

CADERNOS DE INCLUSÃO

21

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UNIVERSITIES. Towards a Multilingual, Multicultural and
Pluriepistemic Academic Institution.

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A PROPOSAL TO TRANSFORM THE CURRICULUM OF UNIVERSITIES.

Towards a Multilingual, Multicultural and Pluriepistemic Academic Institution

José Jorge de Carvalho¹

The present proposal is a follow up of the Panel "Is the Decolonisation of the Academy Realisable?" held at the World Academic Summit of 2020 convened by Professor 'Funmi Olonisakin, from King's College London. The panel included the participation of Wangui Wa Goro, from the School of Oriental and African Studies, King's, and the University of Nairobi; and José Jorge de Carvalho, from the University of Brasília and Head of the Institute of Inclusion in Higher Education and Research. After that public event we continued with our internal discussions to explore the possibilities of decolonizing the academy, not by any reactive move, but via a radical transformation of the curriculum. This proposal is offered as a first draft for an initial program, or a basic project, to be concretely implemented in King's College by Professor Wa Goro. And it is also conceived as a first step to a future partnership between King's College and the Institute of Inclusion at the University of Brasília. It is based on two movements of transformation that occurred in Brazil recently: the struggle for quotas (a specific type of affirmative action) for ethnic and racial minorities; and the movement to include masters of traditional knowledges as lecturers in universities.

I. The Western university: Worldwide Expansion and Contemporary Decolonization

The present model of university, including the curriculum on which the courses are organized and the profile of the professional careers, has been formulated on the basis of the reform of Berlin University in the beginning of the nineteenth century as it was conceptualized by Wilhelm von Humboldt. By the second half of the nineteenth century up to middle of the twentieth century this Humboldtian type of university was expanded to the five continents of the world, mainly through colonialism and imperialism. This model of Western academic institution is profoundly monological in its conceptualization, because it was designed for a class of white students, all members of the European dominant class, and all of them basically with the same cultural background. As an example

¹ Professor of Anthropology of the University of Brasília and Head of the Institute of Inclusion in Higher Education and Research of the National Research Council.

of this forced epistemic homogeneity, the curriculum of higher education implemented in Brazil during the twentieth century was an exact reproduction of that European model, which was designed to form a white, monoethnic and monoracial social elite, with a homogeneous cultural pattern, in a monolingual and monoepistemic environment.

A new model of academic institution that is fully equipped to speak to the world today has to be able to create a dialogical environment, so that different cultural traditions and different epistemologies can exchange with each other on equal terms. And this new academic environment must necessarily be built on ethnic and racial equality. This way, a transformation of the curriculum is a new task that is common to both kinds of institution: to those universities of the Global South as well as to those of the hegemonic North.

For the universities of the Global South, the task is to cease from reproducing an exclusively Eurocentric curriculum that was imposed under colonialism. For the hegemonic institutions of the North, the task is to exercise a self-criticism, recognizing their roles as colonizers, and admitting the limiting effects of their monoepistemic, monolingual, and monocultural outlook. The next step will be to transform the curriculum to include non-Western epistemic traditions, especially those present in the United Kingdom, such as African, Caribbean, Indian, Middle Eastern, among others.

Over the past decades there has been a growing movement in the global South to transform the Eurocentric model of institutions of higher education and the main banner that is used to demand this change is decolonization. For this movement, decolonizing university knowledge means, among other things, questioning the way in which non-European peoples are represented in courses and bibliographical references in numerous areas. A process of decolonization inevitably leads to a proposal to transform the curricula of courses and disciplines.

One of the earliest and most inspiring initiatives to transform the academic curriculum was the official statement called “On the Abolition of the English Department” led by Ngugi wa Thiong’o in the University of Nairobi, in 1968. Ngugi’s proposal was to build a pluriepistemic and multicultural environment in the recently created Kenyan university, giving equal value to African languages and African literature written in African languages, together with the great traditions of orature, an alternative term to oral literature. Professor Wa Goro’s project of Traducture expands Ngugi’s proposal to allow a wider move towards transforming the curriculum of African universities (although her proposal is also valid for universities in other continents), especially in the area of Humanities.

In the case of Brazil, the Institute of Inclusion was able to move from the purely theoretical discussions of the decolonization of academia to a concrete and broad project of transforming the curriculum of university institutions. Thus, in the last two decades we launched a movement of double inclusion to transform what it used to be a racially and epistemically homogeneous composition of

the university classroom. As a consequence of this movement, our universities are now open, not only for White middle-class students, as it used to be the case for more than one century, but also for Black, Indigenous and popular class students, always intersected with genre, sexuality, region, and capabilities. In addition to ethnic-racial inclusion, we managed to set in motion, in 2010, a second project of public policy, called Meeting of Knowledges, centered on epistemic inclusion: in order to overcome epistemic Eurocentrism, we now include, in the university curriculum, non-Western knowledges and epistemologies, such as those of Indigenous, Afro-Brazilian and those of the other traditional Brazilian peoples.²

We are now in the middle of a radical transformation of the ethnic-racial composition of academics and the university curriculum. The goal is to move from a monoethnic, monoracial, monolingual and monoepistemic model of higher education institution to a multiethnic, multiracial, multilingual and pluriepistemic model. With the double inclusion of ethnic-racial quotas and epistemic quotas, Brazilian universities will finally be able to reflect the diversity and richness of Brazilian society, with its 305 indigenous nations speaking over 200 different languages, more than 30 types of traditional peoples, thousands of Afro-Brazilian communities, countless traditions of artistic and scientific knowledge of the so-called popular cultures. The perspective generated is a policy of unrestricted inclusion, both in the school and in teaching – through ethnic-racial quota policies for students and teachers – and a multiepistemic curriculum, which does not reproduce only Eurocentric knowledge, as occurred during the twentieth century, but that values in teaching and research the epistemic plurality: in an egalitarian climate, Eurocentric knowledge will coexist with indigenous knowledge, Afro-Brazilian knowledge and traditional popular knowledge.

With a new model of curriculum, we will be able to bring new sources of knowledge. The Meeting of Knowledges allows us to promote and give complete recognition to the wealth of traditions of knowledges alive in Brazilian society. Moreover, a new pluriepistemic curriculum will have a considerable impact in the young professionals, who will be better equipped to fulfill their roles in a multicultural and highly diverse society.

II. An agenda for the transformation of the curriculum

Based on the academic revolution caused by the public policies of double inclusion (ethnic and racial quotas and Meeting of Knowledges as epistemic quotas), here is a blueprint for an integral

² Discussions of the theory and methodology of the Meeting of Knowledges can be found in Carvalho (2019, 2021, 2022, 2023a and 2023b).

transformation of the curriculum. It is conceived primarily as a program to decolonize and rebuild universities located in multiethnic, multiracial, multicultural, polyglot, and pluriepistemic countries, such as those of Latin America, Africa, and in other parts of the Global South and in Eurasia. However, some of those items may also apply to European universities as well.

a) Institutional reorganization

1. Equality in the entire academic environment. The need to develop mechanisms of inclusion in order to achieve racial, ethnic and social equality among students, lecturers and administrative staff. The university must be prepared to prepare the different ethnic and racial groups of the country to become academics and professionals to attend the total population, without exclusion.

2. Social Forum. To devise a structure of dialogue and of pact with the communities, peoples and ethnic groups that live in the area where the campus is located. As a good example, the University of South Bahia organized a Social Forum in 2014 with the active presence of all the traditional peoples and communities of the region where it is located. On that basis, they all signed a joint agreement, covering research, teaching, extension, and collaborative project, that will meet the interest of both, university and communities. The social forum is a counterpart for the policies of inclusion which are specific to the academic communities, such as inclusion through cuotas and the transformation of the curriculum. If a university is not inclusive in social, ethnic and racial terms, then it is still a colonized institution; or in the case of those of the North, still a colonizer institution.

3. Polyglossia and multilingualism as an institutional policy. Universities must incorporate local and national languages in their courses and their curriculum.

4. Lectures and staff. There should be Black, White and Indigenous lecturers in the exact proportion of their demographic participation in the nation's population. Apart from the multiethnic and multiracial profile of their academic lecturers, universities must include masters of traditional peoples and communities as lecturers to teach their oral traditions of knowledge – or orature, as Wangui Wa Goro, Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Pio Zirimu prefer to say.

5. Meeting of Knowledges, in all the courses possible, organized as the basis for a pluriepistemic and transdisciplinary institution.

6. Orality and literacy together. Collaborative conviviality of written and oral traditions of knowledge in sciences, technologies, arts, and humanities.

b) Epistemic Reorganization

Basically, the organization of academic knowledge rests on four epistemic means: teaching, research, supervision, and examination. According to the way our university system has operated until now, teaching is done exclusively by an academic person who is an expert in some area of Western science and culture; research is based exclusively on the modern Western scientific and aesthetic outlook; and the roles of a supervisor and of an examiner can only be fulfilled by those who have acquired a complete Eurocentric formation (that is, undergraduate, Master, and Ph.D. degrees), and who have been hired as university professors. For a complete decolonization and transformation of our eurocentric curriculum, the Meeting of Knowledges includes masters of knowledges of the traditional peoples in all those academic activities. In sum:

1. Teaching. This is certainly the most basic task for an institution of higher education. After thirteen years of the Meeting of Knowledges, it has become clear for all the academics involved in the project that masters do know how to teach university students; more than that, all of them (Indigenous, Afro-Brazilian, or others) are able to adapt his/her traditional pedagogy to this new intellectual environment which is the classroom.

2. Research. Besides teaching activities, masters are now forming part of research teams, together with lecturers and students.

3. Supervising. If masters of traditional knowledges can teach to university students and participate in research teams with academics, then they can also supervise their students. Gradually, more students are doing research in the masters' communities and are asking them to supervise or co-supervise their monographs, dissertations and theses.

4. Examining. Teaching began in 2010, researching and co-supervising in 2015; and from 2018 onwards, masters began to participate in Examination Committees of Graduate courses in various universities.

5. Publication. There are now a great number of books published by masters, as transcriptions of their classes, seminars, speeches and interviews; books about masters; biographies, autobiographies of

masters; and on top of that, a large production of books and articles published in the regime of co-authorship between lecturers and masters.

6. Notório Saber (Acknowledged Higher Knowledge). Universities that participate in the Meeting of Knowledges are creating formal mechanisms to grant the title of “Acknowledged Higher Knowledge” to masters, certifying them as equivalent to a Ph.D. holder, even if they are illiterate.

7. Transforming institutional academic rules. We are proposing legal adaptations of the standard mechanisms of recruiting lecturers in order to hire masters to teach. This way, universities will be able to pay them a salary equivalent to that of a visiting or temporary lecturer. This articulation is based strongly on the legitimacy of the title of Notório Saber (Acknowledged Higher Knowledge).

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

In other words, in order to build a pluriepistemic curriculum, there must be a general reshaping of syllabuses, courses, bibliographies and other references, as well as the structure of the established careers. We will give a few examples:

The Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences will incorporate Indigenous Medicine, Afro-Brazilian Medicine, etc.

The Department of Pharmacology will include a Centre of Medicinal plants organized by master herbalists of Indigenous and Afro-Brazilian communities.

The Faculty of Arts will include Indigenous and Afro-Brazilian art traditions together with Western art.

The Faculty of Architecture will include courses and research projects about Indigenous architecture, Maroon architecture, Candomblé architecture, *Caiçara* architecture, and so on, organized by academics in collaboration, on an equal basis, with masters of those communities, nations and peoples.

The Faculty of Agriculture will include courses on the various traditional systems of cultivation of the land, taught by Indigenous and Afro-Brazilian masters.

These examples from Brazil are just inspirations to Professor Wa Goro, because the reality

of epistemic diversity in the UK will be certainly different from that which is briefly described above.

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

We can devise a pilot experience of transforming the curriculum of King's College by opening a new course, on an experimental basis, based on the methodology of the Meeting of Knowledges as it has been put into practice during the last thirteen years. As the project is already functioning in twenty Brazilian universities, as well as in Colombia and Austria, maybe it can also be adapted to the reality of the UK. The experimental course to be offered at King's can concentrate on the Humanities side of the academic spectrum, and particularly in the areas of Languages and Literature, and for that purpose it will count on the exceptional knowledge of Professor Wangui Wa Goro. One pillar of the course will be Wa Goro's approach of *Traducture*, which, in her own words, will "draw attention to existing discourses in varied multilingual, transcultural and transnational locations in relation to future".

The idea is that a systematic discussion and a proposal for the transformation of the curriculum will begin in such a course. African, and African Diaspora issues will certainly appear, and hopefully will resonate, for further reflections, with the wide promotion of Afro-Brazilian cultural and scientific traditions which are taking place now in Brazil since the Meeting of Knowledges began. Many topics to be raised in the course will probably show affinities with similar dilemmas presented in an important collective book published in March 2023 called *Whose Heritage?*, inspired on a lecture by Stuart Hall dedicated to an analysis of the whole issue of the lack of integration of Black cultural heritage in the British nation (a heritage which has been defined, up to now, by its White representation). Obviously, the issues involved in the new course proposed at King's will probably transcend Black heritage in the UK and it will likely touch similar absences and negations, such as the heritages of Indian, Pakistani, Middle Eastern, East Asian and other descents.

King's College is located in London, one of the most cosmopolitan cities in the world: multiethnic, multiracial, multilingual and multicultural. And in great measure, so is also the United Kingdom as a country. The idea behind the project which integrates the Meeting of Knowledges with Traducture is that a new curriculum of King's will be able to reflect this immense London and UK diversity and complexity, both among the students and among the staff. It is more than certain that numerous traditions of knowledge coming from the various continents of the world are now present in London and in the United Kingdom in general; however, unfortunately, they seem not to be represented in the curriculum in the same measure and importance according to their great intellectual

and scientific value.

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

Through orature, we can imagine the possibility of masters of traditional knowledges participate as invited or guest speakers in Prof. Wangui Wa Goro’s classes. For instance, *griots* from West African countries, such as Guinea, Gambia, Mali, Senegal, Burkina Faso, *babalawos* from Nigeria and Benin can teach the various aspects of *Ifa* literary corpus in Yoruba and Fon languages, such as philosophy, cosmology, psychology, poetry, among others.³ Perhaps even *mwaliimu* or *nganga* sages who may happen to be living in London or in other cities of the UK can also participate. As part of Traducture/translation open space, master will bring the depth and sophistication of their African languages (such as Wolof, Peul, Yoruba, Fon, Gikuyu, Swahili, Kicongo) to the classroom, opening wide the space created by Traducture/translation. In other words, we will be able to bring to one of the centers of scientific knowledge based on specialized literacy the “living tradition”, as Amadou Hampaté Bâ called it.⁴

The issues discussed above make us conscious of the fact that the transformation that is needed in order to establish the new curriculum cannot be realized by white Eurocentric academics alone, otherwise it will be just an actualization of the same colonizing model of Western higher education institution that we had for centuries. Most likely, a new chart, or a rearrangement of the present curriculum carried out by Professor Wa Goro will begin with the interepistemic, intercultural and multilingual dialogue with masters of orature who represent the non-Western traditions of knowledges which have been excluded from the actual curriculum. In other words, the idea is to finally do justice to the great epistemic diversity present today in the United Kingdom. Of course, masters of orature, such as *babalawos* and *djelis* mentioned above are just examples of a wealth of living treasures that can be found in the United Kingdom these days. Another central point of

³ We can invoke here the trajectory of a Babalawo, ‘Wande Abimbola, who was also Vice-Chancellor of Obafemi Awolowo University in Ile Ife (Abimbola 2003).

⁴ Bâ (1981).

epistemic expansion that will lead to a transformation of the curriculum is the overcoming of monolingualism, so that we will move to an academic environment open to polyglossia and to a constant process of mutual translation between academics, lecturers, students and masters of orature: an atmosphere that Ngugi wa Thiong'o describes very aptly as the "language of languages".⁵

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

Another key concept in Professor Wa Goro's proposal is restoration. In terms of our decolonizing standpoint in Latin America, where Indigenous and African traditions of knowledges were kept in silence by force during centuries, we can conceive restoration as a reaffirmation, or a new presentation. Translated into the language of the Aymara and Quechua peoples of Bolivia Peru, and Ecuador, we can define restoration via the Meeting of Knowledges as a new *Pachakuti*, i.e, a renewal, a renaissance, as well as a new turn of the cycle of time/space.⁶ After all, masters can speak to the present world situation through their traditional knowledges in the same way that Western academics speak today through their Eurocentric tradition of knowledges.

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⁵ Wa Thiong'o (2023).

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