
Importance of Decolonising Western Languages in South African Opera Schools in Higher Education: A Content Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Concepts such as decolonisation, Africanisation, indigenisation, and internationalisation of curricula have become a centre of discourse in South African institutions of higher education. Even though the debate on decolonisation of Western curricula has become an epicentre, South African opera schools continue to be dominated by Western orthodoxy. In South African opera schools, the decolonisation of the Western language agenda has not been successfully addressed as many South African opera schools continued to prioritise Western languages, such as German, Italian, and French. In contrast, African languages continue to be neglected. This neglect is attributed to the problem that South African higher education institutions are dominated by Western orthodoxy. A clear need exists for the decolonisation of the curricula from Western Eurocentric languages to African languages. Therefore, this article aims to critically discuss and raise awareness of the importance of decolonising Western orthodoxy in South African opera schools in higher education. A qualitative research method was adopted with content analysis as the primary methodology. This article also used a combination of a myth of decolonisation theory and decolonialwashing theory to urge that decolonisation is a buzzword in South African opera schools. The findings of this article were presented in the following three significant themes: 1. Relevance of African languages; 2. Advantages of using African languages; 3. Challenges faced by South African opera schools. The findings of this article revealed that it is important for South African opera schools to have musical arts programmes that promote and cultivate the marginalised values of the African people. This article concludes by recommending that there is a collective effort that must take place to ensure that decolonisation becomes a reality rather than a myth in South African higher education.

Keywords: *African languages, curricula, decolonisation, higher education, opera schools*

INTRODUCTION

In 2015 and 2016, South African higher education experienced a severe wave of change sparked by the #FeesMustFall movement (Cini, 2019; Larbig et al., 2019; Mavunga, 2019; Yende, 2020; Yende & Yende, 2022). Apart from the student protests about fee increases, the students also demanded decolonisation of the curricula, financial sustainability in the face of shrinking government funding, and transformation of universities to address inequalities such as gender and race (Mavunga, 2019; Meda, 2020; Mutekwe, 2017; Du Preez, Simmonds & Chetty, 2017;

Sayed et al., 2017). During apartheid, higher education was forcibly segregated at the establishment of universities in South Africa to serve particular racial groups, and the legacies of the segregation still linger. Therefore, student-led protests are essential for decolonising curricula and balancing the language portion.

In this article, an indepth understanding of the experiences and challenges encountered by opera schools in embracing African languages is critically explored. Furthermore, this exploration assists in mapping the way forward for opera schools regarding how to include African

languages in their programmes and adopt appropriate methods of ensuring that course content is delivered effectively. This research also recommends further promoting the development and growth of African languages in opera schools.

Even though significant historical milestones were achieved through the student protest movement, Western languages in South African opera schools remain largely colonised. This lingering form of colonisation was substantiated by Mugovhani (2012) and Yende and Yende (2022), who agree that since the demise of the apartheid regime, South African music schools continue to overemphasise Western arts music such as classical music, jazz, and opera. As a result, Western music culture is valued more than African indigenous culture and music (Yende & Yende, 2022). This stasis is a significant concern and raises questions about the authenticity of the decolonisation of Western curricula in South African higher education, and particularly opera schools. This concern was echoed by Ebewo and Sirayi (2018, p. 83), who assert that “the word ‘transformation’ has become a buzzword in postapartheid South African vocabulary”. South African universities continue to promote Westernised curricula characterised by racism and ethnic exclusion (Adonis & Silinda, 2021; Du Plessis, 2021; Mugovhani, 2012). Yende and Yende (2022) acknowledge that music schools at universities have attempted to revise their curricula to be more Africanised and homogenous. However, opera schools continue to use a monocultural approach with a bias toward Western values and outcomes. Even though decolonisation of curricula has been at the heart of South African universities, European elites have recolonised opera schools and continue to prioritise Western languages such as German, Italian, and French (Mugovhani, 2012; Yende & Yende, 2022).

An article by Mugovhani (2012, p. 916) asserts that African languages are actively excluded in opera programmes:

“Performing arts in South African institutions had therefore been primarily focused on Western art forms to the exclusion of other types of arts existing in the country. Black performing arts students had therefore not been connected to their African history, performing arts and beliefs for centuries. This has undoubtedly been depriving South African Black performing arts students of their connection to their culture and inhibiting their chances of true musical expression, growth and experience. To a considerable extent, this has alienated them from their immediate communities and the society at large.”

Opera schools at South African universities have not yet embraced indigenous languages as part of curricula decolonisation. The colonisation using Western languages in opera schools remains largely uninterrupted. This continuing colonisation deprives South African Black performing arts students of their connection to their culture (Heleta, 2016; Makoelle, 2014; Mugovhani, 2012; Yende & Yende, 2022).

The awareness that South African opera schools remain uninterruptedly colonised propels studies among scholars. Recently, an article by Yende and Yende (2022) shows that since the inception of curricula decolonisation in South African higher education, little effort has been made to discuss the challenges critically that South African opera schools face. Therefore, the question is: What impedes decolonisation in South African opera schools?

Scholars point to rising challenges requiring special attention concerning the decolonisation of curricula in South African opera schools (Devroop, 2011; Ebewo &

Sirayi, 2018; Mugovhani, 2012). Mugovhani (2012) found that “in South Africa, Western performing arts, which were the performing arts of the politically and economically dominant language groups (South African Whites) were regarded as esoteric and elitist, and that of the other indigenous South African people (South African Black people) had been viewed as primitive, ungodly and devoid of artistic excellence”. It is from this viewpoint that there is a necessity for the redress of the past imbalances in opera schools through the decolonisation of curricula. The current curricula must be transformed to attain the objective of decolonisation of the apartheid educational system of teaching and learning in South African opera schools (Mugovhani, 2012; Yende & Yende, 2022).

Many commendable universities in South Africa produce wellrenowned opera, namely the University of Cape Town’s College of Music, the University of KwaZuluNatal’s Department of Music, the University of South Africa’s Music Examinations Directorate, the North West University’s Potchefstroom Campus, the University of Pretoria’s Musaion, and Tshwane University of Technology’s Vocal Arts section. However, these institutions have not fully embraced African languages and are still replete with Eurocentric languages (Mugovhani, 2012; Yende & Yende, 2022). South African arts institutions have demonstrated few signs of transformation and few signs of Africanisation of arts programmes, thereby continuing to marginalise African languages (Devroop, 2011; Ebewo & Sirayi, 2018; Mugovhani, 2012).

There is extensive literature on themes such as decolonisation, Africanisation, indigenisation, and internationalisation of curricula worldwide (Cini, 2019; Ebewo & Sirayi, 2018;

Mavunga, 2019; Mugovhani, 2012). However, limited attention is given to carefully discussing the importance and the potential implications of embracing African languages in South African opera schools. The current article was motivated by Mugovhani’s (2012: 908) article that highlights that “music departments at South African institutions of higher learning have not yet fully transformed their programmes away from European models to programmes that affirm and embrace all the musical styles and genres practised in [South Africa]”. In this context, the inclusion of African languages in opera schools was considered fundamental for curricula decolonisation.

The 2015 to 2017 student protests resulted in the call for decolonisation of the Western educational system to Africanised educational system. However, the present curricula still do not serve and advance South African interests in terms of history, arts, culture, and music, among others. This gap is manifested in the priority given to Western languages more than the African languages in the institutions of higher learning. Opera schools do not put the uniqueness of South Africa’s performing arts epistemologies at the centre of teaching and learning. Hence, Africans must be included in opera schools to balance curricula (Mugovhani, 2012; Yende & Yende, 2022). Against this background, this article seeks to discuss and raise awareness of the importance of decolonising Western orthodoxy in South African higher education opera schools.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In this article, the researchers developed specific primary questions that sought answers that would critically discuss the ongoing crisis in opera schools:

- a) What relevance do African languages have in opera schools?

b) What are the advantages of using African languages in opera schools?

c) What challenges do South African opera schools face in embracing African languages?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this article, the researchers deploy a combination of the myth of decolonisation and the decolonialwashing theories to provide a comprehensive argument about the quest to decolonise Western orthodoxy in South African opera schools. According to NdlovuGatsheni's (2014) myth of decolonisation theory, decolonisation is a theoretical concept that has not been made practical in South African higher education. The researchers perceived the myth of decolonisation theory as a necessary and crucial theory to discuss key themes that prove decolonisation to be a myth rather than a reality (NdlovuGatsheni, 2014). The myth of decolonisation theory was combined with the decolonialwashing theory by Le Grange et al. (2020) to prove that decolonisation has become a metaphor in South African opera schools. Le Grange et al. (2020) highlights that the concept of "decolonialwashing, is a borrowed concept from the word greenwashing used in environmental and sustainability studies to denote processes whereby a company provides a false impression or misleading information about the environmental soundness of its products". Le Grange et al. (2020) points out that in South African higher education, "decolonisation has been equated with concepts such as curriculum renewal and curriculum transformation". NdlovuGatsheni (2014) and Le Grange et al. (2020) are concerned about false decolonisation or decolonisation that has not really happened in higher education. In decolonialwashing universities give the impression that their curricula are decolonised.

In essence, the myth of decolonisation and decolonialwashing theories were adopted as these theories make three comprehensive claims about decolonisation:

- Decolonisation is a buzzword
- Decolonisation South African higher education has not been made a practical reality
- Decolonisation is not promoted in South African universities.

With reference to the three claims, this article argues that decolonisation should be implemented and embraced in a practical form.

Understanding the myth of decolonisation and decolonialwashing theories is key to implementing the decolonisation of curricula and a vital approach that South African universities can apply to shed Western traits and embrace indigenisation and Africanisation in their curricula.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research approach was adopted in this article, with content analysis as the principal methodology. The researchers used existing scholarly writings to answer these questions. The researchers chose content analysis as the principal methodology because it is based on analysing content guided by the research question: Why is it important to decolonise Western languages in South African higher education opera schools?

A qualitative content analysis was employed in this article as it enables the researchers to recognise textual information and categorise it systematically based on its properties (Nowell et al., 2017). This article used a qualitative approach to content analysis to identify significant themes and patterns and describe the existing literature.

Content analysis ensures that the data logic matches the argument, making the argument persuasive. The goal is to identify important aspects of the content and present the aspects clearly and effectively (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). In this article, the qualitative content analysis focused on the content of curricula decolonisation using existing academic documents such as articles, book chapters and theses. The researchers chose to use qualitative content analysis and thematic analysis because of their key characteristic, which is a systematic process of coding data, evaluating the meaning, and providing a description of the social reality through the formation of a theme.

The researchers employed five significant steps in a narrative, thematic analysis (Vaismoradi et al., 2013):

- 1) Gathering data
- 2) Attaining a general logic of the data
- 3) Coding data
- 4) Yielding themes
- 5) Interpreting and describing data.

The narrative, thematic analysis method was deemed important in this article because it supported the researchers in obtaining precise, pertinent, and detailed information, which was interpreted and presented thematically in the findings. The researchers consider these five research processes to be widely recognised, transparent, and systematic. This article categorised these steps under qualitative descriptive design for critically analysing textual data and elucidating the theme.

FINDINGS

The findings of this article revealed the following three themes that emerged from the three basic research questions established to guide the research of this article:

1. Relevance of African languages in opera schools

2. Advantages of using African languages in opera schools

3. Challenges faced by South African opera schools in embracing African languages.

Relevance of African languages in opera schools

African languages are strongly relevant in opera schools in South African universities. South African universities must have musical arts programmes that embrace African languages (Devroop, 2011; Mbembe, 2016; Mugovhani, 2012). In the quest for decolonisation, South African universities encourage African languages in their opera schools, as the languages are a relevant cultural heritage for the previously marginalised populace of South Africa (Devroop, 2011; Mugovhani, 2012). Mugovhani (2012, p. 916) agrees that “as a matter of principle and urgency, South African institutions should start promoting African content in their syllabi and training predominantly South African students”. Given that most students who enrol for opera studies in South African universities are Black opera students, there is a need for opera schools to deliver curricula effectively that will embrace African languages.

At the time when universities embraced the decolonisation of curricula, a strong emphasis was placed on African languages being taught in African universities (Mbembe, 2016; Mugovhani, 2012; Yende & Yende, 2022). Mbembe (2016, p. 17) points out that universities should be a repository of concepts carried on global languages:

“A decolonised university in Africa should put African languages at the centre of its teaching and learning project [...] The African university of tomorrow will be multilingual. It will teach (in) Swahili, isiZulu, isiXhosa, Shona, Yoruba, Hausa,

Lingala, Gikuyu, and it will teach all those other African languages French, Portuguese or Arabic have become while making a space for Chinese, Hindu, etc. It will turn these languages into a creative repository of concepts originating from the four corners of the Earth.”

Efforts are ongoing, as opera schools have not shed Western languages and have not adopted African languages into the practical language module despite the student protests that called for the decolonisation of curricula. Before the call for decolonisation, opera schools offered three Western languages to opera students, namely German, Italian, and French. For example, Vocal Art students at the Tshwane University of Technology pursue Italian in their first year, German in their second year, and French in their third year. Students learn grammar, phonetics, phonology, creative writing, translation, and interpretation in each language.

Advantages of using African languages in opera schools

It is important to highlight that African languages in South African opera schools have been neglected and that Western languages are prioritised (Devroop, 2011; Mapaya, 2011; Mugovhani, 2012). Mugovhani (2012, p. 916) admits that:

“Black performing arts students had therefore not been connected to their African history, performing arts and beliefs for centuries. This has undoubtedly been depriving South African Black performing arts students of their connection to their culture, and inhibiting their chances of true musical expression, growth and experience.”

In this quest to decolonise the curricula, African languages are crucial for students to learn in opera programmes. This endeavour will enrich African indigenous languages that have been marginalised over

the years. There are many advantages to using African languages in opera schools. Black students will benefit by performing in their native language and connecting with their culture through performance (Cupido & van Zyl, 2021; Mugovhani, 2012; Yende & Yende, 2022). Also, the advantage of using African languages in opera schools is that it will contribute to cultural and social cohesion.

Challenges faced by South African higher education in embracing African languages

Over the last two decades, curriculum studies have attempted to understand the many core challenges faced by South African higher education in embracing African languages (Beukes, 2010; Du Plessis, 2021; Mahabeer, 2018). A fundamental challenge South African universities face is eliminating curricula that perpetuate Western bias and the lack of alternative content (Meda, 2020). Another challenge is that “South Africa’s [higher] educational system, in general, still endorses Western knowledge and rationality at the expense of nonWestern methods of knowing” (Kaya & Seleti, 2013). These challenges have also contributed to the challenges faced by South African opera schools. A challenge faced by South African higher education in embracing African languages is the failure of South African universities to separate themselves from the apartheid education system that has been at the forefront of higher education for decades (Devroop, 2011; Ebewo & Sirayi, 2018; Mapaya, 2011; Mugovhani, 2012). Yende and Yende (2022) point out that the inclusion of African indigenous music in opera schools will affirm Africanisation:

“A Western monogenic music education curriculum was therefore adopted and promulgated. This problem is partly attributable to the apartheid government that encouraged classical Western music to the exclusion of other types of music that exist

for most of the South African people, such as African indigenous music. The curricularisation of African indigenous music will confirm the legitimacy of decolonisation and Africanisation.”

The above statement reveals that these challenges have also contributed to the failure of opera schools in implementing opera schools' failure to implement African curricula. Hence, the present opera schools' curricula remain grounded and rooted in Western music.

DISCUSSION

The article sought to discuss critically and raise awareness of the importance of decolonising Western orthodoxy in South African higher education opera schools. This article argued that there is a necessity for South African universities, especially opera schools, to rethink their curricula and centre on Africanisation and embrace African languages in their practices. This article highlighted that practical decolonisation of Western orthodoxy is a key debate in South Africa, and therefore demand is increasing for the decolonisation of opera schools. However, South African institutions of higher learning have witnessed scenarios in which lecturers transmit and train students with Eurocentric content, especially in opera schools.

In this article, the researchers argue the concept of decolonisation of Western curricula has become a serious concern in many universities which continue to wrestle with Western traits, especially opera schools. In this article, the researchers are concerned about the decolonialwashing, whereby universities give the impression that their curricula are decolonised while curriculum reformed. This is the problem that these theories seek to address and at this moment decolonialisation of Western languages in

opera schools is just a palatable concept rather than a reality.

This article's findings show a need for universities to gain extensive knowledge and understanding concerning the African languages and cultures that must be included in their curricula. South African Black opera students are deprived of cultural connections and musical expressions in their native languages. The findings of this article demonstrated that African languages in opera schools are relevant. The decolonisation of Western curricula is strongly emphasised and is debated in South African universities. However, no meaningful curricula transformations have taken place, especially in opera schools. The findings of this article revealed that it is important for South African opera schools to have musical arts programmes that promote and cultivate the marginalised values of the African people.

This article raised some strong concerns about South African opera schools' failure to implement African languages in their curricula. These concerns include the ongoing priority given to Western languages in opera schools instead of African languages. The findings of this article affirm that the decolonisation of curricula in South African higher education remains a myth rather than a reality. The findings of this article are consistent with studies that reveal decolonisation of curricula has not been put into practice (Mahabeer, 2018; NdlovuGatsheni, 2014; Yende & Yende, 2022).

The findings concerning the decolonisation of curricula continue to be a myth rather than a reality in South African universities and is in line with the theory of the myth of decolonisation that argues and advocates for visible and practical decolonisation (NdlovuGatsheni, 2014). Le Grange et al. (2020) echo that “decolonialwashing also includes all

instances in which decolonisation is used as a metaphor, whether deliberately or in ignorance". Evidence from the findings illustrates that the notion of decolonisation has become a metaphor in South African opera schools. This metaphor is partly influenced by opera being a Western art form. The premise presented by writers such as NdlovuGatsheni (2014), Yende (2020), and Le Grange et al. (2020) indicate that decolonisation is not practically applied in South African higher education. This lack of practice is evident in South African opera schools that continue to prioritise Western languages over African languages.

This article used a framework of analysis informed by the central tenets of the myth of decolonisation and decolonialwashing in South African higher education (NdlovuGatsheni, 2014; Le Grange et al., 2020). This article critically examined the importance of understanding the decolonisation of Western orthodoxy in South African opera schools as part of valuing African languages and culture. By so doing, this article contends and argues that South African opera schools have not yet managed to shed the Western traits of teaching and learning. This argument supports NdlovuGatsheni's (2014) concern that decolonisation has become a myth, while Le Grange et al. (2020) refers to this as decolonialwashing. So far, scholars and universities are still struggling with the practical form of decolonisation. Le Grange et al. (2020:44) explain that "decolonisation becomes a metaphor for more palatable concepts such as curriculum renewal and curriculum transformation".

Therefore, at this final stage of this article, the researchers assert that decolonisation efforts in South African opera schools are faced with the myth of decolonisation and decolonialwashing, which are palatable concepts with no reality.

Hence, this article concurs with the theories that assert that decolonisation is a buzzword in South African opera schools.

This article establishes that South African opera schools must revise their curricula to establish relevant African curricula. There is a visible need to redress Western orthodoxy in South African opera schools to create more favourable performing environments for students. This article is in line with Mugovhani's (2012) findings that established that it is essential for South African performing arts institutions to promote and prioritise African content in their curricula. This article also pointed out that embracing African languages in opera schools has many advantages, including allowing students to perform in their native languages and learn from the richness of their culture. The findings of this article highlight the importance for South African opera schools to place their primary focus on the decolonisation of Western languages and include African languages.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Understanding the importance of promoting African languages in South African opera schools, as presented in this article, implies issues of curriculum development in higher education directly. The findings presented in this article indicate a need for South African higher education to embrace Africanisation in its curricula. Considering these implications, the findings of this article addressed the following questions: How do South African universities, especially opera schools, respond to Africanisation? In what way can Africanised curricula improve opera schools in South Africa?

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the analysis and findings of this article, the researchers make the

following recommendations: Firstly, extensive research is required, whereby curricula developers, policymakers, and other stakeholders at the forefront of decolonisation and Africanisation should be studied. Secondly, opera schools should set a benchmark in curricula that promotes the practice of African languages. This promotion of African languages will cater for both Western and African languages. Thirdly, opera school leaders in South African higher education should embrace the diversity and use of African languages in opera. Fourthly, South African opera schools, largely informed by Western art forms, must include African languages in their curricula and promote African centrality. The researchers also recommended that since Western languages are also necessary for opera singers who aspire to perform in European countries, the curricula must be blended with African languages. Lastly, it is recommended that policymakers and decisionmakers must develop materials and content that accommodate African languages in opera.

This article argues for acknowledging the importance of promoting the practice of African languages in South African opera schools. A further crucial point this article highlights is that decolonisation in South African opera schools is still a farfetched concept rather than a substantive one. Both the myth of decolonisation and decolonialwashing theories have consistently highlighted that decolonisation has gradually lost its revolutionary impulse. The finding of this article supports NdlovuGatsheni's (2014) and Le Grange et al.'s (2020) concern that decolonisation in South African higher education slightly becomes a metaphor and myth that will soon lose its revolutionary instinct. Thus, this article makes a significant contribution by reasserting decolonisation and providing an indepth understanding of

the importance of transforming Western orthodoxy in South African opera schools.

CONCLUSION

This article concludes that the decolonisation of South African higher education curricula remains a myth rather than a reality, especially in opera schools. Adopting African languages in South African opera schools will afford students an opportunity to connect to their African identity, music, and culture and truly express their musical style in the language they understand. A collective effort must take place to ensure that decolonisation becomes a reality rather than a myth in South African higher education. South African opera schools must address Western orthodoxy in their curricula.

Despite the call for decolonisation of Western orthodoxy at the centre of South African higher education, opera schools have not yet fully transformed their programmes and continue to rely on European models that promote and embrace a limited number of languages. Opera schools are not promoting the African languages of previously marginalised South African people. The curriculum transformation in South African higher education stems from policy restructuring and epistemological change that attempts to redress the Western orthodoxy in the curricula. The researchers argue that the restructuring and change must be more rigorous to underpin decolonisation in practice.

In line with the theoretical framework, the researchers acknowledge the value of decolonisation of Western orthodoxy at the centre of South African higher education as a means of initiating transformation in Africa. However, the researchers argue that since there is a lack of critical transformation in South African opera schools, the institutional effort of

decolonisation has become an exercise of decolonialwashing as decolonisation has become a metaphor and myth. These are palatable concepts that lack practicality. Inevitably, decolonisation will soon become a myth and lose its revolutionary instinct in South African higher education.

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