writers, methods, and therefore knowledges from the global South, a problematic situation which continues to position the West as producers of knowledge and others as consumers of knowledge. As we have often joked about our education experiences, in Africa, we learn about the whole world, but no one learns about us, our philosophies, indigenous knowledges, which in this era of decolonisation, must stop. Decolonised education spaces are spaces where diverse epistemologies and perspectives about research or any other topics are embraced and discussed.

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