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Decolonising Religious Education in sub-Saharan Africa through the prism of anticolonialism: A conceptual proposition

Through the lens of an anticolonial (as opposed to postcolonial) analytical framework, this conceptual paper examines decolonising efforts (and failures) in Religious Education (RE) as a school subject in post independent sub-Saharan Africa. It criticises the missionary/European epistemological hegemony that continues to render RE a colonial rather than a postcolonial project. Beyond rhetoric of the impact of colonialism, the paper laments the perversity of a ‘colonial caged mentality’ affecting the conceptualisation of RE in what is supposed to be a postcolonial milieu in which Africans should design school curricula that suit their particular needs. It calls for the re-conceptualisation of RE de-linked from colonial/Eurocentric thought patterns and presents an ‘envisioned’ decolonised RE (post-confessional, inclusive and multi-faith) that speaks to the political and socio-cultural reality of a postcolonial environment in sub-Saharan Africa. The argument in this paper is that sub-Saharan Africa should yearn for a paradigm shift not only to ensure the decolonisation of the RE curriculum, but also crucially to challenge embedded colonial residues inherent in stakeholders ‘manning the gates’ ensuring that decolonised RE is supported and implemented effectively in the curriculum and schools.

**Keywords:** Decolonised RE, anticolonialism, postcolonial environment, sub-Saharan Africa

**Introduction**

As in other regions of the world, postcolonial sub-Saharan Africa is a cultural and religious melting pot, existing in what Asamoah-Gyadu calls the ‘new Africa’ being “… a continent that has transitioned from slavery and colonialism into a global fraternity of democratic governance… [including]… an explosion of new religious movements leading to pluralism” (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2010, 238). Despite the dominance of Christianity (62.9%) and the assertive influence of Islam (35.2%), there exist African Indigenous Religions (AIR), pockets of Buddhist, Hindu, Sikh, Bahai, Jewish and other minority religious communities (e.g. Rastafarianism), including a small but growing group of ‘nones’ (2%) – that is those who are irreligious (see Englund, 2011; Hacket, 2003; Pew Research Center, 2015). In postcolonial sub-Saharan Africa people embrace the ideals of democracy, and as such “regardless of their faith [or none] … they favor democracy and think it is a good thing that people from other religions are able to practice their faith freely” (Lugo and Cooperman, 2010, 1). As a bastion of intense missionary activity during the colonial era mainly through education “… as an arm of imperialism” (Raftery, 2019, 20), RE has remained largely a school subject with vestiges of colonial education dominated by a Christian/missionary epistemological framework underpinning knowledge production and dissemination (see Boudreau, 2011; Sivasubramaniam and Sider, 2018). As in Zimbabwe, such a framework has perpetuated a colonial legacy in RE essentially “… because the single-tradition approach that was pioneered by the missionaries is still in use” (Ndlovu, 2014, 197).

Complicating the situation for RE in postcolonial sub-Saharan Africa is not only the painfully slow pace of educational reform and conceptual misunderstanding of what post-confessional RE is (Matemba, 2013; Dlamini, 2018), but crucially, that political leaders and policymakers are trapped into a ‘colonial caged mentality’ to the extent that “… African democratic structures embrace imperialist choreographies and architectures in social structures such as education … following on from the colonial past” (Nyoni, 2019, 4). Evidently, colonialism and its relentless attack on the “… mental, spiritual and emotional realms of Africa…” (Wane, 2006, 87) has left indelible scars still being felt today in postcolonial Africa. Consequently, Africans are unable or unwilling to challenge “… epistemologies and knowledge systems … rooted in colonial … and Western worldviews…” (Heleta, 2016, 1).
(295x52) 1), at the expense of authentic (African) indigenous ways of knowing in education and social life, including religion (Wane, 2008). Student unrest in post-Apartheid South African higher education in 2015, was an attempt to resist, *inter alia*, the prolongation of “… the notion that local or indigenous knowledge is inferior” and calling for curricula “that are relevant to the needs and life experiences of [African] students” (Mampane, Omidire and Aluko, 2018, 1). However, as I demonstrate in this in this paper, Africans are just as guilty for allowing the status quo to continue, long after colonialism (in a historical sense) supposedly ended with the emergence of self-rule and political independence from the late 1950s and early 1960s. Jose Cossa is forthright in his criticism that,… There came a time when we (Africans) forgot the advice deriving from the wisdom of our ancestors and opted to embrace a counter-productive paradigm of modernity perhaps in the hopes that we, too, would be modernized or that we could fool coloniality by decolonizing through a Western-modeled education replete with decolonial jargon framed within coloniality… (Cossa, 2018, 200).

While countries in sub-Saharan Africa are cognisant of the necessity to reform education in line with the principles of democratic pluralism (i.e. fairness and inclusion), there is exceptionality about RE as a curriculum space of that favours Christian RE on the account of tradition, history and attending to the needs of the majority faith (Nthontho, 2020). In some countries tokenistic attempts give a veneer of reform from the missionary type Bible Knowledge (BK), to inclusive RE (decolonised) when in reality the curriculum remains Christian based or gives Christianity a dominant position on the curriculum, functioning “... exactly the same as the colonial project” (Ntombana and Mokotso, 2018, 1). With the church as a dominant player in the provision of education since missionary/colonial times, the purpose of Christian RE in public schools in sub-Saharan Africa continues to be perceived in proselytisation terms (Dlamini, 2018; Matemba, 2013). It is an issue, which affects relations between different religious communities in countries (like Malawi) with a declared religious majority (i.e. Christianity) but also having an assertive religious minority like Islam (see Matemba, 2009). In Tanzania, a country with a Christian-Muslim demographic of 61% and 35%, respectively (Pew Research Center, 2015), it has been reported that allowing schools to be run on religious lines is a mistake. This is because such a dynamic hinders “… some parents of other religions from sending their children to these schools [and] ... creates more imbalances in education because Christians have more and better schools than Muslims” (Rukyaa, 2007, 203).

The reluctance or inability of the educational establishment in sub-Saharan Africa to rid RE of its colonial/missionary past is a major concern. That RE in sub-Saharan Africa remains largely conceptualised in confessional terms of the missionary/colonial era underpinned by a *caged* neo/colonial mindset should engender an intellectual readiness to break the chains of a colonial caged mentality towards action for radical reform in decolonising the RE curriculum. Such a curriculum while not ignoring the social and religious context in which it is framed, should nevertheless take seriously notions of religious pluralism towards “…effectively deimperialising embedded education legacies, global values and epistemological superiority” (Nyoni, 2019, 4), of one religion (Christianity) as an imperialist imposition in the hierarchy of knowledge in postcolonial education in sub-Saharan Africa (see Shahjahan, 2011).

In my attempt to address the persistence of *colonised* forms of RE in sub-Saharan Africa, three related questions are worth considering:

- To what extent can an anticolonial analytical framework facilitate (or not) the process of decolonising the RE curriculum in sub-Saharan Africa?
• What issues and concerns continue to bedevil decolonisation efforts in RE in sub-Saharan Africa?
• How can decolonised RE relevant to the sub-Saharan African context be conceptualised?

I argue that time has come for Africans to accept the cold reality that the missionary/colonial formulations of RE are out of step with postcolonial conceptions of education, and therefore the need to challenge the structural conditioning of the neo-colonial encounter in RE. An anticolonial approach should give Africans conceptual tools to understand the frustrations others (like myself) feel for the failure of RE to decolonise or when such attempts are made, the opposition faced that affect its implementation in schools. It is to this issue that we should turn in the next section.

**Anticolonialism as analytical framework**

Postcolonial theories while valid to understand the ideological, cultural and political entrapment of the formerly colonised nations (see Shizha, 2013; Simmons and Sefa-Dei, 2012; Wane, 2013), are perhaps insufficient to offer a radical shift towards remaking RE for the contemporary child in sub-Saharan Africa. My use of the term of ‘anticolonial’ rather than ‘postcolonial’, follows Shahjahan’s conceptualisation regarding the “… questionable way the latter signifier has been dominantly represented and taken up in the Western academy, as well as the critical theory that it has excluded in its body of thought (Shahjahan, 2011, 183).

Drawing also on my long experience (three decades) as an RE scholar and educator in different countries (Malawi, Botswana and UK), I am concerned that the veneer of curriculum reform in many countries in sub-Saharan masks the ‘true’ reality of a school subject still being scripted by a colonial/missionary framework of the past. In the absence of a framework that can deal sufficiently with the conceptualisation of RE, an anticolonial approach is applied as a relevant approach if RE (indeed education) is ever to decolonise sufficiently in line with the ethos of democratic pluralism upon which the post-colonial state in sub-Saharan Africa is premised (see Held, 1998; Matemba, 2009; Mwale and Chita, 2017). By this I mean that an anticolonial framework is perhaps better equipped to critique also the postcolonial status quo of RE, and secondly, challenge the perversity of a colonial caged mentality towards a re-conceptualisation RE de-linked from colonial/Eurocentric thought patterns. The framework also helps in “… decentring European knowledge, to centring African knowledge, to disrupting binaries of coloniser and colonised and grappling with ‘entangled’ forms of knowledge” (Jensen quoted in Heffernan, 2018, 438).

Informed by African/Africanist scholars (Sefa-Dei, 2011, 2012, 2015; Wane, 2006, 2008, 2013; Nyoni, 2019; Cossa, 2018) and other anti/postcolonial theorists (Shahjahan, 2011; Shizha, 2013; Nye, 2019), I employ anticolonial perspectives as theoretical lens through which to challenge imposed colonial/colonised practices and knowledges that continue to write over local contexts and indigenous knowledge in education in sub-Saharan Africa. An anticolonial framework is preferable because it offers resistance and radical action against postcolonial conceptions of education in which the “colonial space has been left intact to continue with its imperializing gaze, scripting and regularization of the ‘other’” (Simmons and Dei, 2012, 69).

As Shahjahan postulates, an anticolonial approach challenges the “… multiple incarnations of colonialism in the contemporary context and bridges epistemic and material realities to oppose, dismantle, and transform social relations stemming from the colonial past” (Shahjahan, 201, 182). As also applied to the study of religion more generally, the framework can help towards approaching decolonisation not simply in addressing religious pluralism but importantly challenging and dismantling Eurocentric/colonial epistemological foundations of RE in postcolonial sub-Saharan Africa (see Nye, 2019).
An anticolonial framework thus relates to African epistemologies and worldviews in moving the discourse beyond the limitations of a postcolonial framework because the prefix ‘anti’ denotes “… "…sites of resistance within colonial relations of power” [and giving the colonised] “… power and discourse to resist these colonial relationships” (Shahjahan, 2011, 183). Such a framework offers a “radical critique of the dominant, as the colonial oppressor whose antics and oppressive practices continue to script the lives of the subordinate and colonized even [if people] resist such dominance” (Simmons and Dei, 2012, 68). It thus contests the “promotion of colonial hierarchies of knowledge and monocultures of the mind” (see Shahjahan, 2011, 182), in calling for ‘epistemological equity’ through the recognition of others’ knowledge and reclamation of one’s identify. As Sefa-Dei has noted “… knowledge about our own existence, realities and identities can help produce a form of knowing legitimate in its own right and able to contest other ways of knowing” (Sefa-Dei, 2015, 5).

The postcolonial state in sub-Saharan Africa is essentially a neo-colonial one because “most Indigenous people who have been subjected to western education become a commodity of western ideology” (Wane, 2008, 187). As such, an anticolonial approach can provide a counter-challenge to the postcolonial encounter that “persists across time in the colonising of nations and peoples” (Simmons and Dei, 2012, 92). As Nye astutely puts it:

… Although the process of political decolonization and independence may have removed the colonizers from the direct context, there was also a process of internal colonization of the ruling classes of the colonized. That is, colonization did not necessarily end with political independence [and] … that colonization should be seen as a continuing process in the 21st century (Nye, 2019, 7).

Cossa goes further in pointing out the perversity of what he calls Afro-coloniality - that is “… coloniality perpetuated by African governments on their people” (Cossa, 108, 204). Therefore, an anticolonial framework offers a critique of the settled status of a largely colonised education in part because African leaders have continued “… to restrict their mental power to operate critically outside the [colonial] box… ” (Nyoni, 2019, 4). Crucially, the framework illuminates educational failures of post-colonial African governments to initiate radical curriculum reforms towards the decolonisation of the curriculum in ways that reflect the lived reality of learners in a democratic dispensation, and as recognition of the pluralistic nature of contemporary society. Importantly, an anticolonial framework provides the necessary lens in theorising patterns of decolonisation and challenging the emerging phenomenon of (re)colonisation occurring in RE in postcolonial sub-Saharan Africa (see Clapham, 2020). It is also revolutionary because it “offers possibilities for the colonised and marginalised subjects to design their own futures” (Simmons and Dei, 2012, 68). An anticolonial approach appraises decolonial actions (i.e. through curriculum reform), ensuring the localisation and indigenisation of RE so that the subject is able to express different cultural and religious worldviews, including the often maligned AIR (see Mignolo, 2000; Matemba and Lilemba, 2015; le Grange, 2016).

Regarding RE, an anticolonial is necessary because of its potential to engender the recognition of difference and celebration of religious and cultural heterogeneity and in this way act “… as a mode of resistance to homogenizing forces of colonial power, that construct sameness in order to overlook and consolidate power” (Shahjahan, 2011, 183). An anticolonial approach provides the conceptual tools that can adequately subject to critical reflection an approach to RE in sub-Saharan Africa underpinned by an educational policy that recognises the primacy of Christianity (see Matemba and Addai-Mununkum, 2019), while paradoxically, the nation state promotes democratic pluralism (Wiseman, 1993).

An anticolonial approach challenges a neo/colonial mindset and dominance of one nreligion with colonial vestiges (i.e. Christianity) continuing to script the conceptualisation of
RE, classroom discourse and stakeholders’ perception of the subject as an extension of a Christian worldview at the exclusion of the religious ‘other’. The process of critique and appraisal is important towards a radical conceptualisation of truly decolonised RE curriculum in sub-Saharan Africa. An anticolonial framework thus challenges current thinking about the aims of RE in postcolonial sub-Saharan Africa, and hopefully can compel stakeholders (government education officials, representatives of religious organisations, headteachers, teachers and parents) to rethink how best RE can be made democratic and transformative as preparation for young people towards citizenship (see Baumfield, 2003).

The anticolonial strategy being proposed is not anti-religion and nor does it seek to promote any one religion (or none) in public schools. Rather, it provides the means to deconstruct and re-construct RE within the context of religion as an enduring reality in the local and global social-cultural life. The framework helps RE to challenge forms of discrimination, religious monism and demonisation of ‘other’ religions, particularly AIR (see Hacket, 2003). Further, it supports an envisioned RE curriculum as an educational endeavour (not religious) for the transformation of learning towards the “growth of the potentiality for an active and critical reconstruction of different and differing perspectives …” (Wardekker and Miedema, 2001, 86). An anticolonial framework thus provides not only the theoretical tools to critique how RE engages with the (neo)colonial encounter but importantly its potential to liberate and empower those with the mandate (and responsibility) to oversee the subject towards forging a new path for RE as a decolonised school subject in sub-Saharan Africa.

**Decolonising Religious Education: Issues and concerns**

How countries in sub-Saharan Africa are attempting, if at all, to ‘decolonise RE’ (delinking RE from its colonial/missionary past), and the ways in which different countries are responding to this dynamic, including cases of (re)colonisation, are critical issues worth noting. Zambia (1984) is the first country in sub-Saharan Africa to initiate a decolonial path for RE (see Carmody, 2003, 140-141). Over the decades particularly from the 1990s, other countries (e.g. Ghana, South Africa1, Namibia, Botswana, Malawi, Zambia, Zimbabwe and Eswatini) have initiated similar reforms, but with different outcomes of success and failure (Museka, 2019; Matemba, 2005; Matemba and Addai-Mununkum, 2019; Lombard, 2011; Nthonto and Nieuwenhuis, 2016; Matemba, 2005). In some countries (e.g. Nigeria, Tanzania, Uganda and Lesotho) there has been little attention (if at all) given to RE in terms of pedagogical development and therefore the subject remains pretty much in a missionary/colonial formulation (Rukyaa, 2007; Ntombana and Mokotso, 2018; Josephine, 2018).

Deducing from the discourse of RE in sub-Saharan Africa, I can make out at least four different approaches and curriculum arrangements for RE:

- Confessional RE (BK) of the missionary/colonial era type remaining the preferred curriculum in public schools (e.g. Lesotho and Eswatini). In Muslim dominated countries (e.g. Guinea, Sierra Leone and Niger) Islamic RE (confessional) continues as has been since colonial times.
- Initial reforms resulting in the introduction of particularist RE in which two or more single-faith RE programmes are offered simultaneously on the curriculum to satisfy the confessional aims of competing religious communities (e.g. Uganda, Nigeria and Tanzania).
- Post-confessional RE in line with phenomenological/multi-faith/inclusive models (e.g. South Africa, Botswana, Namibia and Zambia). In some cases, ‘limited’ multi-faith RE

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1 In post-Apartheid South Africa RE (defined as ‘Religion Education’) is not offered as a standalone subject but integrated within a curriculum area called ‘Life Orientation’.
characterised by the prescription of a small number of religions for study (e.g. Malawi and Ghana).

- Half-measured approach in which different stages of the school curriculum adopt different models of RE, for instance, multi-faith/phenomenological RE in primary and junior secondary school while senior secondary school continues to offer Christian RE (e.g. Malawi).

A number of factors frustrate decolonising efforts in RE in sub-Saharan Africa. One issue is that decolonial developments in RE in sub-Saharan suffer from the problem of ‘wholesale’ policy borrowing (instead of policy ‘learning’) from Western countries perhaps because of the “… fallacious assumptions behind the notion that policy can simply be transplanted from one national context to another” (Phillips and Ochs, 2004, 773). The ‘home/national context’ for policy borrowing and enactment is particularly important taking into account elements of history (i.e. political independence from colonialism), culture (i.e. indigenous worldviews) and religious demography (i.e. pluralisation). In much of sub-Saharan Africa (e.g. Malawi, Botswana, Namibia, Zambia and Zimbabwe) follow uncritically Western conceptualisations of RE (Lombard, 2011; Museka, 2019, Matemba, 2005, 2009; Raditoaneng, 2011), curriculum reforms in RE particularly developments in the UK where neo-confessionalism (multi-faith RE with Christianity as primus inter pares) underscores the way the curriculum is conceptualised (see Matemba, 2015).

There is an uncritical assumption that what exists in Western countries is good for Africa as well (which definitely is not). The issue here is that European countries, for example UK, are former colonial nations and therefore by adopting their educational policy uncritically, African countries continue to enact policies and pedagogical approaches that are still being scripted by a hegemonic Western epistemology (see also Gearon, 2002). I argue that an anticolonialist mindset has potential to challenge the status quo in ensuring that RE in postcolonial sub-Saharan Africa is indigenised adequately by drawing on ethos of Ubuntu (humanness). In doing so, RE might help towards initiating young people “… into practices on the basis of a genuine commitment to bring about change, without privileging any dominant cultural community” (Waghid, 2014, 279). Unfortunately, however, as the case of Zambia with the revised 1997 secondary syllabi (2044 and 2046) and in Malawi with the 2006 revised senior secondary syllabus, would illustrate, these ‘Zambianised’ and ‘Malawianised’ RE programmes, respectively, have not been implemented in schools due to lack of resources or stakeholder intransigence (see Matemba and Addai-Mununkum, 2019; Mwale and Chita, 2017).

A concern to indigenising RE relates not only to the problem of conceptualising RE in Christian terms, but also to the blatant demonisation of AIR (Matemba and Addai-Mununkum, 2019). Such demonisation has Christian roots emerging in missionary/colonial times but sadly continuing in the postcolonial era - long after sub-Saharan Africa is supposed to be politically independent - although national constitutions in the various countries have embed religious and cultural freedoms and rights. As I have argued elsewhere:

… When Western education was introduced during the second half of the nineteenth century, African moral [religious] values, and the institutions and practices that shaped them, were largely condemned by missionaries and colonialists as being obstacles to a more desirable system of thought, practice and religion (Matemba, 2010, 332).

In postcolonial sub-Saharan Africa, RE is gripped by the perversity of a mindset influenced by a corrosive neo-colonial discourse of demonism and Satanism, resulting in the ostracisation of AIR in educational discourse in preference of normative religions such as
Christianity (Matemba and Addai-Mununkum, 2019). The issue is that while generally teachers have a positive attitude towards the inclusion of AIR in RE, as a Zimbabwean study has demonstrated, the curriculum is not effectively set up to promote this because it is “… still functionally Christocentric” (Marashe, Ndamba and Chireshe, 2009, 48). In Botswana the new (2012) ‘decolonised’ syllabus in senior secondary schools while it includes the study of some world religions and AIR, the dominance of Christianity is evident and covers topics such as ‘early Christian missionaries’ and ‘contribution of the Christian churches’ (Botswana Government, 2012). Similarly, in Zambia although the RE curriculum has attempted to incorporate other religions and none (i.e. Humanism), it is essentially Christocentric (see Mwale and Chita, 2017).

Stakeholder resistance (‘gate-keeping’) is another factor frustrating decolonising efforts in RE, particularly related to school ownership and the vexed issue of religious identity. As in many countries in the region, churches still operate a substantial percentage of public schools, seen as retainers of their Christian identity. In Malawi and Lesotho, for example, churches own or control about 80% and 90% of public schools, respectively, a situation largely unchanged since colonial/missionary times (see Matemba, 2013; Ntombana and Mokotso, 2018). In these schools, Christian RE remains the mainstay of education and as such, decolonising RE has always met stiff resistance from churches and Christian parents who see RE in terms of identity keeping and faith propagation. In such cases, these stakeholders are averse to a decolonised curriculum (i.e. multi-faith RE) as a way of preventing these other religions “… from ‘corrupting’ the religious identity of children of their members…” (Matemba, 2013, 376, quotation marks in the original). For instance, in Lesotho (95% Christian population), RE has failed to decolonise and remains Bible based, *inter alia*, because policy decisions in education are influenced by church leaders who interact with senior government officials appointed to their positions along denominational lines (Setloboko-Chokobane and Moshoeshoe, 2003).

Related to stakeholder ‘gate keeping’, is the issue of teachers who self-declare their religious allegiance because they see their role as Christian apologists or at least seek to present Christianity in a good light to the children (Museka, 2019; Simuchimba, 2001). Such teachers obstruct attempts to decolonise RE or hardly adopt decolonised approaches because they see their role as extension of the missionary (whether they realise it or not) project whose strategy is to indoctrinate children into a Christian worldview underpinned by a neo-colonial framework (see Ntombana and Mokotso, 2018; Ndlovu, 2014; Simuchimba, 2001). A comparative study of RE in Malawi and Ghana captured the following sentiment from a (Christian) teacher:

I do not accept these other religions as worth teaching in our schools, essentially, because we Christians desire to convert these people to our religion, and thus, it defeats logic on my part to teach a religion I want children to convert from (Matemba and Addai-Mununkum, 2019, 166).

A further concern is that schools face a challenge of change when implementing new (post-confessional) RE because they subscribe to a religious orientation connected with the powerful Christian bloc in sub-Saharan Africa (Nthontho and Nieuwenhuis, 2016; Simuchimba, 2001; Matemba, 2009). In South Africa, for example, headteachers and teachers struggle “to accommodate other religions [fearing] that they are compromising their own [Christianity]” (Nthontho, 2017, 47).

The continued practice of offering particularist RE (e.g. Nigeria, Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda) - that is separate mono-faith programmes - is at odds with a decolonised project for RE because it serves only the interests of individual religious communities concerned (see Josephine, 2018; Svensson, 2010). Almost in all situations where particularist RE exists, AIR is not offered as a standalone programme on the curriculum. Lack of teaching and learning resources, ineffective initial teacher preparation and absence of in-service opportunities to re-
orient teachers on post-confessional approaches have frustrated decolonial efforts in RE in sub-Saharan Africa (see Matemba and Addai-Mununkum, 2019, Svensson, 2010; Raditoaneng, 2011; Josephine, 2018). Consequently (as in Zimbabwe), AIR is sidelined in because RE “… teachers do not have knowledge of the religion and as such tend to avoid it even when the syllabus gives them the green light to teach it” (Marashe, Ndamba and Chireshe, 2009, 47). In Malawi, teachers prefer BK than the new multi-faith RE on the dual curriculum arrangement in junior secondary because they have confidence and material knowledge in BK (Matemba, 2009). Similarly, in Malawi, Ghana, Namibia, Zimbabwe and Zambia although multi-faith RE is in operation, some teachers prefer BK or adopt Christian confessional practices in RE because they feel ill equipped to teach multi-faith RE (Museka, 2019, Simuchimba, 2001; Iita, 2014, Matemba, 2009; Matemba and Addai-Mununkum, 2019).

One of the emerging issues in sub-Saharan Africa is the re-colonisation of RE, as the recent case of Eswatini (formerly Swaziland) illustrates, where a new phenomenon of recolonising an already decolonised RE curriculum can be observed. As a concept, recolonisation is a rarely used term in colonial/postcolonial discourse. In his article “Briefing: Decolonising African Studies”, Clapham sees recolonisation as the “… subordination of knowledge production within the continent [Africa] to modes of thought that have been devised outside it, and directed to very different purposes from the understanding of African peoples within their own geographic and social setting…” (Clapham, 2020, 148). Returning to Eswatini, in 2000 the government introduced decololnised RE (i.e. multi-faith RE) but suddenly in 2017 through a government directive a compulsory Bible-based RE was re-introducing apparently to socialise “… students in Swazi schools with Christian values… [and] help students to see life from God’s point of view” due to the (unfounded) fear that inclusive RE can fall fundamentalism and social disunity (Dlamini, 2018, 46-47). In the final section below, I attempt to conceptualise an envisioned decolonised RE for sub-Saharan Africa.

Conceptualising an ‘envisioned’ decolonised RE
Chilisa has identified a five-stage typology of decolonisation. First, rediscovery and recovery – people recovering their lost culture and identity. Secondly, mourning - lamenting the continued assault on peoples’ identity and social realities. Next, dreaming - imagining alternative ways of recovering peoples’ histories, worldviews, and indigenous knowledge systems. Fourth, commitment - activists demanding commitment to ensure that the voice of the colonised/marginalised is heard and sustained. Finally, action - dreams and commitments that translate into strategies for transformation (Chilisa, 2012). The third stage in the iterative process of decolonisation is interesting and resonates with the issues I wish to elucidate in this section in daring to dream an ‘envisioned’ decolonised RE. By ‘dreaming’, colonised peoples can begin to draw on their rich history, heritage and culture so that they are able to theorise and imagine alternative possibilities on how best they can deal with issues confronting them, for instance, drawing a different school curriculum (le Grange, 2016). It is this point that gives this section an important cue regarding what I call decolonised RE.

The term ‘decolonised RE’ is one I have coined myself to describe the conceptualisation of a radical approach to designing a new and different model of RE that is relevant for postcolonial Africa. Such a programme of RE is eclectic in nature because it draws on different perspectives and approaches of and to contemporary RE. Crucially, it is anticolonialist in its approach in resisting the perpetuation of colonial/Western missionary ideology in RE, and reclaiming the value of indigenous/local spiritual and cultural identities, including the commitment to embrace the religious ‘other’ in the remaking of Africanised RE. In drawing out such a curriculum ‘situationality’ is important pertaining to how situational realities that speak to complex realities of children’s lived experiences, for example, religious and cultural dualities, non-religion and other worldviews, are reflected in RE (see Mart’i, 2017).
The envisioned decolonised RE stands to challenge both the confessional approach of the past (i.e. missionary/colonial) and the neo-confessional approach of the present that promotes some religions like Christianity or Islam and excludes/demonises ‘others’, particularly AIR as reflected in the language of RE (Adamo, 2011). Decolonised RE emerges through the process of radical curriculum reform not merely as a way to replace Christian confessionalism with liberal confessionalism (see Wright, 2003), but also that grapples with the intricate processes of deconfessionalising RE “… in order to guarantee the freedom of religion and education in a religiously diversified and secularised society” (see Franken, 2019, 63). Thus, the process of decolonising RE must involve the process decentring Eurocentric RE curriculum introduced during the colonial/missionary era (i.e. focusing mainly on Christianity) towards the creation of a ‘decolonial’ space that considers all religions as ‘equals’ and by their own merits. The process must also include deliberate efforts and policy changes in re-defining RE to ensure its suitability in postcolonial Africa, a process that also guarantees equal representation of the religion ‘other’, including AIR (Driesen and Tayob, 2016).

How will the envisioned decolonised RE look like? Decolonised RE will be the type that is dislodged from the confines of a confessional past, whether Christian or Islam, to reflect the lived reality of religious pluralism in postcolonial sub-Saharan Africa – that is it will engage critically with common and specific religious traditions, including recognition of non-religion and secular representations (see Boudreau, 2011). By this, I also mean decolonised RE that undergoes a critical process of postcolonial reform in ensuring that there is no hierarchy of importance in favour one religion or a particular worldview (Gearon, 2001). Decolonised RE in question will see religious pluralism not as a problem to deal with but a reality to be embraced, and in which religions have equitable status in educational policy, school curriculum and classroom discourse (Horton 1993). It has the potential to challenge the subjugation and misrepresentation of certain forms of religious knowledge, for example, AIR which is cast as inferior and perceived in pre-modern terms while promoting foreign knowledge (i.e. Christian or Islam) as universal knowledge, and yet both of these religions are imposed in sub-Saharan Africa (Matemba and Addai-Mununkum, 2019). The envisioned decolonised RE should emphasise dialogue based on “… openly shared experiences and a common humanity, irrespective of vast differences” (Lombard, 2011, 129) engages positively with non-normative religions (e.g. AIR) in ensuring that classroom discourse does not demonise the religious ‘other’ (Matemba and Addai-Mununkum, 2019).

I am also thinking of decolonised RE as an extension of what Baumfield calls ‘democratic RE’ – that is it will be a form of inclusive RE offered “as a force for democracy through critical engagement rather than conformity” (Baumfield, 2003, 184). As an educational rather than a religious activity, decolonised RE will be the kind that is fit for purpose in a rapidly “… changing society characterized by secularization [3.3% of the population in sub-Saharan Africa is religiously unaffiliated], religious diversity and de-traditionalization” (Franken and Loobuyck, 2013, 482). Decolonised RE is the type that can create a ‘de-colonial’ space that “honour[s] the agency of voices of the other” (Hyde, 2011, 28), while also challenging marginalisation and elitism of the colonial religion (see Marcos, 2009). Grounded in local contexts decolonised RE has the potential to develop in children an attitude of embracing diversity (philosophical, ideological orientations and worldviews) and appreciating difference beyond merely the notion of accepting religious ‘otherness’ (Nyoni, 2019; Bråten and Everington, 2019).

While recognising the pedagogical limitations of multi-faith RE (phenomenological relativism, religious illiteracy and ‘mishmash’ approach (Homan and King, 1993; Conroy and Davies, 2008), decolonised RE should be in sync with core elements of Wright’s Critical Realist Approach as a more suitable pedagogical tool that can deal with religious and cultural diversity at school (Wright, 2003). The essence of this approach is that the study of religion in
schools should begin by accepting that the human knowledge of the world has gaps and ambiguities. Wright claims that this helps RE to escape the anti-realist excesses of postmodernity, which has dogged the subject for a long time (Wright 2004). Despite that Wrights’ approach pays scant attention to religion a core issue of study in RE (otherwise what else will the subject be about if religion is not a key feature), it offers a useful pedagogical tool in four key areas that can benefit decolonised RE. First, the approach ensures that children’s freedom of belief is respected. Secondly, it encourages children to be tolerant of other people’s beliefs. Third, it facilitates informed debates, including debates on controversial issues. Finally, and hopefully, it helps children in their pursuit of truth (ones truth) and truthful living (Wright, 2009).

I must hasten to add, however, that implementing a decolonised RE programme might have its challenges in its engagement with the contested notion of religious pluralism and diversity in the curriculum and classroom discourse. The problem is that in sub-Saharan Africa it would seem that some countries that have engaged with pluralist approaches in RE marginalise non-normative religions and worldviews which are treated as an add-on and something to be dealt with rather than treating these as legitimate forms of knowledge deserving equal treatment on the curriculum. A recent study on Malawi and Ghana found that although the countries have pluralist forms of RE, in reality “… classroom discourses tended to present a theological superiority of Christianity” (Matemba and Addai-Mununkum, 2019, 168). What such evidence illustrate is that achieving true religious pluralism has not been an easy-sell given the complexities associated with how schools are structured, the politics of what knowledge is of most worth and the religious diversities students and teachers bring to the table. While cultural pluralism theories often acknowledge religious diversity, they seldom account for religious inclusivity, as they tend to overemphasize race and ethnicity to the neglect of other markers of difference. Eck (2006) argues that religious pluralism should go beyond diversity and tolerance to an energetic engagement with diversity. Contrary to perceptions that seek to make unification the prime goal of pluralism, Eck echoes the ‘salad bowl’ argument and champions an ‘orchestra-pluralism’ - one that promotes harmony and still preserves the distinct features of each instrument (Eck, 2006).

I argue that religious pluralism is not tolerance because tolerance involves “the support for the rights and liberties of others, others who one dislikes, disapproves of, disagrees with, find threatening, or toward whom one has some other negative attitude” (Vogt, 1997, xxiv). In agreement with Eck, a tolerant person ‘puts up’ with others of differing faiths and accommodates their concerns, but that is not enough description to merit the definition of pluralism. True pluralism arises out of the engagement that creates a common society from diversity. Pluralism does not seek to “obliterate or erase difference, nor to smooth out differences under a universalizing canopy, but rather to discover ways of living, connecting, relating, arguing, and disagreeing in a society of differences” (Eck, 2007, 745). Exclusionary practices are anti-pluralistic but diversity and tolerance are not synonyms of pluralism either. Diversity and tolerance are springboards to engagement “of difference in the often-difficult yet creative ways that we … can observe, investigate, and interpret” (Eck, 2007, 758). The success of an envisioned decolonised RE will depend therefore not only on how it factors in all these complex issues, and pedagogical nuances but also on the courage of governments to see through its creation and implementation or as in Chilisa’s typology, translating the dream into strategies towards decolonising (i.e. transforming) the RE curriculum in sub-Saharan Africa (Chilisa, 2012).

Conclusion
In Sub-Saharan Africa, RE has since colonial times been dominated by a missionary/Western epistemological hegemony influencing how the curriculum is conceptualised, material content
that promotes one religion (e.g. Christianity) at the exclusion of others, particularly AIR, and how key stakeholders still value ‘colonised’ RE, which is an extension of the colonial project. Even when attempts to decolonise RE are initiated, resulting in the formulation of post-confessional/inclusive programmes, such efforts face a myriad of challenges and consequently, school practice tend to return to the well-established confessional programme (i.e. Christian RE) which has remained largely unchanged since missionary times.

The discussion in this paper has laid bare how countries in sub-Saharan Africa seem unable to resist the Western epistemological pull in the construction of RE offered in public education. Part of the problem points to the persistence of ‘caged colonial mentality’ (i.e. ‘colonised mind’ (see also Wane, 2008)) even in what is supposed to be a postcolonial milieu with African leaders in-charge of their countries since gaining political independence to end Western colonialism. The blame game of the coloniser as the perpetual perpetrator and the African as perpetual victim should be cast in a different light, because African leaders have been at the helm of power for more than two generations, and as such should hold the bull by the horns in making meaningful and lasting decolonial changes in education, including RE.

What I have tried to argue in this paper is that it is imperative to cast an ‘anticolonial gaze’ in any effort towards re-creating a curricula that not only challenges the current neo-colonial conceptions of RE but also one that is ultra-sensitive to the needs of an independent postcolonial sub-Saharan Africa. An anticolonial analytical framework offers critical lens to critique not only the colonial but also crucially the postcolonial environment (and its actors) if RE in sub-Saharan Africa is ever to decolonise (sufficiently) in line with the post-independence ideals of freedom (from colonial/Western domination), religious and cultural rights, democratic pluralism and so on. An anticolonial framework offers radical tools of resistance for Africans to challenge both the missionary/colonial and postcolonial conceptions of RE, and empowers them to embrace decolonial approaches towards a radical remaking of the RE curriculum, including particular attention given to AIR.

The ‘envisioned’ decolonised RE suggested in this paper offers not only an idea (dreaming) but commitment and action as well, towards decolonised RE curriculum reforms in sub-Saharan Africa. As I have argued throughout this paper, a decolonial transformation of RE that speaks to the socio-cultural, political and religious environment of an ‘independent’ postcolonial sub-Saharan Africa, is urgently needed. Educational administrators, curriculum planners and policymakers/actors—in consultation with schools, teachers, parents and other key stakeholders (e.g. religious leaders)—should ‘bite the bullet’ to ensure that the desired decolonial reforms in RE are materialised. The paper has attempted to provide initial discussion points and debate in this important area.

**References**


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