Navigating Decolonial Realities in Social Work Education and Practice

Navigating Decolonial Realities in Social Work Education and Practice:

Uncovering the Voices

By

Thembelihle Brenda Makhanya

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Navigating Decolonial Realities in Social Work Education and Practice: Uncovering the Voices

By Thembelihle Brenda Makhanya

This book first published 2026

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-0364-6737-1
ISBN (Ebook): 978-1-0364-6738-8

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My deepest appreciation goes to all the participants, students, and practitioners who generously shared their experiences and allowed themselves to be vulnerable for the benefit of others. Your willingness to share your stories and insights made this work possible, and I hope this project honours your voices and lived realities.

I also dedicate this work to all those who continue to live with the enduring effects of colonialism, imperialism, and apartheid, whose historical dispossession and marginalisation remain embedded in present social, economic, and educational realities. Many continue to experience inequality and exclusion while being expected to move forward without restoration of what was taken: dignity, land, opportunity, and material well-being. For many, access to education remains unequal, often experienced as challenging and isolating rather than liberating. It is my hope that this work contributes, in some small way, to ongoing efforts to recognise these histories, affirm lived experiences, and support more just and humane futures.

I gratefully acknowledge the support of the National Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences (NIHSS) for funding this project. Their financial support created the conditions necessary for the research and writing to be undertaken successfully. I extend my sincere appreciation to the research assistants, editors, and critical readers whose careful engagement, constructive feedback, and dedication strengthened this work in meaningful ways. Your contributions ensured both the quality and clarity of this book.

I extend heartfelt gratitude to my family. To my children, Mqobi, Qhawe (departed), and Langa, thank you for your patience and understanding when my work required my absence from many daily activities. Your sacrifices and love sustained me throughout this journey. To my parents, Lindeni and Bhekizitha Makhanya, although you did not have the opportunity to pursue

formal education yourselves, your unwavering encouragement and insistence that I pursue education and strive for a better future laid the foundation for everything I have achieved. I am forever grateful for your sacrifices and unconditional support.

To my fiancé, Senzeka Mntambo, thank you for your constant encouragement and for standing by me throughout the demanding process of completing this project. Your support made the journey lighter.

I also extend my sincere appreciation to my siblings Bheki, Zamo, Nokuthula, Nokwanda, Nondu, and Nduduzo whose support and encouragement have always provided a strong foundation to return to whenever challenges arose.

My sincere thanks go to my former colleagues in the Department of Social Work at the University of KwaZulu-Natal and my PhD supervisor, Prof Zibane, where this project began. I remain grateful for the encouragement, mentorship, and support I received in various forms, all of which contributed significantly to my academic growth and professional journey.

I further wish to express my sincere appreciation to my current employer, the University of Mpumalanga, and my colleagues within the Social Work discipline for their collegial support. A special word of gratitude goes to the students with whom many of the ideas presented in this book were engaged, tested, and refined through lectures, classroom discussions, assessments, and community engagement activities. Your willingness to learn, participate, question, and share your perspectives continues to inspire and shape my teaching and scholarship. This work is enriched by your curiosity, commitment, and engagement.

I wish to acknowledge my small rural community of KweNkulu in the Okhalweni area, near Gamalakhe Township in Port Shepstone on the South Coast of KwaZulu-Natal, where my journey began. A significant part of who I am today is rooted in this community and in the spirit of Ubuntu that sustained and encouraged me despite the challenges of growing up in a disadvantaged context. I am deeply grateful to my primary school educators at eNkulu Primary School and my teachers at Makhada High School. At Makhada, educators nurtured my academic ambitions and supported me

beyond the classroom, often assisting with logistics so that I could focus on my studies. I wish to acknowledge Mr. Chiliza, Mr. Ndlela (departed), Mrs. Shabalala, Mrs. Khumalo, Ms. Mdenene, Mrs. Dlamini, Mr. Mbhele, and Mr. Ndovela (departed), among many others, whose contributions have shaped my path. Their impact remains deeply appreciated.

I am equally grateful to Cambridge Publishing and the entire publishing team. Had your doors been closed, many communities, students, academics, and practitioners may not have had access to the valuable knowledge and lived experiences documented in this work. Your willingness to recognise the importance of this project and support its publication affirms the significance of documenting and sharing these perspectives. I thank all those involved in the various stages of the publication process whose collective efforts transformed an idea into a tangible contribution.

To everyone who contributed directly or indirectly to this journey, I extend my sincere gratitude. This work stands as a collective achievement shaped by many hands and hearts.

FOREWORD

In “Uncovering the voices: Navigating the (de)colonial realities in social work education and practice” Dr. Thembelihle Makhanya provides incisive insights into the impacts of colonialism on higher education, with a particular focus on social work education and practice. She begins with a discussion on the historical trajectories of the twin phenomena of colonization and missionization and their consequences on the philosophical, educational, material, socio-political and cultural life worlds of colonized peoples in Africa. In the guise of altruism and service, missionization softened the blow of the brutalizing forces of colonization, while claiming to have contributed to the so-called civilization of the primitive and uncivilized natives of their lands.

Given the calls for decolonizing education and the inclusion of Indigenous knowledges in educational curricula at institutional, national, regional and global levels, this book is a timely addition to the growing body of research and literature on decolonization. Despite the decades old and widespread calls, Thembelihle Makanya, drawing on the voices of higher education students and recent graduates, with a focus on the University of Kwa Zulu Natal (UKZN), demonstrates that we are far from enjoying the benefits of decolonized education on account to a range of ideological and structural impediments.

Makhanya points out that while missionaries claimed to promote wellbeing and education, they simultaneously denigrated African systems, cultural beliefs, practices and pedagogies. Western education fused with Christianization to erode Indigenous knowledges and cultural autonomy. Yet, paradoxically and issue that receives little attention in decolonization literature is the extent to which the Christianization mission is fully embraced, while the calls for a politics of resistance to colonization/neo-colonization is increasing. Might a pertinent question be: To what extent is the decolonization agenda possible, without a de-missionization agenda?

Against the background of the all-pervasive pernicious consequences of colonialism, Makhanya details the richness and contextual relevance of pre-colonial education in Africa, based on "a life-long, community-based process embedded in everyday social and economic activities," that bears much relevance for contemporary social work education, research and practice, and she discusses various notable higher education institutions in Africa that pre-dated the colonial era.

In the South Africa context, Makhanya explicates how apartheid compounded the effects of historical colonialism, reinforcing racial, gender and social hierarchies, with race being the key criterion underlying inequality, poverty, oppression, exclusion and violence. She details the impacts of these on the higher education sector, and more particularly on social work education, in South Africa.

Despite post-Apartheid restructuring and the repeated calls for decolonization in higher education, there is still much to be done as both ideological and structural barriers persist. Makhanya details colonial architecture with buildings and statues, and pictures that constitute alienating experiences for students, especially those hailing from rural areas, and how English being the lingua franca in institutions of higher learning detract from decoloniality imperatives.

Despite the challenges, Makhanya points to critical events, such as the Fees-must-fall movement where students protested in support of free higher education, which were linked to broader aspects of de-coloniality in higher education. With the Rhodes-must-fall movement, students and staff were pivotal in protesting against colonialism, institutionalised racism and patriarchy, demanding structural and pedagogical changes to the ideological and infrastructural colonization of institutions of higher learning.

These movements have strengthened post-Apartheid national and institutional responses to broadening access to higher education, with privileging of previously disadvantaged groups, and to the adoption of strategic plans that embrace Afrocentric paradigms. UKZN's 2023-2032 strategic model, e.g. states: "As part of its institutional transformation, UKZN has embraced symbols that are consistent with the vision of being a Premier University of

African scholarship. The transformation symbols include the anthem iHele, the academic dress and corporate branding which reflect the institution's African roots", accompanied by some salient institutional and pedagogical shifts towards de-coloniality.

Nevertheless, Makhanya highlights ongoing challenges in relation to operationalising inclusive language policies; the occupation of racialized and class based spaces on the university campus; high tuition fees that preclude access; the infrastructural remnants of colonialism; the ideological barriers to bringing Indigenous knowledges into the classrooms given the normalized, dominant belief that the West is best; and lack of access to student housing with innuendoes of corruption with students' asserting that who one knows, rather than need, determines access. Corruption, so widely embedded on a national level, is contrary to the Afrocentric Ubuntu values of integrity, inter-connectedness, holism, care, compassion, kindness, justice, equality, reciprocity and respect for all life forms. Yet, the national corruption ethos has become entrenched in institutions of higher learning. In response to this, UKZN - the site of Makhanya's study - is taking measures (as part of its Elevating Integrity initiative) to heighten awareness about the various forms that corruption takes in institutions of higher education, including political corruption; forms of academic fraud; forms of sexual corruption; and the roles that every individual and every constituency have in recognising, resisting and combating corruption.

—Prof. Vishanthie Sewpaul
Emeritus Professor, University of KwaZulu Natal

Acronyms and Abbreviations

ACDT	Anti-Colonial Discursive Theoretical Framework
AOP	Anti-Oppressive Practice
BSW	Bachelor Of Social Work
BLM	Black Lives Matter
CHE	Council on Higher Education
CEO	Central Application Office
DHET	Department of Higher Education and Training
DSD	Department of Social Development
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HWU	Historically White Universities
HE	Higher Education
IKS	Indigenous Knowledge Systems
IFSW	International Federation of Social Workers
IASSW	International Association of Schools of Social Work
LPHE	Language Policy for Higher Education
LGBTQ	Lesbian, Gay Bisexual, Transgender and Queer+
NQF	National Qualification Framework
NDP	National Development Plan
NSFAS	National Student Financial Aid Scheme
NGOS	Non-Governmental Organizations
NQF	National Qualification Framework
SASO	South African Student Organisation
SACSSP	South African History Online
SRC	Student Representation Council
SAHO	South African History Online
SA	South Africa
UKZN	University of KwaZulu - Natal
UDW	University of Durban-Westville
WIL	Workplace- Integrated Learning

INTRODUCTION

This book embarks on a transformative journey through the multifaceted landscapes of social work, critically engaging with the enduring legacies of colonialism that continue to shape and constrain the discipline. *Uncovering the Voices: Navigating the (De)Colonial Realities in Social Work Education and Practice* is more than a scholarly endeavour. It is a deliberate, urgent outcry for introspection and radical action within the social work profession. Rooted in the lived experiences of students and practitioners in the African context, this work confronts uncomfortable truths, illuminating the silenced and marginalised voices that have long been excluded from dominant Eurocentric frameworks of social work theory, education, and intervention.

The book examines the historical, structural, and epistemic legacies of colonialism and apartheid in shaping knowledge systems, social work, and higher education in South Africa. It uncovers the ways in which European colonial expansion disrupted indigenous African educational systems, social welfare practices, and epistemologies, and how these disruptions were further entrenched and intensified under apartheid. The analysis is situated within a decolonial framework, which seeks to interrogate the hierarchies of knowledge, power, and social organisation imposed through coloniality, and to explore pathways toward reconstruction, inclusivity, and social justice.

At the heart of this book lies a decolonial commitment: to expose and dismantle the hegemonic structures and epistemologies that have entrenched systemic oppression, inequality, and cultural erasure. The narrative challenges the colonial inheritance embedded within the profession, an inheritance that, despite efforts of indigenisation or transformation, continues to prioritise Western-centric ontologies and methodologies. This critique aligns with scholars such as Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999), whose seminal work, Decolonising methodologies, underscores the importance of deconstructing the colonial power embedded in knowledge production. Walter Mignolo (2007) asserted that epistemic disobedience is necessary to

break the monopoly of Eurocentric knowledge systems.

As the pages unfold, readers are invited into a dialogical space of discomfort, where dominant ideologies are challenged, and where the politics of knowledge, power, and identity are interrogated. This discomfort is not an end in itself, but a catalyst for transformation. The book illuminates how students and practitioners, especially in colonial contexts such as South Africa, navigate the complexities of identity, belonging, and professionalism amidst the residue of colonial and apartheid legacies. The silenced realities they share expose the contradictions and tensions in current social work education and practice that claim to be inclusive but often marginalise local and indigenous ways of knowing.

A critical aim of this book is to explore how colonial and apartheid legacies continue to shape higher education and social work, highlighting the ongoing need for decolonial transformation. The chapters examine the historical foundations, the production and marginalisation of indigenous knowledge, the role of social work as both a tool of governance and a site of resistance, and the enduring effects of racialised policies on access, curriculum, and institutional culture. By foregrounding both historical analysis and contemporary decolonial interventions, the book provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how South African higher education and social work can evolve to centre African knowledge systems, social justice, and contextually relevant practice.

This work resonates with the critical insights of Sphamandla Zondi (2022) in African Voices in Search of a Decolonial Turn, which asserts that African intellectuals have not been passive recipients of Eurocentric knowledge but active agents shaping decolonial thinking. Similarly, scholars such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) and Frantz Fanon (1961) emphasise the necessity of reclaiming indigenous languages, narratives, and frameworks as tools of liberation and resistance.

This book is grounded in empirical research conducted between 2019 and 2020 and draws extensively on the lived experiences and critical reflections of 23 students and social work practitioners in South Africa. Employing a qualitative case study methodology, the study explored how participants

make sense of (de)coloniality within the context of higher education and social work practice. The research aimed to illuminate how colonial legacies continue to shape academic structures, pedagogies, and professional orientations, and how these may be disrupted through decolonial praxis. Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from the University of KwaZulu-Natal's Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSS/0680/018D, approved July 23, 2018). All research activities were conducted in strict accordance with the university's ethical guidelines and principles governing social science research. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participants were fully briefed about the aims of the study, the voluntary nature of their involvement, their right to withdraw at any time without penalty, and the measures taken to protect their confidentiality. To ensure anonymity and safeguard the identities of those who generously shared their stories, all participants are referred to by pseudonyms throughout the book. In addition, identifying details such as institutional affiliations, geographic locations, or references to specific individuals or organisations have been either anonymised or omitted, particularly where such details could compromise confidentiality. This ethical commitment was especially important given the politically sensitive nature of the topics under investigation, including institutional racism, epistemic violence, and critiques of university transformation policies. Data were collected through a combination of semi-structured individual interviews and focus group discussions, enabling deep, dialogic engagement and collective meaning-making. The rich narratives shared by participants form the cornerstone of the book's central argument: that a reimagined, contextually relevant, and decolonial approach to social work education and practice is not only possible but urgently necessary. Their voices, spoken with trust, clarity, and courage, anchor this work in real-world struggle and offer a roadmap for epistemic justice and transformation in the academy and beyond.

Central to this reimagining is a commitment to social justice, cultural humility, and community-engaged scholarship. The book challenges educators, practitioners, and students to embrace pluriversality. The coexistence of multiple epistemologies and resisting the universalisation of Western knowledge as the sole reference point for professional standards. It

affirms the value of African philosophies, such as Ubuntu, Afrocentricity, and Decoloniality, which stress relationality, mutual care, and collective wellbeing (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018; Bojuwoye, 2015). These philosophies offer alternative frameworks for social work intervention that are rooted in local realities and responsive to historical and cultural contexts. Moreover, the book advocates for pedagogical approaches that centre critical reflexivity, intersectionality, and community resilience. As noted by Hooks (1994), education must be a practice of freedom, a space where learners are empowered to challenge oppression and imagine new possibilities. In this spirit, *Uncovering the Voices* seeks to contribute to the broader movement towards a decolonial social work, one that actively dismantles structural barriers, promotes epistemic justice, and fosters inclusive, equitable societies.

In positioning colonialism and apartheid not as isolated historical phenomena but as enduring logics of power, this book argues for a reimagining of higher education and social work in South Africa. It advocates for a deliberate centring of indigenous knowledge systems, ethical community engagement, and inclusive pedagogies as essential for addressing structural inequalities and fostering socially responsive practices. By tracing the intersections of history, education, and welfare, the book contributes to ongoing debates on decolonisation and provides a foundation for reconstructing knowledge systems that are both critically aware and socially transformative.

Although the focus is on social work education and practice in Africa, the discussions are applicable globally. Interdisciplinary engagement, transnational solidarity, and knowledge exchange are vital to collectively resist colonial continuities and build emancipatory futures. The call issued by this book is one of radical hope, echoing Paulo Freire's (1970) words: “To exist, humanly, is to name the world, to change it.” *Uncovering the Voices* is a collective and solidarity-driven appeal to disrupt the status quo and reimagine a profession that serves all, not just a privileged few. It is a call to walk the streets that confront historical shadows and ancestral ghosts, reclaiming the dignity of communities long marginalised. Through this journey, social work can become a truly transformative force, anchored in context, grounded in justice, and responsive to the voices that were historically silenced

CHAPTER 1

COLONIALISM, KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS, AND HIGHER EDUCATION

Colonialism fundamentally reshaped knowledge production and education systems across Africa, Asia, and Latin America by imposing European epistemological frameworks while marginalising indigenous ways of knowing. Higher education institutions established during colonialism rule were not neutral spaces of learning. They functioned as instruments of governance, cultural domination, and economic control. Their primary aim was to produce a small class of locally trained intermediaries who could administer colonial territories while remaining intellectually and culturally aligned with European interests. The late 15th century marked a significant disruption in African civilisations with the arrival of European imperial powers. This incursion catalysed far-reaching changes to indigenous systems of knowledge, sociopolitical structures, and cultural identities. The slave trade, wars of conquest, and colonial expansion undermined African learning spaces and institutions, systematically dismantling centuries of indigenous education rooted in African cosmologies, oral traditions, and community-centred pedagogies (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013). In the late 19th century, the Berlin Conference of 1884-1885 symbolised the formal partitioning of Africa among European powers- Britain, France, Germany, Spain, Italy, Belgium, and Portugal. This division was carried out without African consent and justified under the guise of a civilising mission, often termed the white man's burden (Birmingham, 1995). This imperial rationale rationalised the violent expropriation of African land, cultural heritage, and epistemic systems. Colonial racism, as Tsotsi (2000) notes, was underpinned by an ideology that positioned Europeans as superior and Africans as inherently inferior- racially, intellectually, and spiritually. In this racialised hierarchy, Europeans placed themselves at the apex-civilised and rational, while Africans were relegated to the bottom, regarded as second-class citizens, uncultured, and biologically deficient (Spickard, 1992 in Zibane,

2018). Such thinking served to legitimise the suppression of indigenous knowledge systems (IKS), traditions, and educational structures in favour of imported Western norms. As Tamburro and Tamburro (2014) argue, colonial education was not merely an instructional project, but a deliberate epistemic conquest aimed at delegitimising indigenous ways of knowing.

Higher education institutions that emerged in colonial contexts often mirrored European universities in structure, curriculum, and governance. Instruction was conducted in colonial languages such as English, French, or Portuguese, which created barriers for many local populations while reinforcing linguistic hierarchies (Maringe & Ojo, 2017). In this vein, Abdi (2006) asserts that colonial education projects weaponised language to erode African self-worth and worldviews. Knowledge production became externally oriented, with research agendas frequently serving colonial economic and political interests rather than addressing local community needs.

The imposition of the coloniser's language became a symbol of prestige and access, while mother tongues were associated with backwardness. As Makhanya and Zibane (2020) contend, advanced education remains unattainable in indigenous languages, which are often excluded from formal academic and scientific discourse, thereby perpetuating linguistic imperialism. Although the authenticity of Lord Macaulay's infamous speech to the British Parliament in 1835 remains contested- whether it referred to Africa or India, it is widely cited to illustrate the colonial mindset that devalued local knowledge and aimed to produce subjects loyal to the empire. The speech, whether apocryphal or not, is symbolic of the colonial logic that sought to "create a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect", a sentiment applicable to African context (Boom News, 2020).

European colonial powers planted universities in Africa as a strategic means of governance and epistemic control. Institutions such as the University of Cape Town (established in 1829) were modelled entirely on European academic systems (Smith, 2014). The University of Cape Town's offering of South Africa's first social work diploma in 1924 exemplifies how higher education was constructed to reflect and serve the interests of colonial

administration rather than indigenous communities. As Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2016) and Maringe and Ojo (2017) highlight, these institutions introduced Eurocentric curricula that were contextually irrelevant to African realities. Education became a tool of assimilation, equipping African elites with colonial knowledge, values, and language to serve in the colonial machinery. This process also produced enduring epistemic hierarchies that persist in contemporary higher education. Western theories and methodologies continue to dominate academic disciplines, while indigenous scholarship often remains peripheral or tokenised. Academic prestige is still largely measured through alignment with Euro-American knowledge systems, international rankings, and publication in Western-dominated journals, which can marginalise locally relevant research.

Colonial education, although presented as benevolent, constituted a form of epistemic and psychological violence. Aime Césaire (1972) argued that colonialism was not about development, but about the systematic destruction of culture. Hitler's remark, cited by Césaire, that domination, not equality, was the colonial goal, resonates with Cecil John Rhodes' imperial ideology, which framed the British as a "master race" destined to civilise the "despicable specimens" of humanity in Africa (South African History Online, 2021). These narratives were not isolated but reflected a widespread colonial worldview rooted in conquest, racism, and cultural genocide.

Fanon (1984) classified colonial violence in three interlinked dimensions: physical violence, psychological violence, and structural violence. The latter two are particularly pertinent in education. Psychological violence involved the internalisation of inferiority among colonised subjects through education systems that celebrated European knowledge while dismissing African perspectives. Structural violence materialised through institutional arrangements that perpetuated social exclusion and elite formation, rather than equitable development. For example, the University of Fort Hare in South Africa, despite producing iconic liberation leaders such as Nelson Mandela, Oliver Tambo, and Robert Mugabe, was originally designed to train an African elite class that would serve colonial interests, not liberate African societies (Smith, 2014). As Nyerere (1968) pointed out, the colonial mission in higher education was twofold: the systematic destruction of indigenous education systems and the distortion of African development

paradigms to prioritise colonial objectives.

Colonial education systems privileged Western science, philosophy, language, and history as universal forms of knowledge, while indigenous knowledge systems were often dismissed as primitive, unscientific, or superstitious. Missionary and colonial schools replaced community-based learning structures with curricula centred on European literature, Christian theology, and administrative training. As a result, indigenous knowledge related to agriculture, medicine, governance, conflict resolution, and environmental stewardship was excluded from formal learning spaces, leading to long-term epistemic marginalisation. The arrival of European missionaries, particularly through the London missionary society, further transformed African educational trajectories. While missionaries claimed to promote wellbeing and education, they simultaneously denigrated African belief systems and pedagogies (Global Black History, 2012). Western education was often fused with Christianisation, eroding traditional knowledge and cultural autonomy. Smith (2014) observes that missionary education served as a double-edged sword, on the surface promoting literacy and morality, but in practice advancing capitalist and imperialist ideologies under a religious veil.

The vestiges of colonial education continue to haunt African universities. The marginalisation of indigenous languages, the exclusion of African philosophies, and the privileging of Western frameworks remain deeply embedded. Decolonising education requires more than curriculum reform. It necessitates dismantling the epistemic hierarchy that valorises Western knowledge as universal and delegitimises others. As Mbembe (2016) argues, decolonisation is not a metaphor. It is a radical reimagining of knowledge, power, and being. It entails reclaiming African voices, knowledge systems, and educational philosophies that were suppressed or erased during colonialism. Decolonisation calls for epistemic disobedience (Mignolo, 2007), which resists imposed knowledge hierarchies and promotes pluriversality, the coexistence of many ways of knowing and being.

Learning and Knowledge in Precolonial African Education

Discussions of education in African societies often begin with the arrival of colonial powers, creating the misleading impression that structured systems of learning emerged only through colonial intervention. However, African communities possessed well-developed systems of socialisation, knowledge transmission, and moral education long before colonial occupation. Understanding precolonial African education challenges colonial narratives that portrayed African societies as lacking organised knowledge systems. Instead, it reveals complex, dynamic, and contextually grounded educational traditions that sustained communities long before colonial educational models were imposed. This historical grounding is crucial for contemporary debates on decolonising higher education and re-centering indigenous knowledge systems within modern curricula. Precolonial African education was holistic, communal, and deeply rooted in lived experience and practical application. Unlike Western education, which became increasingly formalised in classroom settings, African education was a lifelong, community-based process embedded in everyday psychosocial and economic activities. It was neither restricted to formal buildings nor dependent on rigid bureaucratic structures. Education was transmitted through families, kinship groups, village collectives, and community elders, thereby establishing a pedagogical system that was both inclusive and participatory (Adeyemi & Adeyinka, 2002).

Precolonial African education was deeply embedded in community life and shaped by the social, economic, spiritual, and environmental realities of diverse African societies. Education was not confined to formal institutions or classrooms but was integrated into everyday life, with learning occurring through participation in community activities, storytelling, observation, apprenticeship, and ritual practices. Knowledge transmission was collective, intergenerational, and aimed at preparing individuals to contribute meaningfully to community survival and continuity. In African contexts, learning took place in diverse settings, such as in the fields (emadlelweni), rivers, hunting grounds, ceremonial gatherings, and storytelling circles. It was closely intertwined with spirituality, morality, social norms, and environmental sustainability. As Omolewa (2007) states, “indigenous

African education encouraged close links with social life in both a material and spiritual sense," highlighting its deep cultural relevance. This integrative education model allowed children and youth to learn by observing, participating, and practicing under the guidance of elders and specialists in various trades and rituals.

In many African societies, education was closely tied to communal values that emphasised respect, responsibility, and social harmony. Gender relations, for example, were regulated through cultural norms and community accountability mechanisms (Ocitti, 1994). Women were widely regarded as bearers of life and custodians of family and community continuity, and social norms often protected them from public violence. Men were expected to provide for and protect their families through agricultural labour, livestock management, and communal responsibilities. Physical violence against women was socially condemned in many communities, and men who abused women could be disciplined by elders or community authorities. Social sanctions reinforced expectations of respect and accountability, ensuring that personal behaviour remained a community concern rather than a private matter (Mbiti, 1969). Traditional forms of education therefore taught boys and girls distinct but complementary social responsibilities (Amadiume, 1987). Boys were trained in agriculture, herding, craftsmanship, and community defence, while girls were prepared for roles associated with family care, food production, and community cohesion. These roles were not merely economic but moral and social, teaching cooperation, mutual respect, and interdependence. Importantly, education was not only about skill acquisition but about shaping character and social responsibility. Respect for women, elders, and communal authority formed part of moral education. Moral and ethical education formed a central component of learning. Community elders played a crucial role in instilling values such as respect, communal responsibility, solidarity, hospitality, and conflict resolution. Oral traditions, including proverbs, folktales, praise poetry, and songs, were used to transmit history, cultural norms, and philosophical understandings of life. Initiation ceremonies and rites of passage further reinforced identity formation, discipline, and social responsibility as individuals transitioned into adulthood.

Despite the dominance of colonial narratives that dismiss African systems as primitive, there is ample evidence that formal educational institutions existed long before the colonial era. African societies also maintained centres of advanced scholarship and learning. Maringe and Ojo (2017) emphasise that higher education did not arrive with European colonisers in the 18th century but had long existed on the continent. Notable early institutions include the Alexandrian Academy (331 BC) in Egypt, renowned for mathematics and philosophy; the University of Timbuktu (c.1100 AD) in Mali, a major center of Islamic scholarship; Al Quaraouiyine University (859 AD) in Fez, Morocco the world's first degree-awarding institution; and Al-Azhar University (970 AD) in Cairo, which focused on Islamic jurisprudence and theology (Mazrui, 2005). At the same time, some African societies sustained centres of advanced learning, particularly in regions connected to long-distance trade networks. Cities such as Timbuktu, Gao, and Djenné became important intellectual centres where scholars engaged in studies of theology, law, medicine, mathematics, astronomy, and literature (Mbiti, 1969). These institutions demonstrate that African educational systems were not homogeneous, encompassing both community-based knowledge systems and organised scholarly traditions. These institutions served not only as centres of higher learning but also as international hubs for intellectual exchange between Africa, the Middle East, Asia, and parts of Europe. Their existence debunks the myth that Africa lacked sophisticated systems of formal education prior to colonial intervention. Precolonial African education also emphasised community values such as solidarity, cooperation, and mutual aid. Central to these was the philosophy of Ubuntu, encapsulated in sayings like “Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu” a person is a person through other people (Letseka, 2012). This philosophy promoted a communal sense of identity and social responsibility, which remain essential in professions like social work today.

Moreover, African education was intensely practical and vocational. Young people were systematically apprenticed to learn crafts and vocations directly tied to community well-being. Education systems across African societies focused on holistic development, combining intellectual, moral, spiritual, physical, and social learning. Children and youth were gradually introduced to community responsibilities through structured socialisation processes

(Fafunwa, 1974). For example, pastoral communities taught livestock management, migration patterns, and environmental knowledge, while agricultural societies trained young members in farming practices, land stewardship, and seasonal cycles. Craft specialisation, including pottery, weaving, metallurgy, and carpentry, was often passed down through apprenticeships within families or guild-like systems. For example, those involved in fishing learned about star patterns, ocean currents, and fish behaviour. Farmers also studied ecological systems. Spiritual leaders underwent rigorous mentorship and rituals to assume roles such as diviners, rainmakers, and herbalists (Fafunwa, 1974). This form of learning by doing ensured relevance and sustainability, key principles still advocated in contemporary pedagogical frameworks.

Importantly, indigenous education systems were adaptive and contextually relevant. Knowledge was continually refined through lived experiences and environmental interaction, ensuring communities developed resilience in agriculture, health practices, governance, and ecological management. Education therefore functioned as both cultural preservation and practical preparation for life. The foundational goal of this education system was to raise individuals who were well-adjusted, cooperative, and able to contribute meaningfully to communal life. It followed a developmental approach aligned with the child's physical, cognitive, and emotional growth. Instruction was typically delivered in the native language, often using oral traditions. These tools stimulated children's curiosity, sharpened cognitive skills, and transmitted cultural values in engaging and accessible ways (Ocitti, 1994).

Movements such as the 1976 Soweto Uprising and the #FeesMustFall protests of 2015/2016 in South Africa have reignited the call to decolonise education by reclaiming African epistemologies and pedagogies. These movements argue for a revaluation of indigenous knowledge systems and a shift away from Eurocentric curricula that alienate African students from their cultural and historical roots (Heleta, 2016; Le Grange, 2016). This is because precolonial African education was dynamic, inclusive, and deeply contextualised. It challenged the colonial narrative of a dark continent and offers a critical foundation for rethinking and reconstituting African social work education. Its emphasis on communalism, experiential learning, and

cultural relevance aligns strongly with contemporary calls for decoloniality in education and practice.

However, while precolonial African education possessed many strengths, it also had limitations that require critical reflection. Educational access and knowledge transmission were often structured along lines of age, gender, lineage, and social status (Bridger, 2021). Certain specialised knowledge systems were restricted to elite groups, royal families, priesthoods, or secret societies, making access to advanced learning uneven across communities. Some practices reinforced rigid social hierarchies, and initiation systems could function as mechanisms of social control rather than empowerment. The strong emphasis on conformity and respect for tradition sometimes discouraged questioning of authority or innovation, particularly where elders' decisions were rarely challenged. Precolonial education systems also tended to focus on immediate communal needs rather than on broader scientific or technological development that could adapt rapidly to global changes. While highly effective within local contexts, these systems sometimes struggled to respond to new political and economic pressures introduced through expanding global trade networks and later colonial incursions. At the same time, colonial education systems introduced formal schooling models that displaced indigenous forms of knowledge transmission. Learning shifted from community-based education to classroom-based instruction focused on literacy, religion, and skills suited to colonial administration and labour needs. Indigenous systems of moral and social education were often dismissed as informal, contributing to the erosion of community authority in shaping behaviour and values.

One of the major challenges in reconstructing precolonial African education is the lack of historical documentation. African societies primarily relied on oral traditions, and communal memory to transmit knowledge across generations. Colonial administrators and missionaries later documented African histories, often interpreting them through colonial perspectives that portrayed African societies as lacking civilisation prior to European arrival. This has raised enduring questions about the legitimacy and reliability of written accounts of African prehistory, as they were often recorded by outsiders who misunderstood or misrepresented indigenous institutions. Because modern academic systems tend to privilege written documentation

over oral tradition, indigenous histories and knowledge systems have often been marginalised or treated as less credible. As a result, generations of Africans have been taught histories that begin with European discovery, reinforcing the false notion that civilisation and education arrived with colonial powers. Recovering oral histories and recognising them as legitimate sources of knowledge is therefore essential for reconstructing accurate understandings of African educational traditions.

Recognising both strengths and limitations is important in contemporary debates about decolonising education. Romanticising precolonial education risks overlooking internal inequalities and complexities, while dismissing indigenous systems ignores their depth and relevance. A critical engagement enables contemporary education systems, particularly in African higher education, to draw on indigenous knowledge while addressing historical exclusions based on gender, class, and power. Such balanced reflection enables efforts to reconstruct educational models that are both socially inclusive and contextually relevant in postcolonial societies. Reclaiming these histories is therefore essential for building educational systems that affirm African intellectual heritage while responding to contemporary social realities.

Social Work in Colonial Contexts: Foundations and Contradictions

Social work as a formal profession emerged alongside the expansion of European industrial capitalism and colonial governance in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While often presented as a humanitarian response to poverty and social dislocation, social work also developed within broader political projects aimed at regulating populations, managing labour, and stabilising colonial economies. In many colonised societies, welfare interventions were introduced not primarily to improve indigenous well-being but to maintain social order, secure labour productivity, and prevent resistance. As colonial administrations expanded, social welfare policies were integrated into systems of governance, positioning social work as both a supportive and regulatory mechanism within colonial rule. The origins of social work as a profession are deeply entangled with the histories of colonialism, imperialism, and capitalist

expansion. The formalisation of social work in Africa was not a neutral or organic development, it was shaped within colonial frameworks that sought to regulate, control, and civilise indigenous populations (Gray, Coates & Yellow Bird, 2008; Kreitzer, 2012). As a profession rooted in Western liberal and philanthropic ideologies, social work was introduced to Africa through colonial educational and missionary institutions, primarily to serve the administrative and moral interests of the colonisers rather than the needs of colonised people. While the professionalisation of social work in Africa is often traced back to colonial institutions such as the University of Cape Town's social work diploma introduced in 1924 (Smith, 2014), it is essential to situate the emergence of the profession within a broader historical and socio-political context. This chapter sets the tone for the book by tracing how colonial ideologies institutionalised forms of care, discipline, and social control under the guise of humanitarian assistance. However, it also challenges the notion that social work began with colonialism, highlighting that African societies had well-established systems of mutual aid, communal care, and indigenous social services long before European contact (Osei-Hwedie, 1993; Mupedziswa, 2001).

Precolonial societies across Africa, Asia, and Latin America already maintained complex systems of mutual aid, kinship-based support, and community responsibility for vulnerable members. Extended family structures, clan networks, communal land systems, and indigenous healing practices functioned as social protection mechanisms long before colonial welfare systems were introduced. However, colonial administrations frequently dismissed these indigenous welfare systems as primitive or ineffective. Instead, European models of charity, poor relief, and institutional care were imposed, often disrupting existing community support networks. Missionary organisations played a central role in establishing orphanages, hospitals, and schools that promoted Christian moral values alongside social assistance, thereby linking welfare provision with cultural assimilation. Contrary to dominant colonial narratives, African societies were not devoid of social systems before colonisation. Social organisation was communal, with collective responsibility for the welfare of the individual. Kinship networks, clan-based systems, age-grade associations, and spiritual leaders formed the bedrock of indigenous social

welfare systems (Rankopo & Osei-Hwedie, 2011). For instance, mechanisms such as *Ubuntu* in southern Africa, *Ujamaa* in East Africa, and *Botho* in Botswana reflected philosophies rooted in solidarity, reciprocity, and interdependence (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013; Thabede, 2008). These indigenous approaches to social welfare were embedded in cultural, spiritual, and ecological knowledge systems. They prioritised harmony with the environment, respect for elders, restorative justice, and moral instruction. By drawing attention to these indigenous forms of social support, the book does not aim to romanticise the past or suggest a return to pre-colonial life. Rather, it insists that development and educational progress must be grounded in the historical and cultural contexts of the people they aim to serve (Gray & Fook, 2004). Progress devoid of identity is assimilation, not transformation.

A central contradiction in colonial social work lies in its dual role as both a helping profession and a tool of colonial control. Welfare services were frequently designed to discipline populations rather than empower them. For example, social workers and welfare officers often monitored African families, regulated urban migration, and intervened in child-rearing practices deemed incompatible with European norms. In settler colonies such as South Africa, social welfare policies were racially segregated, with resources disproportionately allocated to European populations while African communities received minimal and highly controlled assistance. Social work interventions sometimes reinforced pass laws, labour controls, and housing segregation, illustrating how welfare services could serve broader systems of racial governance. Colonial modernity ushered in a rupture in African epistemologies. With the imposition of Eurocentric institutions, languages, and value systems, African indigenous ways of knowing were dismissed as unscientific. The social work profession became one of the vehicles through which these hierarchies of knowledge were normalised. As Patel (2005) notes, social work in South Africa, for instance, developed within a highly racialised and unequal society, where its focus was primarily on regulating the behaviours of African populations within settler colonial systems. The introduction of Western social work frameworks often displaced indigenous paradigms. For example, Eurocentric individualism conflicted with African communalism; Western pathology-