

Religious Education

The official journal of the Religious Education Association

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/urea20

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To cite this article: Yonah Hisbon Matemba (2024) Neocolonialism, Anti-Coloniality and Religious Education: New Lessons from Africa South of the Sahara (ASoS), *Religious Education*, 119:3, 210-226, DOI: [10.1080/00344087.2024.2352977](https://doi.org/10.1080/00344087.2024.2352977)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00344087.2024.2352977>



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Published online: 20 May 2024.



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Neocolonialism, Anti-Coloniality and Religious Education: New Lessons from Africa South of the Sahara (ASoS)

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ABSTRACT

This paper initiates a novel discourse advocating for the anti-colonization of religious education (RE) in Africa South of the Sahara (ASoS). It illustrates how anti-colonial critiques can not only offer more precise theoretical perspectives but also generate a practical imperative for a paradigm shift in a school subject *still* influenced by what I have labeled as the neocoloniality of power. In some countries, attempts to decolonize RE through multi-faithism are being forsaken, reverting the subject to the Christonormativity of the colonial era. The paper contends that the process of reconceptualizing RE with an anti-colonial mindset should inspire innovative ideas for an anti-colonized RE aligned with the educational goals in an African postcolonial environment.

KEYWORDS

Religious education; anti-colonialism; South of the Sahara; paradigm shift

Introduction

The paper critically examines religious education (RE) in African public schools South of the Sahara (ASoS)¹, emphasizing its failure to adequately address the imperative of decolonization in education—a subject rooted in colonial education for proselytization purposes (Mart 2011). While much has been debated about the deleterious effects of colonial education, especially its *epistemic violence* on the minds of the colonized (Fanon 1986; Mwiria 1991; Nyoni 2019; Wane 2008; Fasakin 2021), this paper focuses on the religious exclusivity of RE in African schools, which promotes the colonizer's religion and marginalizes alternative religious knowledge.

The aim of this paper is to initiate a new conversation by integrating anti-colonial thinking with extant literature, policy rhetoric, and classroom discourse on decoloniality in ASoS countries, drawing on intellectual ideas such as those found in the Special Issue of the *British Journal of Religious Education* (Gearon et al. 2021). While advocating for the anti-colonization of RE, I acknowledge my structural location as an African male and a Christian, cognizant of the patriarchal attitudes affecting women

¹In the acronym "ASoS" the use of the term "Africa South of the Sahara" (instead of "Sub-Sahara") challenges the colonial "othering" of this region as "sub" to rest of the African continent.

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in both religion and society. I am aware of how my gender and socio-cultural environment in which I was raised have privileged me in relation to the disadvantage suffered by female Africans (Nye 2019; Matemba 2022). Drawing on 30 years of teaching experience, teacher education, field research, and publications in RE across ASoS countries, I utilize my African cultural identity and insider knowledge to critique extant research and relevant curriculum materials, including RE syllabuses.

Covering 49 of the 54 countries in Africa, this study is geographically broad but limited in scope. Not all ASoS countries offer RE in public schools, and even where it is taught, accessibility to relevant curriculum materials varies. Despite these limitations, the study focuses on 15 countries representing all four geographical areas (southern, central, eastern, and western) within ASoS (Nigeria, Malawi, Eswatini, Zambia, Sierra Leone, Zimbabwe, Kenya, Uganda, Ghana, Lesotho, Namibia, Botswana, South Africa, Rwanda, and Tanzania), addressing the scarcity of scholarly attention to RE in this region.

Colonialism and religious education

With the exception of Ethiopia and Liberia, ASoS countries, like the rest of Africa, fell victim to the European imperial invasion following the 1884 mad scramble for possession of Africa. This unenviable development not only facilitated the annexation of African lands by European powers (Britain, Germany, Portugal, Italy, Belgium, Spain, and France) but also imposed a socio-cultural and religious value system that perpetuated an epistemological hegemony in education, including in RE.

The intricate relationship between missionaries, education, and colonialism has been thoroughly discussed in extant scholarship (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991; Pearce 2006; Englund 2011). Deirdre Raftery, discussing the role of mission schools in colonial Africa, particularly focusing on RE, addresses how these schools served as instruments of imperialism (Raftery 2019). As highlighted by some Africanists (Paustian 2014; Ngugi 1986), the introduction of the colonialists' religion, such as Christianity, and its profound impact on education *entrenched* colonization. This process was facilitated, *inter alia*, by RE as “*missio Dei*,” allowing God to use a Christocentric syllabus as a tool for evangelizing heathen children, perceived as more receptive to conversion than adults (Vallgård 2015; Worsley 2018). Eugene Stock further emphasizes how it was the duty of every Christian in the colonies to propagate the knowledge of the gospel among the heathen (Stock cited in Prochner, May, and Kaur 2009).

The cognitive power of foreign-self-imposed religions in Africa has been such that although historical colonization, in terms of territorial occupation, largely ended from the 1960s onward, non-indigenous religions, especially Christianity (62.9%) and Islam (35.2%),² continue to dominate socio-cultural and religious lives of people in Africa, at the expense of indigenous/ancestral religions (3.3%) (Pew Research Center 2015). Despite recognizing other religions through multi-faith approaches in RE, a neo-confessional Christian framework, reflecting a missionary/colonial influence, persists in knowledge production and dissemination in ASoS countries (Kaunda 2018; Heleta 2016).

²In addition, in ASoS countries, there are pockets of Buddhists, Rastas, Hindus, Sikhs, Bahá'ís, and Jews.

A common justification for maintaining RE in its colonial/confessional format, which warrants challenges, is the preference for Christianity or Islam owing to its tradition, history, and majority faith status (Nthontho 2020; Museka 2019). In regions with a significant Christian or Muslim following, proponents argue for the continued dominance of the majority religion in education (Nthontho 2020). While religious faith has its place in education, particularly in faith-based schools and students' personal lives, the RE classroom should desist from being a space of evangelization that pits one religion against another. Rather, it should be a place of active citizenship promoting the values of education, including understanding, equality, fairness, empathy, and responsibility, while challenging monism, hegemony, and religious "othering" (Matemba and Addai-Mununkum 2021).

Neocoloniality of power

Aníbal Quijano coined the term "coloniality of power" to elucidate the interrelatedness of colonial structures of power, control, and hegemony that perpetuate European colonial legacies in the contemporary era (Quijano 2007). Coloniality of power is related therefore to the presence of colonial situations in policy choices and governance patterns in postcolonial Africa, undermining African agency in dismantling colonial legacies (Fasakin 2021).

In postcolonial Africa, I extend Quijano's conceptualization to what I term the "neocoloniality of power." This neocoloniality exists in behaviors of Africans that contribute to the perpetuation of coloniality on themselves, akin to José Cossa's concept of "Afrocoloniality" – coloniality perpetuated by African governments, social systems, and institutions on their people (Cossa 2018). This persistence stems from Africans' inability to challenge a colonial-caged mentality that leads them to think, operate, and support structures aligning with imperialist choreographies and architectures, echoing the colonial past (Nyoni 2019).³ Kwame Nkrumah (Ghana), Kenneth Kaunda (Zambia), and Julius Nyerere (Tanzania) and other visionary African leaders warned about the insidious power of neocolonialism, identifying it as the most dangerous stage of imperialism (see Nkrumah 1965).

In ASoS countries, the neocoloniality of power manifests through economics, politics, education, and other global pressures, exerting the influence of former colonial powers on previously colonized regions (Spivak 1991; Clapham 2020). These structures propagate European epistemological hegemony on knowledge-making among African children, met with limited resistance. Particularly concerning is the prevalence of Western-style schools seen as moral enclaves, where Africans expect and demand their children to be socialized into Englishness, perpetuating self-imposed colonization (Race et al. 2022). The persistent use of foreign languages (English, French, and Spanish) as *lingua franca* further marginalizes African languages in education, governance, business, and media (Wane 2006; Matemba and Lilemba 2015).

³Africans have continued the demonization of African indigenous beliefs and justifying the colonizing effect of Christianity to the extent of indigenizing foreign religions like Christianity in the use of terms such as "African Christianity" or "authentic African Christian theology".

The neocoloniality of power expresses a condition where, despite African nations being “free,” powerful elites in politics, education, religion, and business act as self-appointed “agents” of the colonial project by perpetuating coloniality instead of challenging it (see Kaoma 2012; Matemba 2021a). In this context, the significance of education in the intellectual and cultural socialization of the African child becomes a form of oppression, contributing to epistemic violence when African parents insist on an education of whiteness. Njoki Wane has noted how “... Indigenous people who have been subjected to western education become a commodity of western ideology” (Wane 2008: 187). Savo Heleta observes that Africans often fail to challenge epistemologies rooted in colonial and Western worldviews, sidelining authentic indigenous ways of knowing in education, exemplified by the continued scripting of RE within a colonial/missionary framework (Heleta 2016; Wane 2008).

Despite the rhetoric of political independence, African leadership must acknowledge its failure to challenge Western epistemologies in education, including RE (Matemba and Lilemba 2015; Sefa Dei 2008). Frantz Fanon’s work precisely challenged this neocoloniality of power when he called formerly colonized peoples to deal with the false consciousness, double consciousness, and identity masks that often befall the colonized mind (Fanon 1986). Similarly, James Ngugi was blunt in reminding Africans to critique false universalism that comes in the guise that only “Westernized” canons attribute to truth, and as such the need to decolonize themselves, as in the canon of knowledge-making all perspectives are valid (Ngugi 1986).

Decolonization in education is essential to challenge historical colonization and the neocoloniality of power. As an epistemological and political movement, decolonization addresses the marginalization of “others” and provides liberatory tools and language to challenge injustice and underlying structures of oppression in education (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2015; Heleta 2016). Decolonization dislodges hegemonic epistemologies and power hierarchies, going beyond classic criticisms of whiteness as a racial identifier of coloniality (Cusworth 2022; Felsch 2023). Emnet Woldegiorgis (2021) emphasizes that decolonization should adopt a pluralistic approach accommodating diverse structures of knowledge, departing from a monolithic epistemic tradition.

Anti-colonial framework

I propose an anti-colonial framework as the lens through which to comprehend and critically challenge the neocoloniality of power and its impact on RE in ASoS countries. This framework draws from anti-colonial struggles—political, military, and intellectual—that facilitated independence in many African countries, particularly from the late 1950s to the 1970s (Nkrumah 1965). Although somewhat overlooked in postcolonial theory (Elam 2017), anti-colonial theory proves instructive as it scrutinizes imposition wherever it occurs (Kempf 2009a: 15).

Embedded in pre-independence political discourse, the prefix “anti” in the term anti-colonial is pivotal, symbolizing resistance and defiance against colonizing power and its pervasive past and contemporary influence (Wane 2008; Sefa Dei 2008). It signifies resistance and radical action against postcolonial education, where the colonial

space persists, maintaining its imperializing gaze, scripting, and regulation of the “other” (Simmons and Sefa Dei 2012, 69). An anti-colonial framework therefore transcends the limitations of a postcolonial framework, challenging the “promotion of colonial hierarchies of knowledge and monocultures of the mind” and advocating for “epistemological equity” through recognizing others’ knowledge and reclaiming one’s identity (see Shahjahan 2011, 182).

The revolutionary nature of this framework lies in its capacity to “offer possibilities for the colonized and marginalized subjects to design their own futures” (Simmons and Dei 2012, 68). As Shahjahan notes, it provides “sites of resistance within colonial relations of power,” empowering the colonized with the discourse to resist colonial relationships (Shahjahan 2011, 183). It offers a comprehensive approach to resist all aspects of oppression and domination, whether induced by the coloniality of power (Quijano 2007) or the neocoloniality of power. An anti-colonial framework therefore equips indigenous peoples with ideological clarity to break colonial hegemony in education, fostering a “radical critique of the dominant” (Simmons and Dei 2012, 68). The framework thus engenders a critical attitude in helping people to “... question as we walk...” (McLaren 2009, xvi) by challenging what I have described earlier as “neocoloniality of power” as—and importantly—it can target hegemonic epistemologies both in the colonial (historical) and postcolonial (contemporary) in ways removed from the one-sided traction of non-whites seen always targeting whites as perpetuating coloniality (Sefa Dei 2008; Felsch 2023).

As highlighted by Woldegiorgis (2021), coloniality exists in Africa’s traditional knowledge structures in education and social life. Africans must grapple with their failure to uproot “ongoing colonial power structure” in the postcolonial present, perpetuated by gatekeepers’ indelible influence scripting knowledge-making in RE (Matemba 2021b). Emard and Nelson (2021) challenge Africans to acknowledge their “complicity in colonial systems” manifested in gendered and racialized social hierarchies, essential for rooting out deep-rooted systemic forms of coloniality in Africa’s postcolonial education. The anti-colonial framework stresses the need to actively seek the dismantling of privileges that punish others and effect the elimination of colonialism and colonization (Kempf 2009a). What makes the anti-colonial approach useful is its practical utility in dealing with “day-to-day material and immaterial operations and manifestations of oppression” (Kempf 2009b, 15).

As the African postcolonial state is essentially a neocolonial one, an anti-colonial approach can provide a counterchallenge to the postcolonial encounter that “persists across time in the colonizing of nations and peoples” (Simmons and Dei 2012, 92). Such a counterchallenge should go beyond merely calling for the demolition of colonial statues of Rhodes at Cape Town or Oxford Universities, or even pulling down statues of confederate leaders in the USA, King Leopold of Belgium, or those who profited from slavery in the United Kingdom. Rather, it should be about the inclusion of counternarratives to be placed alongside the colonial narratives that were placed to commemorate the people represented by these statues, ensuring the proper identification of the terrible wrongs these people did and how Black people suffered and died as a consequence of their actions. In doing so, these statues will not remain an immortal reminder of their colonial misdeeds but that such revelations will, in some way, atone for what happened. This is at the heart of an anti-colonial framework as

it responds not only to systems of oppression but also to the individual acts of colonial perpetrators.

For RE, an anti-colonial framework is relevant, offering intellectual insights to deconstruct the colonized status of RE and providing practical tools to dislodge hegemonic epistemologies for a curriculum befitting a postcolonial setting (Matemba 2021a). In RE, children's lived reality should foster recognition of differences and celebrations of religious and cultural heterogeneity, acting as resistance to homogenizing forces of colonial power (Shahjahan 2011). An anti-colonial framework offers analytical tools for the *radical* transformation needed to decolonize RE, addressing the subject's entanglement with colonial legacies since the introduction of education in Africa by missionaries and colonial administrations (Matemba 2022).

Critiquing dominant epistemologies is crucial for proposing a radical conceptualization, essential for realizing a *truly* anti-colonized RE curriculum in ASoS countries. An anti-colonial framework must contest current thinking about the aims of RE, ensuring inclusivity in conception and transformative agendas (Baumfield 2003). This strategy is not anti-religion; instead, it challenges the displacement of indigenous ways of knowing by hegemonic normative religions that have dominated RE since colonial times. The framework aids RE in challenging various forms of discrimination, religious monism, and the demonization of non-normative religions, promoting an envisioned future where RE is an educational endeavor rather than a religiously confessional one, fostering the transformation of learning (see Matemba and Addai-Mununkum 2021; Wardekker and Miedema 2001).

An anti-colonial framework scrutinizes the entrenched nature of predominantly *colonized* RE, highlighting the shortcomings of postcolonial African governments in implementing transformative curriculum reforms for the decolonization of education. It not only offers theoretical tools to critique RE's engagement with the neocolonial encounter but also empowers those overseeing the subject to create an equitable epistemological space that accommodates diverse ways of knowing, contributing to a path of decolonized RE (Simmons and Sefa Dei 2012). Connected to anti-colonial struggles, this framework aligns with African epistemologies and worldviews and the recognition of subaltern voices, paving the way for RE that is culturally rooted (Fiedler, Gundani, and Mijoga 1997; Mignolo 2000; Felsch 2023).

Despite potential limitations, such as its impact on decommodifying subjectivities, the anti-colonial framework offers sufficient analytical and practical tools to conceptualize and actualize a decolonized RE, aiming to dismantle the neocoloniality of power dynamics perpetuating imperialism (McLaren 2009).

Curriculum reform challenges in ASoS countries

In many ASoS countries, public school RE faces challenges in implementing curriculum reforms responsive to contemporary socio-cultural dynamics, such as pluralism, and democracy, with limited success (Asamoah-Gyadu 2010; Museka 2019; Republic of Rwanda 2014; Republic of Sierra Leone 2023). Efforts to introduce plural voices and deconfessionalize RE have encountered obstacles, exemplified in South Africa's unique post-apartheid curriculum valuing indigenous knowledge systems but facing challenges in implementation (Republic of South Africa 2003, 2; Nthontho 2020).

Dominance of Christianity and stakeholder resistance

Historically dominated by Christianity, ASoS struggles with the religious, rather than educational, function of RE, facing gatekeeper resistance from churches and parents, hindering meaningful decolonial reforms (Englund 2011; Matemba and Addai-Mununkum 2021). Stakeholders, particularly Christian parents, resist moves toward religious pluralism in RE, impeding transitions from confessional to non-confessional plurality (Bweyale and Tugume 2021). The tension between the government's push for deconfessional RE and the powerful Christian bloc's resistance poses a complex challenge. In Lesotho, for example, stakeholder rejection to replace missionary Christian RE with multi-faith RE in 2006, reflect such resistance to decolonization (Matemba et al. 2023).

Recapitulating the colonized status of religious education

Eswatini (formerly Swaziland) presents a peculiar case of recolonization in its (dis) engagement with multi-faith RE, reverting to an earlier Bible Knowledge format in 2017, echoing colonial-era practices (US State Department 2018; Kingdom of Eswatini 2018, 11). The Oxford historian, James Belich, in his analysis of the history of the Anglo-World (i.e., between 1880s and 1960s) initially coined the term "recolonization" to explain how people in British-Anglo settler colonies (e.g., Australia, Canada, and New Zealand) "... thought of themselves as co-owners of the British Empire and of Old British culture and heritage" (Belich 2001, cited in Jackson 2020, 43). In political theater, recolonization is the reemergence of the colonial ("empire") through deploying rhetorics of "humanitarian intervention" as "inevitable necessity" by re-subjugating formerly colonized peoples through theaters of war and for colonial purposes (see Veracini 2005; Noxolo 2017). In epistemological terms, recoloniality relates to hegemonic ideologies that promote the return of colonization, as demonstrated by adherence to colonial-era knowledge, practices, and attitudes in the postcolonial present (Subramaniam 2017). Thus, recolonization is an unenviable process that mimics the West by reinforcing Western/colonial hegemony over formerly colonized nations. This leads to a subversion of indigenous ways of understanding the world and, ultimately, the replication of the inequalities inherent in colonization.

Regarding RE, Stephen Jackson illustrates how recolonization strengthened an Anglican version of RE in the Anglo-World amidst a religious-political fault line between Protestants and Catholics over the matter of RE to the extent that, in the 1960s, students in Australia received RE no different from the way their ancestors did in the 1880s (Jackson 2020). This understanding of recolonization in RE is insightful, although how it has been manifested in Eswatini is worth noting.

Compromises through particularist approaches

Governments resort to compromises, adopting a particularist approach (also known as the parallel approach) to RE, allowing coexistence of different syllabi in the national curriculum to address stakeholder contestations (Matemba and Addai-Mununkum 2021). Following this approach, in countries where stakeholders have not agreed on one vision for RE, curriculum planners have maintained colonial Bible-based RE, while

also offering a new multi-faith program (see [Table 1](#)). In Kenya, Nigeria, Tanzania, and Uganda, multi-faith RE has not been considered or rejected; instead, the curriculum offers standalone confessional RE programs that cater to the needs of children from different religious communities.

While the accommodationist intentions (to address stakeholders' non-negotiable issues) of a particularist approach can be lauded, given the intensity of stakeholder contestations, it creates the very exclusionary outcomes endemic in "colonized" RE, as learners are placed in de/confessional silos (see [Matemba 2021b](#)). In Malawi, the particularist approach led to neglect of multi-faith RE in favor of missionary/colonial Bible Knowledge. For example, in 2013, most junior secondary students (78,377) selected Bible Knowledge, whereas a very small number (247) took multi-faith RE across all schools in the country ([Matemba and Addai-Mununkum 2021](#)).

Exclusion and marginalization of African traditional religion

The colonial-caged mentality persists in RE curricula across ASoS countries, excluding African traditional religion (ATR) for study, raising critical questions about the neglect of indigenous traditions and the damage inflicted on the African psyche ([Emard and Nelson 2021](#); [Republic of Sierra Leone 2023](#)). Examining curriculum materials in RE in Rwanda, Kenya, Tanzania, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, and Uganda ([Federal Republic of Nigeria 2010](#); [Republic of Uganda 2019, 2020](#); [Republic of Rwanda 2014](#); [Tanzania Ministry of Education, Science and Technology 2023](#); [Republic of Kenya 2017](#); [Republic of Sierra Leone 2023](#)), one cannot miss these workings (see [Table 1](#)) in terms of African complicity in the coloniality of their education ([Emard and Nelson 2021](#)). Sierra Leone's new multi-faith RE curriculum (based on Christianity and Islam) dismisses ATR (see [Table 2](#)), to the extent that teaching and learning (using the Bible and Quran as resources) focus on the influence evangelical Christianity and Islam have on ATR in helping people "attend Mosques and Churches instead of Shrines" ([Republic of Sierra Leone 2023: 4](#)).

This prompts fundamental questions for consideration: (a) How can ATR be overlooked in an African-constituted curriculum? (b) How damaged is the African psyche of those who are reluctant or unable to embrace their cultural and religious traditions in education? (c) What is the merit of African education if the foundation of its indigeneity is frowned upon by those who should celebrate it?

Evidently, the residual challenges of colonialism are still embedded in the African mindset, to the extent that the ontological damage suffered ensures acceptance of the demonization of indigenous worldviews and also actively participates in its exclusion. Writing about the situation in Kenya, Matthew Karangi is at a loss about why the

Table 1. Syllabuses in particularist RE.

Country	Parallel syllabuses	
Malawi	Bible Knowledge	Multi-faith RE
Nigeria	Christian Religious Studies	Islamic Studies
Kenya	Christian RE	Islamic RE Hindu RE
Tanzania	Bible Knowledge	Elimu ya Dini ya Kiislamu (Islam)
Uganda	Christian RE	Islamic RE
Zambia	Multi-faith RE (Syllabus 2044)	Christian RE (Syllabus 2046)

Table 2. Treatment of ATR in Sierra Leone RE.

Topic/theme/unit	Learning outcomes	Teaching methods	Resources	Assessment
The influence of Christianity/Islam on African Traditional Religion (ATR) and the life of the people (cultural clash).	Identify and describe the influence of Christianity/Islam on ATR and the life of the people.	Build on students' experience, guiding group discussions on the influence Christianity/Islam has on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Traditional religion. • The life of people in their communities. 	The Holy Bible: Hebrews 13:20–21 Peter 2:25 Matthew 8:18–22 The Holy Quran: Sura 98:5	Oral assessment, answering short questions on the influence of Christianity/Islam on ATR. Written assessment, writing a brief report about changes in the life of the people, e.g., building and attending mosques and churches instead of shrines.

Source: Republic of Sierra Leone (2023).

particularist approach does not include a syllabus for ATR, given that “African ways of knowing constitute invaluable aspects of African heritage that harmonize Africa’s past broken story of development with its modern realities of globalization” (Nara 2007 quoted in Karangi 2022, 165).

Critiquing multi-faith religious education

As currently constituted, multi-faith RE in ASoS countries serves as a superficial showcase of diversity, giving the illusion of a diversified subject merely by including religions other than Christianity in the curriculum (Matemba 2024). The apparent inclusivity within the curriculum space is, however, not accompanied by a genuine anti-colonial transformation. It is as if simply adding other religions is evidence thereof when the inherent epistemologies that reproduce coloniality remain intact through the persistence of a neo-confessional liberal approach that maintains the normative religion as *primus inter pares* in RE (Matemba and Addai-Mununkum 2021).⁴ Instead of first decentering the hegemonic structures in the framing of the curriculum (i.e., indigenizing the core while adopting pluriversity principles), the current approach merely tokenistically recognizes other religions without challenging existing epistemological coloniality (Mbembe 2016; Makhubela 2018).

The result is a sense of *epistemic closure* under the mistaken belief that the curriculum has been decolonized through symbolic change. Despite the inclusion of other religions, the curriculum still favors colonial-era confessional RE, framed and supported by colonial/confessional attitudes among school actors (head teachers and teachers) responsible for implementation (Matemba and Addai-Mununkum 2021). For instance, in Rwanda, multi-faith RE encourages teachers to make children “feel” the presence of God, maintaining a neo-confessional stance (Republic of Rwanda 2014: iv).

In ASoS countries, multi-faith RE further perpetuates *epistemic exclusion* through the politics of limited pluralism, as countries grapple with the complexities of religious

⁴Neo-confessional approach teaches religion from an experiential standpoint in arguing that the “truth” lies in the beliefs of the normative religion and therefore the beliefs of all other religions are false.

Table 3. Religions in multi-faith RE.

Country	Religions in multi-faith RE
South Africa	ATR, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism.
Zimbabwe	Christianity, Islam, and ATR.
Sierra Leone	Christianity and Islam.
Malawi	Christianity, Islam, ATR, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Bahai Faith.
Ghana	Christianity, Islam, and ATR.
Namibia	Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, ATR and Bahai Faith.
Botswana	Christianity, Sikhism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Bahá'í Faith, and ATR.
Rwanda	Christianity and Islam.

diversity within a confined curriculum space (Mikva 2018). This limited pluralism, akin to Michael Apple's (2000) concept of selective tradition, manifests in the selective inclusion of a limited number of religions, excluding others that may exist within the nation-state (see Table 3).

Policy borrowing is evident in the reform of RE in most ASoS countries, with many adopting similar sets of religions for multi-faith RE programs. For example, in Sierra Leone, Zimbabwe, and Ghana, the arbitrary selection of the same three religions (Christianity, Islam, and ATR) in their multi-faith RE programs illustrates this phenomenon (see Matemba 2024). Bråten (2015) observed that while school curricula exist in diverse cultural contexts, at a supranational level, policy borrowing in RE can occur when developments in one country influence the subject in another country.

In countries introducing multi-faith RE, the engagement of school actors reveals a neocolonial mentality affecting how the subject is viewed and implemented; whether as a standalone syllabus (e.g., Botswana, South Africa, and Zimbabwe), or following a particularist arrangement (see Table 1). School actors in some countries, such as Malawi, Zimbabwe, and South Africa, continue to exhibit a colonial mentality by self-identifying as Christians, struggling with religious pluralization owing to fears of compromising a Christian-centric worldview (Nthontho 2020; Matemba and Addai-Mununkum 2021; Museka 2019).

Given the professional expectation of inclusiveness, school actors merely project superficial engagement with religious plurality in multi-faith RE (Matemba 2022). Despite the rhetoric of religious inclusivity through multi-faith RE, classroom discourse and actions (or non-action) of teachers (trained in an education shaped by a colonial past) often reflect a Christonormative bias, where Christianity is implicitly used as a model for evaluating other religions. This results in a form of religious misrepresentation, emphasizing the shortcomings of Islam and ATR when compared to Christianity that "... still harbours the aspirations of the colonial masters" (Marashe, Ndamba, and Chireshe 2009, 47).

Lessons from an anti-colonial mindset

Curriculum dynamics in ASoS countries reveal a challenging neocoloniality of power, presenting a nuanced trajectory for RE. Rather than a linear progression from a colonized (confessional) state to a decolonized (inclusive) one, RE tends to face recolonization, either through the abandonment of multi-faith RE (as observed in Eswatini) or by retaining a Christonormativity deeply rooted in nineteenth-century missionary/colonial education (Matemba 2021a; Verhoef 2021; Subramaniam 2017).

One critique directed at postcolonial theories is their perceived lack of radical action in decolonizing knowledge-making, potentially perpetuating a colonial continuum negatively impacting education in ASoS countries. In the context of decolonizing the African academy, Achille Mbembe emphasizes the need for a nuanced understanding of the challenges to avoid recurring techno-bureaucratic fixes that have contributed to the current impasse (Mbembe 2016). In ASoS countries, the structure of multi-faith RE exemplifies the type of “techno-bureaucratic fixes” Mbembe warns against. The rushed diversification of RE by incorporating other religions, without first addressing the underlying structures of the colonial-era curriculum with its inherent epistemological hegemony, provides an illusion of progress that ultimately sustains the existing (Christian) status quo.

Africans are thus challenged to reflect on the anti-colonial liberation movements of the 1950s to the 1970s for inspiration to cultivate an anti-colonial mindset. This mindset advocates a militant stance against colonial-linked oppression, inequality, and epistemological hegemony. Recognizing that perpetrators of coloniality are unlikely to relinquish their unjust power, an anti-colonial mindset encourages radical measures to support anti-colonial practices such as atonement, justice, reparations, equity, diversity, respect, and inclusion (Lewis 2012). It provides intellectual tools to empower individuals to navigate and challenge colonial systems effectively.

Crucially, an anti-colonial mindset draws wisdom from indigenous epistemologies, as highlighted by George Sefa Dei. Acknowledging that knowledge about one’s existence and identities can contest other ways of knowing, an anti-colonial mindset is militant in nature (Sefa Dei 2008). It inspires Africans to take radical actions in challenging neocoloniality for the realization of epistemic justice in RE (Matemba and Lilemba 2015; Walker 2019). To actualize anti-colonial RE in ASoS countries, six key ideas must be considered and implemented.

Anti-colonization before diversity in religious education

Curriculum reforms aiming for pluriversity, embracing epistemic diversity in RE, should undergo a critical process of anti-colonization. This step is necessary to eradicate the colonial embeddedness of (neo)confessionalism, which presents RE as a diverse space while still favoring Christonormativity as the prevailing norm. A curriculum lacking anti-colonization merely catalogs inclusions without effecting real change, as it preserves structures governing knowledge-making, perpetuating the marginalization of religious others (Matemba 2021a). Moreover, a curriculum not subject to anti-colonization intensifies epistemic trauma. It restricts the ability of the religious other to challenge the hegemony of the dominant normative religion and discourages critical reflexivity for both students and teachers, compelling them to accept its truth claims as the sole reality. Initiating anti-colonization in the curriculum first creates the necessary hermeneutic space to disrupt both the practice of knowledge production and the material substructure supporting it (Makhubela 2018).

Eliminate multi-faith religious education

Multi-faith RE is unsuitable for culturally and religiously pluralistic regions and should be discontinued as it fails to ensure equal treatment of included religions (Matemba

2024). Despite projecting non-judgmental inclusivity, multi-faith RE erroneously assumes that religious intolerance will dissipate (Barnes 2006). However, classroom discourse reveals the misrepresentation and marginalization of non-normative religions, stemming from the colonial legacy of Christian hegemony (see Matemba and Addai-Mununkum 2021).

Advocate for inclusive religious education

Conversely, inclusive RE embodies an anti-colonial stance as it is comprehensive and impartial in addressing the complexity of religion and non-religion. It fosters a space for students to critically and empathetically engage with religious diversity through dialogue, mutual respect, and empathy. Aligned with the Toledo framework, inclusive RE ensures the rights of every religion, regardless of majority/minority status, with numerical representativeness accorded full and equal recognition within the common school (Matemba 2024).

Center indigenous epistemologies in religious education

Anti-colonized RE should be akin to being “cooked in an African pot” (see Fiedler, Gundani, and Mijoga 1997). This culinary metaphor implies that the curriculum should be informed by African worldviews, traditions, and epistemology; a crucial step for RE in ASoS countries to realize an anti-colonized (African) curriculum (Shizha 2013). By infusing RE with African perspectives, even in countries where African indigenous religions and worldviews are presently excluded, this alignment will counteract their marginalization perpetuated by the prevailing Christonormativity in RE (Karangi 2022).

Establish a democratic space in religious education

Within the framework of anti-colonial ideals, anti-colonized RE should embrace democratic principles in creating a decolonial space that “honor[s] the agency of voices of the other” (Hyde 2011, 28). Simultaneously, it should actively challenge the marginalization and elitism associated with the colonial religion. This democratic inclusion space must be receptive to counter-hegemonic discourse that challenges both coloniality and neocoloniality in the classroom (Sathorar and Geduld 2019). Furthermore, this space needs to incorporate diverse voices, whether religious or not, considering that 2.7% of people in ASoS countries comprise those who are unaffiliated (Pew Research Center 2015). Additionally, it is imperative for this space to address power dynamics and domination, aiming to replace hegemony with structures that foster epistemic equity and fair treatment of diverse knowledge, including indigenous epistemologies (Baumfield 2003).

Repurpose religious education toward atonement

Anti-colonized RE should be reconceptualized to reconstruct a curriculum infused with redeeming and atoning qualities for both educators and pupils. It should explore

the need for religion to atone for its complicity in slavery, patriarchy, and colonialism (see Comaroff and Comaroff 1991). Within anti-colonized RE, religion must confront its role in the colonial enterprise, acknowledging both its historical involvement and its later role in advocating for the end of slavery as part of a critical learning process. Addressing atonement becomes crucial for children to comprehend the complex relationship between religion and colonialism, prompting RE to scrutinize the value of apology as a means of reparative justice. Consequently, anti-colonized RE should align with contemporary demands for both acknowledging and rectifying religions' shadowed histories entwined with slavery, colonialism, and other enduring injustices inflicted upon African people.

Concluding thoughts

In Africa's postcolonial milieu, comprehending the curriculum necessitates an understanding rooted in anti-colonial perspectives, ways of thinking, knowing, and acting that confront various forms of coloniality, encompassing classic coloniality, neocoloniality, and recoloniality. This paper explores the potential contribution of anti-colonial thought in addressing what I term the "neocoloniality of power," a factor affecting the conceptualization and implementation of inclusive RE in ASoS countries. The slow pace of curriculum reform, coupled with stakeholders' adherence to a monolithic epistemic tradition reminiscent of the missionary era, particularly Christian (neo) confessionalism, frustrates RE's engagement with anti-colonization. Effecting meaningful change requires embracing an anti-colonial stance as the default theoretical approach, fostering processes of dehegemonization, atonement, and the inclusion of narratives that have been historically excluded and marginalized in knowledge-making within RE. While the relentless influence of the "cognitive empire" on the African psyche persists, it is crucial for Africans to assume responsibility in actively countering the neocoloniality of power. By doing so, they can forge an essential anti-colonial path for this pivotal aspect of the school curriculum.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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