

# CADERNOS DE INCLUSÃO

## 24

A PROPOSAL FOR THE DECOLONIZATION AND TRANSFORMATION OF THE UNIVERSITY CURRICULUM. Towards a Pluriepistemic Academic Institution

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## **Cadernos de Inclusão**

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## A PROPOSAL FOR THE DECOLONIZATION AND TRANSFORMATION OF THE UNIVERSITY CURRICULUM. Towards a Pluriepistemic Academic Institution

José Jorge de Carvalho<sup>1</sup>

The present proposal was presented for the first time at the Panel entitled "Is the Decolonization of Academy Realisable?" held in September 2020 during the World Academic Summit, organized by Times Higher Education and convened by Professor Funmi Olonisakin, Vice-Chancellor of King's College London. The main motivation for that meeting seems to have been the impact caused by the students' movement at the University of Cape Town in Johannesburg, South Africa, known as the Rodhes Must Fall. An unprecedented crisis arose when they attacked the statue of the famous 19th-century racist colonialist, Cecil Rodhes, who had granted the land for the creation of the university campus. An anti-racist sentiment has subsequently spread to several universities, from South Africa to other African countries, to the United States, and also to the United Kingdom, where another statue of Rodhes can be seen in one of the buildings of the University of Oxford.

To discuss the topic of academic decolonization, the Panel included the following discussants:

Professor Funmi Olonisakin, Vice-President and Vice-Principal (International), King's College London;

Dr Joanna Newman, Chief Executive and Secretary General, Association of the Universities of the Commonwealth;

Professor José Jorge De Carvalho, Head of the Institute of Inclusion in Higher Education and Research, University of Brasilia;

Professor Shaun Ewen, Pro Vice-Chancellor (Indigenous), University of Melbourne;

Professor Adam Habib, Vice-Chancellor and Principal, University of Witwatersrand;

Dr WangũiWaGoro, Professor of Practice, SOAS University of London, and of King's College;

Professor Tawana Kupe, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Pretoria.

Four years ago, the issue of burning statues of racist historical figures was at its peak, and the tension generated by this student uprising could be felt in the speeches of several participants. In her closing remarks at that memorable Panel, Professor Funmi expressed her intention to "decolonise King's curriculum".

After that event, WanguiWaGoro and I continued to dialogue among ourselves in order to explore together the possibilities of decolonizing the academic space, not through any kind of reactive movement, but through a radical purposeful transformation of the curriculum. The perspective I bring

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<sup>1</sup> Professor of Anthropology at the University of Brasília and Coordinator of the Institute for Inclusion in Higher Education and Research at CNPq.

for this new and inspiring intercontinental cooperation is based on two political/academic movements that have taken place in Brazil in the last two decades and in which I am directly involved: the struggle for quotas for ethnic and racial minorities; and the project called Meeting of Knowledges, aimed at including masters of knowledge of traditional peoples and communities (such as Indigenous, Afro-Brazilian, Maroons, among others) as lecturers in a variety of regular courses, even if they have no formal schooling, as a concrete move to decolonize and transform the curriculum of Brazilian universities. As a result of our exchanges, I have formulated the present proposal which is offered as a first draft for the construction of an initial programme, in the hope that they be concretely implemented at King's College by Professor WaGoro in the present year. It is also conceived as a first step towards a future partnership between King's College and the Institute of Inclusion in the University of Brasilia.

### **I. The Western University: World Expansion and Contemporary Decolonization**

The current university model, including the organization of the curriculum of the courses and the profile of the professional careers, was formulated on the basis of the reform of the University of Berlin in the early nineteenth century, as conceptualized by Wilhelm von Humboldt. In the second half of the nineteenth century until the middle of the twentieth century, this Humboldtian model of the modern European university was transferred to the five continents of the world, mainly through colonialism and imperialism. It is a kind of institution that is profoundly monological in its knowledge profile, because it was designed for a class of white students, all members of the European ruling class, and all with basically the same cultural background. As an example of this forced epistemic homogeneity, the higher education curriculum implemented in Brazil during the twentieth century was an exact reproduction of this European model, having been designed to form a white, monoethnic and monoracial Brazilian social elite, with a homogeneous cultural pattern, in a monolingual and monoepistemic environment, mirroring Western universities.

A new model of academic institution that is fully prepared to speak to today's world must be able to create a dialogical or polyphonic environment, so that different cultural traditions and different epistemologies can establish exchanges with each other, always on equal terms and with equal value. And this new academic environment must necessarily be built on the basis of ethnic and racial equality. In this line, a transformation of the curriculum is a new task specific to each part, but common to both types of institutions: the universities of the Global South and those of the hegemonic North.

For universities in the Global South, the current task is to cease reproducing the exclusively Eurocentric curriculum that was imposed under colonialism (and more recently by neo-colonialism). For the hegemonic institutions of the North, the first task is to exercise a self-criticism, acknowledging

their role as colonizers and admitting the damaging effects of their monoepistemic, monolingual, and monocultural vision for the countries of the Global South where they were imposed; and the second task is to transform their own colonialist-based curriculum, allowing adequate space for the presence non-Western epistemic traditions. And, in the specific case of the United Kingdom, to ensure the academic presence of African, Caribbean, Indian, Middle Eastern, among other traditions of knowledge.

For universities in the Global South, decolonizing academic knowledge means, among other things, to question the way in which non-European peoples are represented in courses and bibliographic references in numerous areas. A process of decolonization inevitably leads to a proposal to transform the entire curriculum.

One of the first and most inspiring initiatives to transform the academic curriculum in the Global South was the official statement called "On the Abolition of the English Department," led by Ngugi waThiong'o at the University of Nairobi in 1968. Ngugi's proposal was to build a multi-epistemic, polyglot and multicultural environment in the newly established Kenyan university, giving equal value to African languages and African literature written in African languages, along with the great traditions of orature, a term he helped to coin as an alternative to oral literature. Professor WanguiWaGoro's Traducture project expands Ngugi's proposal to allow a broader movement to transform the curriculum of African universities (although her proposal is also valid for universities in other continents), especially in the area of Humanities.

In the case of Brazil, the Institute of Inclusion managed to move from purely theoretical discussions of the decolonization of academia to a concrete and broad project of transforming the curriculum of university institutions. This way, over the past two decades we have launched a double inclusion movement to transform what was once a racially and epistemically homogeneous composition of the college classroom. As a consequence of this movement, our universities are open, not only to white middle-class students, as used to be the case for more than a century, but also to black, indigenous, and working-class students, always intersected with gender, sexuality, region, and capabilities. In addition to ethnic-racial inclusion, in 2010 we were able to set in motion a second public policy project, called the Meeting of Knowledges, centered on epistemic inclusion: in order to overcome epistemic Eurocentrism, we began to include, in the university curriculum, non-Western knowledge and epistemologies, such as those of indigenous peoples, Afro-Brazilians and other traditional Brazilian<sup>2</sup> peoples taught directly by masters of traditional peoples and popular cultures.

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<sup>2</sup> Discussions on the theory and methodology of the Knowledge Meeting can be found in Carvalho (2019, 2021, 2022, 2023a and 2023b).

Four years after the question posed by the World Summit Panel, we can affirm that we have already begun, in Brazil, the formulation of a new model of ethnic-racial composition of academics and the university curriculum. Our aim is to go beyond the monoethnic, monoracial, monolingual, and monoepistemic pattern of higher education institution and transform it into a multiethnic, multiracial, multilingual, and multiepistemic model. With the double inclusion of ethnic-racial quotas and epistemic quotas, Brazilian universities will finally be able to reflect the diversity and richness of Brazilian society, with its 305 indigenous nations speaking more than 200 different languages, more than 30 different types of traditional peoples and communities, thousands of Afro-Brazilian communities, and countless cultural, artistic, and scientific traditions of artistic and scientific knowledge of so-called popular cultures. The perspective generated is the implementation of a policy of unrestricted inclusion, both in school and in teaching and a multi-epistemic curriculum, which does not only reproduce Eurocentric knowledge, as occurred during the twentieth century, but which values epistemic plurality in teaching and research: in an egalitarian climate, Eurocentric knowledge will coexist with indigenous knowledge, Afro-Brazilian knowledge, and traditional popular cultures.

In the context of this new curriculum model, the Meeting of Knowledges is allowing us to promote and give full recognition to the richness of living, valid and necessary traditions of knowledge in Brazilian society. In addition, a new multi-epistemic curriculum will have a considerable impact on the training of the new generation of professionals, who will be better equipped to play their role and contribute to their role and contribute to the process of full humanization of a multicultural and highly diverse society.

## **II. An Agenda for Curriculum Transformation**

Based on the academic revolution brought about by the public policies of double inclusion, namely, the ethnic-racial quotas and the epistemic quotas of the Meeting of Knowledges, we offer a basic plan for a comprehensive transformation of the curriculum. This plan is primarily conceived as a program to decolonize and rebuild universities located in multiethnic, multiracial, multicultural, polyglot, and pluriepistemic countries, such as those in Latin America, Africa, and elsewhere in the Global South and in Eurasia. However, some of these elements can also be applied to European universities – noting, of course, the need to adapt to countries with lower epistemic diversity, with fewer traditional peoples and with smaller niches for the validity of full oral traditions.



### a) **Institutionalreorganization**

1. Equality and equity throughout the academic environment. There is the need for a radical break with the historical profile of our academy, which was built on the foundations of extreme inequality - social, economic, ethnic, racial, and epistemic – and to devise new policies to achieve racial, ethnic and social equality among students, teachers and administrative staff is definitively established. The university must be properly prepared to welcome the different social, ethnic, and racial groups of the country to become academics and professionals capable of satisfactorily serving the total population, without exclusion of any group or community.

2. Social Forum. It is necessary to devise a structure of dialogue and pact with the communities, peoples and ethnicities that live in the area where the campus is located. As a good example, the University of Southern Bahia organized a Social Forum in 2014, with the active presence of all traditional peoples and communities in the region where it is located. Based on this, they all signed a joint agreement, covering research, teaching, extension and collaborative project, which will serve the interest of both the university and the communities. The Social Forum is a counterpart to inclusion policies that are specific to academic communities, such as inclusion through quotas and curriculum redesign. The mechanism of the Social Forum allows us to generate a decolonizing equation: if a university in the Global South is not inclusive in social, ethnic, and racial terms, then it is still a colonized institution; or, in the case of a university in a country in the Global North, it is still a colonizing institution.

3. Polyglossia and multilingualism as an institutional policy. Universities must incorporate local and national languages and literatures (oral and written) into their courses and curricula. In other words, in addition to exopolyglossia (Brazilian academics are polyglots in relation to Western languages only) build an environment of endopolyglossia (being also polyglots in relation to Brazilian indigenous and African languages).

4. Diversity of the teaching and technical-administrative staff. There should be Black, White, and indigenous teachers and staff in exact proportion to their demographic share of the country's population. In addition to the multi-ethnic and multi-racial profile of their academic faculty, universities must include masters of traditional peoples and communities as teachers to teach their oral traditions of knowledge – or orature, as WanguiWaGoro, Ngugi waThiong'o and Pio Zirimu prefer to

say.

5. Meeting of Knowledges (meaning: masters of traditional knowledges teaching together with academic lecturers) in all courses, generating interepistemic dialogues, organized as a basis for a new pluriepistemic and transdisciplinary institution.

6. Orality and literacy together. Collaborative coexistence and conviviality of written and oral traditions of knowledge in science, technology, arts and humanities.

### **b) Epistemic Reorganization**

Basically, the organization of academic knowledge rests on four epistemic means: teaching, research, supervision, and examination. According to the way our university system has operated until now, teaching is done exclusively by an academic person who is an expert in some area of Western science and culture; research is based exclusively on the scientific perspective and modern Western aesthetics; and the roles of advisor and examiner can only be performed by those who have acquired a full Eurocentric training (i.e. undergraduate, Masters and Ph.D. degrees) and who have been hired as university professors. For a complete decolonization and transformation of our Eurocentric curriculum, the Meeting of Knowledges will make it possible to include masters of the knowledge of traditional peoples in all these academic activities. In sum:

1. Teaching. This is certainly the most basic task for a higher education institution. After fourteen years of practicing the Meeting of Knowledges, it has become clear to all the academics involved in the project that the masters know how to teach the students. More than that, all of them (Indigenous, Afro-Brazilians or others) are able to adapt their traditional pedagogy to this new intellectual environment, namely, the university classroom.

2. Research. In addition to teaching activities, traditional masters become part of research teams, along with teachers and students.

3. Supervision. If masters of traditional learning can teach university students and participate in research teams with academics, then they can also supervise their students. It is increasingly common for students who have attended master's courses to choose to do their research in the master's communities and ask them to supervise or co-supervise their monographs, dissertations and theses.

4. Examination. Teaching began in 2010, research and co-supervision in 2015; and since 2018, masters began participating in Examination Committees for Graduate courses at several universities.

5. Publication. There are now a large number of books published by masters, such as transcripts of their lectures, seminars, speeches, and interviews; books about masters; biographies, autobiographies of masters; and, on top of that, a large production of books and articles published in co-authorship between professors and masters.

6. 'Notório Saber' (Acknowledged Higher Knowledge). The universities which are linked to the Meeting of Knowledges network (over twenty institutions now) are creating formal mechanisms to grant the title of 'Acknowledged Higher Knowledge' to masters, certifying them as equivalent to a Ph.D. holder, even if they are illiterate.

7. Transforming institutional academic rules. We have initiated a process of legal adaptations of the standard mechanisms for recruiting teachers in order to hire traditional masters to teach. This way, universities will be able to pay them a salary equivalent to that of a visiting or temporary lecturer. This articulation is strongly based on the legitimacy of the title of 'Notório Saber'.

8. Pluriepistemic curriculum. The final transformation initiated with the positioning of masters in the role of lecturers is to build a new curriculum in all courses, and in all Faculties, Institutes, Centers and Departments. In the case of Brazil, the goal to be achieved is to integrate our three epistemic pillars: Western, Indigenous and Afro-Brazilian, whether in Science, Technology, Humanities or Arts.

In other words, in order to build a pluriepistemic curriculum, there needs to be a general reformulation of, courses, bibliographies and other references, as well as the structure of established careers. Here are some examples:

The Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences will incorporate Indigenous Medicine, Medicine of African origin, Medicine of traditional herbalists and healers, as well as of other masters of traditional communities.

The Department of Pharmacology will include a Center for Medicinal Plants organized by masters of medicinal plants from Indigenous and Afro-Brazilian communities.

The Faculty of Arts will include Indigenous and Afro-Brazilian artistic traditions along with Western Art traditions.

The Faculty of Arts and Humanities will include indigenous and Afro-diasporic languages and literatures (written and oral).

The Faculty of Architecture will include courses and research projects on Indigenous architecture, Maroon architecture, candomblé architecture, *caiçara* architecture, and so on. These new courses will be all organized by academics in collaboration, on equal terms, with masters from these communities, nations, and peoples.

The Faculty of Agriculture will include courses on the various traditional systems of land cultivation, such as polyculture, traditional agroecological methods and techniques, among others – taught by Indigenous, Maroons, Afro-Brazilian, and other masters of traditional peoples and communities.

These examples from Brazil are only inspirations for Professor WanguiWaGoro, as the reality of epistemic diversity in the UK will certainly be different from the one briefly described above.

### **III. Transforming the King's College Curriculum: Traducture and the Meeting of Knowledges**

We can devise a pilot experience of transforming the curriculum of King's College by opening of a new course, of an experimental basis, grounded on the methodology of the Meeting of Knowledges as it has been put into practice over the last fourteen years in Brazil. As the project is already working in twenty Brazilian universities, as well as in Colombia and Austria, perhaps it can also be adapted to the reality of the United Kingdom. The experimental course to be offered at King's can focus on the Humanities side of the academic spectrum, and particularly in the areas of Languages and Literature, and for this will it will benefit from the exceptional expertise of Professor WanguiWaGoro. One of the pillars of the course will certainly be her approach to *Traducture*, which, in her own words, will "draw attention to existing discourses in varied multilingual, transcultural and transnational locations in relation to future".

The idea behind this new course is to initiate a systematic discussion and a proposal for transforming the curriculum at King's. African and African-Diasporic issues will certainly appear, and we hope that they will resonate, for further reflections, with the broad promotion of Afro-Brazilian cultural and scientific traditions that have now been taking place in Brazil since the beginning of the Meeting of Knowledges movement. Many topics to be raised in the course are likely to show affinities with similar dilemmas presented in an important collective book published in March 2023 called *Whose Heritage?*, inspired on a lecture by Stuart Hall dedicated to an analysis of the whole issue of the lack of integration of Black cultural heritage in the British nation (a heritage that has been defined, until now, exclusively by its white representation). Obviously, the issues involved in the new course

proposed at King's are likely to transcend Black heritage in the UK and are likely to touch other similar areas of absence and denial, such as the heritages of Indian, Pakistani, Middle Eastern, African, East Asian and other descents.

King's College is located in London, one of the most cosmopolitan cities in the world – precisely mirroring, albeit in a so far unsatisfactory, because exclusionary, way, our transformative utopia: multiethnic, multiracial, multilingual and multicultural. And to a large extent, so does the UK country as a whole. The idea behind the project which attempts at integrating the Meeting of Knowledges with Traducture is that a new curriculum at King's College will be able to reflect this immense diversity and complexity of London and the United Kingdom, both among students and teachers. It is more than certain that numerous traditions of knowledge from the various continents of the world are present today in London and in the United Kingdom in general. However, unfortunately, they do not seem to be represented in the curriculum to the same extent and importance in the same measure and extent of their great intellectual and scientific value.

Together with Traducture, which will expose and submit to criticism the "dominant discourses" where "reality is distorted through misrepresentation, such as stereotypes and exclusion", the theory and method of the Meeting of Knowledges may be useful, especially in the dimension of "orature", capable of opening of a space for the inclusion of non-Western knowledge traditions, both in science, technology, arts, humanities, and spirituality.

Through orature, we can imagine the possibility of masters of traditional knowledge participating as guest or visiting lecturers in Prof. WanguiWaGoro's classes. For example, *griots* from West African countries such as Guinea, Gambia, Mali, Senegal, Burkina Faso; *babalawos* from Nigeria and Benin can teach the various aspects of the Ifá literary corpus, such as philosophy, cosmology, psychology, poetry, among others, in the Yoruba and Fon languages.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps even some *mwaliimu* or *nganga*, i.e. scholars from the traditions of the Bantu-speaking nations, who may be living in London or other cities in the United Kingdom can also participate. As part of the by Traducture/translation open space, the masters will bring their African languages (such as Wolof, Peul, Yoruba, Fon, Gikuyu, Swahili, Kicongo) into the classroom, broadly opening up the linguistic and epistemic space of the current curriculum at King's. In other words, it will be possible to bring to one of the great centers of scientific knowledge of the world the specialized orature of the 'living traditions', as Amadou Hampaté Bâ used to call it.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>We can invoke here the trajectory of a Babalawo, 'Wande Abimbola, who was also rector of the Obafemi Awolowo University in Ile Ife, Nigeria (Abimbola 2003).

<sup>4</sup> Bâ (1981).

#### **IV. Uniting universities of different continents by the simultaneous and mutually inspiring transformation of their curriculum.**

The issues discussed above make us aware that the transformation required to establish the new curriculum cannot be accomplished by white Eurocentric academics alone, otherwise it will only be an update of the same colonizing model of Western higher education institution that we have had for centuries. In all likelihood, a new chart, or a rearrangement of the current curriculum undertaken by Professor WaGoro, will begin with interepistemic, intercultural and multilingual dialogue with masters of orature who represent the non-Western traditions of knowledge that have been excluded from the actual curriculum. In other words, the idea is to finally do justice to the great epistemic diversity and the wealth of living treasures present in the UK today. Another central point of the epistemic expansion that will lead to a transformation of the curriculum is the overcoming of monolingualism, so that we will move to an academic environment open to polyglossia and to a constant process of mutual translation between scholars, teachers, students and masters of orature: an atmosphere that Ngugi waThiong'o describes very aptly as 'the language of languages'.<sup>5</sup>

The Meeting of Knowledgess fits well with WanguiWaGoro's Traducture/translation because both projects aim at "exploring scenarios as methodology and explore the modelling of the time/space and complexity in relation to the future". As the Meeting of Knowledges has effectively introduced a new pluriepistemic, multicultural and multilingual scenario in Brazilian universities, we can be confident that another scenario, also richer in scientific knowledges, cosmologies, aesthetics and ethical principles, will also be possible to take place in King's College.

Another key concept in Professor WaGoro's proposal is restoration. In terms of our decolonizing standpoint in Latin America, where indigenous and African traditions of knowledge have been kept silent by the oppressive power of white slave-owning and post-slavery racism for centuries, we can conceive restoration as a reaffirmation, or a new presentation. Translated into the language of the Aymara and Quechua peoples of Bolivia, Peru and Ecuador, we can define restoration through the Meeting of Knowledges as a new *Pachakuti*, that is, a renewal, a rebirth, as well as a new turning point

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<sup>5</sup>Wa Thiong'o (2023).

in the time/space cycle.<sup>6</sup> After all, masters can speak to the current world situation through their traditional knowledges in the same way that Western scholars speak today through their Eurocentric tradition of knowledge. This restorative moment can open a new cycle of horizontal dialogues (probably still unprecedented) between the academies of the Global North and the Global South.

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<sup>6</sup> This interpretation/translation of Pachakuti is offered by Alejo (2011).

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