Contested issues in training ministers in South Africa

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AFRICAN LEADERSHIP VIABILITY
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THE AFRICAN RENAISSANCE AND THE DECOLONISATION OF THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

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Introduction

Theological education during the colonial period in Africa was hegemonic and disruptive to African cultural practices, indigenous epistemologies, and ways of knowing. The centuries old subjugation of Africa to colonial exploitation, ranging from slavery to the creation of socio-economic structures during the colonial era which were designed to achieve maximum extraction and exportation of raw materials, wreaked serious damage that still remain palpable years after the demise of colonial rule. This was accomplished, as Nkomo (2000:52) notes, by a whole range of arrangements, including educational philosophies, curricula and practices of which the context corresponded with that of the respective colonial powers. This meant that with the advent of colonisation, traditional African epistemologies started disappearing due to cultural repression, misrepresentations and devaluation (see Higgs 2012).

Theological education in Africa in the 21st century has to operate in both a post-colonial and globalising context. However, theological education in post-colonial Africa is still to a large extent confronted by the legacy of colonial forms of theological education that remained in place decades after political decolonisation. As a result, theological education in Africa, despite the advent of decolonisation, still in many instances, mirrors colonial models inherited from the West and Europe. The voices of African indigenous populations are, therefore, greatly negated in theological education discourses. Consequently, there is an existential and humane need today to decolonise theological education in Africa by means of post-colonial forms of theological education that will reclaim indigenous African voices through curriculum reforms and the transformation of theological discourses.

This chapter is an attempt to explore the need for the reconstruction of theological education in an African context in the light of Africa's colonial past, and the call for an African Renaissance on the African continent. In reflecting critically on this educational issue, I understand education as a social and epistemic practice which is concerned with the cultural and social conditions that underpin the construction of knowledge (Luckett 2010). In this endeavour, I argue that through the implementation and integration of indigenous African epistemologies in theological education in Africa, Africans can reclaim their voices in the continent's spaces of theological education, including South Africa. Ministerial training in such a context will allow ministers in training to understand and acquire a voice that resonates with and acknowledges a decolonised African identity. Such an African identity is highly contested in South African theological education, especially in the training of church ministers. The reasons for such contestation are many and varied.

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However, a major factor remains the ever-present duality of Western/European forms of theological education, while the training of church ministers in an African context should actually be informed by indigenous African knowledge systems. In addressing this problem, I will reflect critically on the question of indigenous African knowledge systems and the problem of an African identity. In doing so, I will attempt to deconstruct this dualism in claiming that the African notion of communalism and the *ubuntu* ethic can lead to an African-based theological education in the training of church ministers throughout the continent, and, indeed, in South Africa as well. My argument that follows is rooted in the call for an African Renaissance in theological education in its many manifestations in Africa in pre- and post-colonial periods.

The African Renaissance and theological education

The call for an African Renaissance has been present in the period marking the nearly four decades of African post-independence. The process of decolonisation that unfolded during this period, saw Africa assert its right to define itself within its own African context in the attainment of independence. Wa Thiong'o (2009:21) claims that independence was about people's struggle to claim their own space, and their right to name the world for themselves rather than be named through the colour-tinted glass of the Europeans (Zenawi 2012).

In the context of education, Hoppers (2001:1) describes this continuing struggle in the following way:

The African voice in education at the end of the twentieth century is the voice of the radical witness of the pain and inhumanity of history, the arrogance of modernisation and the conspiracy of silence in academic disciplines towards what is organic and alive in Africa. It is the voice of 'wounded healers' struggling against many odds to remember the past, engage with the present, and determine a future built on new foundations. It invokes the democratic ideal of the right of all to 'be', to 'exist', to grow and live without coercion, and from that to find a point of convergence with the numerous others. It exposes the established hegemony of Western thought, and beseeches it to feel a measure of shame and vulgarity at espousing modes of development that build on the silencing of all other views and perceptions of reality. It also seeks to make a contribution to the momentum for a return of humanism to the centre of the educational agenda, and dares educators to see the African child-learner not as a bundle of Pavlovian reflexes, but as a human being culturally and cosmologically located in authentic value systems.

What this means in the context of theological education, is that the latter is founded on the perception that the overall character of much of theological education in Africa is overwhelmingly Western and Eurocentric. In other words, it is argued by advocates of an African Renaissance in theological education, such as Boesak (2005) and Botman (2008), that much of what is taken for theological education in Africa is, in fact, not African,

but rather a reflection of Europe in Africa. The African Renaissance has also taken on a much greater significance in recent days, with the call for the recognition of indigenous African knowledge systems by scholars such as Gigaba (2011). The inference here, when applied to theological education, is the distorted view that Africans possess little or no indigenous knowledge of value that can be utilised in theological education. It is also believed that theological education in Africa is context-bound by Western European culture, where the English language is sacralised and internalisation of bourgeois European values are seen as the index of progress (Sefa Dei 2013). This situation is compounded by globalisation which has corrupted African culture through its progressive technological changes in communication, political and economic power, knowledge and skills, as well as cultural values, systems and practices. Shizha (2011:2) notes that globalisation promotes the epistemological and ontological realities and experiences of the most powerful in the world. In doing so, globalisation has, as Maweu (2011:36) observes, catalysed the colonisation of African ways of knowing. And it is in response to this state of affairs that the call for an African Renaissance in theological education goes out – a call which insists that all critical and transformative theological educators in Africa embrace indigenous African epistemologies and root their theological and educational paradigms in indigenous African socio-cultural and epistemological frameworks. This implies that all educational discourses in Africa, including those in theological education, should have Africa as their focus, and as a result be indigenous-grounded and orientated. Failure to do so will mean that theological education becomes alien, oppressive and irrelevant. Thus, in order to debunk the belief that Western Eurocentric knowledge in Africa is the only viable knowledge when it comes to theological education, it is vital to decolonise the misconception of its superiority.

The call for an African Renaissance in theological education seeks to demonstrate how indigenous African epistemologies can be tapped as a foundational resource for theological education in Africa. However, in assuming the indigeneity of culture, the call for an African Renaissance in theological education does not connote a detachment from political radicalisation and mobilisation. In fact, proponents of the African Renaissance in theological education (Boesak 2005, 2006, Botman 2008, Bowers 2007, Carney 2010 and Steinke 2011) would rather claim that the influence of Western Eurocentric culture on Africans needs to be forcefully arrested by all critically conscious African theological educators in the struggle for the establishment of an African identity in theological education. This will entail countering the colonisation of the African mind by forces emanating from the excessive mono-cultural domination of Western and European forms of knowledge and languages, as well as the asking of critical questions about the knowledge included in theological education and the languages spoken and used as mediums of instruction.

Such a critical questioning about knowledge included in theological education will be evidenced in, what I call, transformative education discourses. Such discourses examine the sources of the knowledge that is imposed on or prescribed for Africa, as well as how theological education in Africa is implicated in the universalisation of Western and

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European experiences. These discourses will also ask which ways of knowing theological education in Africa it validates and promotes, and which ones it ignores, invalidates, and why. By this means, transformative education discourses in theological education will help to decolonise theological education and will also seek to integrate indigenous African epistemologies with the content and practices of theological education in Africa. Theological education will thus provide for the construction of an empowering knowledge that will enable communities in Africa to establish their own African identity within theological education.

Theological education and the problem of an African identity

The issue of an African identity in theological education requires that attention be directed towards the questions:

- Who is an African, and what does the term ‘African’ denote?
- In what way does African philosophy provide African identity with distinctive content?

The responses to these questions will suggest what needs to be focused on in attempting to decolonise theological education by divesting it of any undue influences emanating from the colonial past. The appropriation of an African identity in theological education is given voice by a number of scholars (see, for example, Maluleke 2006). However, the question of what an African is and what it means to be one, is not unproblematic. In the light of Africa’s colonial past, African philosophy is confronted with the problem of establishing its own unique African order of knowledge. Or as Nabudere (2005:12) states, “The struggle for African authentic development is about an epistemological revolution and struggle for knowledge production that satisfies the demands for cultural identity.”

What it means to be African

The question of cultural identity in an African context directs attention at what meaning we attach to the adjective ‘African’, and is a crucial debate in attempts at establishing a uniquely African order of knowledge (see Masolo 1995).

LeBeau and Gordon (2002:218) contend that the African Renaissance universalises African identities towards a single African culture. Thabo Mbeki (in Lotter 2007:13) concurs in promoting African pride, but does not call for a multi-cultural South Africa to achieve the goals and objectives of the African Renaissance. Rather, Mbeki contends that to be truly ‘African’ one must participate in the African Renaissance. In other words, as Boesak (2005:42) states, “... to be a true African is to be a rebel in the cause of the African Renaissance.” Nehusi (2004:22) maintains that:

An Afrikan is a person who shares with others a common geographical origin and ownership of, and spiritual attachment to their ancestral land known as the continent of Afrika. A proper definition of a people must be clear about who they are as well as about whom they are not. Some Afrikans believe that anyone who lives

in the continent of Afrika is an Afrikan. Nothing could be further from the truth. Arabs and Europeans have established themselves in Afrika with much physical and cultural violence. There is a widespread tendency to over emphasise this nationality to the exclusion of identity. The answer to the problem is a redefinition of 'Afrikan' by Afrikans to place more emphasis upon similarities and commonalities of origin, values, history, heritage, and interests.

Nehusi's definition of an 'African' has clear reference to the basis of identity as having to do with skin colour. This raises a serious ontological issue for theological education on the African continent: Do the prospects of the inclusion of indigenous African epistemologies in theological education in Africa include a place for all races and cultural groups? However, Appiah (1994:2) is critical of all assertions of a united, homogeneous African voice, Africa identity and what he calls radical Pan Africanism, declaring that Africa is like "... my father's house in which there are many mansions ... meaning that there are, and should be, many and various ways of being African."

Ramose (2003:114-116) argues that the term Africa(n) is contestable on at least two grounds. One is that the name is not conferred by the indigenous people of Africa on themselves. The other is that the name Africa(n) does not by definition refer to the particular histories of the indigenous peoples inhabiting various parts of the continent from time immemorial. In other words, the term is geographically significant although, historically, its meaning is questionable from the point of view of indigenous African peoples. Other African philosophers, for example Hountondji (1996), regard an intellectual product as African simply because it is produced or promoted by Africans. In other words, if an African is a person who shares with others a common geographical origin, ownership of, and spiritual attachment to their ancestral land known as the continent of Africa, then 'African' includes members of all races and cultural groups.

African philosophy and an African identity

The struggle for an authentic African epistemic is taken up in African philosophy. This involves, as Nabudere (2005:12) states, "The ... struggle for knowledge production that satisfies the demands for cultural identity." With regard to the term 'philosophy', two conceptions of philosophy have become prominent in debates about an African identity for African philosophy. Firstly, the definition of philosophy as a rational, critical activity. Those who adopt this definition of philosophy, for example Appiah (1989a), Hountondji (1996), Oladipo (1989), and Ramose (2003), frown at the attempt to equate African philosophy with traditional African world epistemologies. In doing so, they make a distinction between philosophy in the popular sense, and philosophy in the academic sense. In the first instance, philosophy is regarded as being concerned with traditional African epistemologies, whereas in an academic sense, philosophy is a theoretical discipline like physics, algebra and linguistics, with its own distinctive problems and methods. Scholars in Africa who view philosophy in this academic sense are referred to as universalist African

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philosophers since they emphasise reason as a universal human phenomenon. Secondly, there are other African philosophers such as Gyekye (1997), Kaphagawani and Malherbe (1998), and Motshega (1999) who maintain that traditional African epistemologies constitute an authentic African philosophy. They insist on a definition of philosophy that is broad enough to accommodate these epistemologies. Recourse to traditional African epistemologies is taken up in the practice of what is called ethno-philosophy.

These two mentioned conceptions of philosophy that have become prominent in debates about an African identity in African philosophy, are distinguished by:

- those who insist on a strict definition of philosophy on a purity of form – they are out to defend the professional integrity of their discipline against the popularisation by cultural nationalists; and
- those who give a rather broad definition of philosophy and emphasise the specificity of the content of whatever is produced by African philosophers in the practice of ethno-philosophy.

The concern of identity – be it with regard to definitions of ‘African’ or ‘philosophy’ – is considered by some, for example Oladipo (1992) and Appiah (1989b), to be misguided and distracting. Oladipo (1992:22) argues that there are no definitions that capture the essence of either the terms ‘African’ or ‘philosophy’. No one definition can be credited with a universal application, because both these terms are linked with a social history that impacts upon their meaning. In responding to the preoccupation with definition, Appiah (1989b:12) points out that:

There are other issues for philosophers in Africa to explore now, which require not preliminary anxieties as to whether our work fits existing labels, but confident examinations of some of the questions for which our training happens to have equipped us.

In the light of these remarks, it would seem that the problem surrounding African philosophy is not the problem of anything meeting the criteria for being both ‘African’ and ‘philosophical’. It is rather the problem of the extent to which African philosophers have been able to put their intellect in the service of the struggle and destiny of Africans. In other words, the issue is not that of whether a contributor to a debate is African-born or whether the question under consideration is authentically African in the cultural sense. It is not even the issue of whether what they are doing is pure philosophy, applied philosophy, ethno-philosophy, social criticism, etc. In fact, as said in the words of Oladipo (1992:24):

... it is the issue of the extent to which African philosophers have been able to use whatever intellectual skills they possess to illuminate the various dimensions of the African predicament.

This sentiment is taken up in part by African scholars, such as Serequeberhan (1994), who adopts a hermeneutical perspective on the term ‘African’ in African philosophy. Rooting

themselves in what is traditional to Africa, such scholars seek to escape an enslavement to the past by using that past to open up the future. They contend that African philosophy properly construed must move beyond a preoccupation with universalist abstractions and ethnological considerations, and call into question the real relations of power in Africa. In this regard, Serequeberhan (1994:43) states that:

The discourse of African philosophy is indirectly and historically linked to the demise of European hegemony (colonialism and neo-colonialism) and is aimed at fulfilling/completing this demise. It is a reflective and critical effort to rethink the indigenised African situation beyond the confines of Eurocentric concepts and categories.

To appreciate the distinctive features of African philosophy, it is also helpful to compare its method and execution with other systems of philosophy. Appiah (1994:144) elucidates the difference between African and Western philosophy being mindful of the condescending attitude of the West towards Africa. For Appiah (1994:145), the West considers the issue of what philosophy is 'for' – that is, its social meaning and relevance – with intellectual and academic contempt. Undoubtedly, the West does philosophise in a different style and method than Africa. This, however, may be attributed to enormous resources and funding. The West is concerned with perfecting philosophical discourse for its own sake, while Africa wants to use philosophy in a particular sense to address social issues.

Central to the issue of philosophy in Africa, therefore, is the question of relevance and usefulness. Africa, perhaps owing to its level of development at this point, wants philosophy to contribute towards the political, economic, ethical and general upliftment of people. In Africa, philosophy is expected to be pragmatic and to render a 'service'. It must contribute effectively towards the amelioration of the human condition, the lived and existing human condition. Wiredu (as quoted by Anyanwu 1989:127) concludes in saying that "... we will only solve our problems if we see them as human problems arising out of a special situation." Thus, Anyanwu (1989:127) affirms that African philosophy "... invites people to take a stand on the issue of reality as experienced." This experience of an African reality gives rise to a sense of commonality in an enunciation of indigenous African knowledge systems which find expression in certain general themes in African philosophy – one of these being the discourse of community in Africa, also referred to as 'communalism', the other being the African ethic of *ubuntu*.

In the light of this sense of commonality in indigenous African knowledge systems evidenced in communalism and the African ethic of *ubuntu*, what then are the implications for attempts at decolonising theological education in Africa? I turn my attention firstly to the notion of communalism.

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Theological education and communalism

Despite the diversity and extraordinary dynamism of the African continent as emphasised by Appiah (1994:47), it is argued by many (see, for example, Gyekye 1997:158) that there are commonalities which unite the African experience. In the words of Diop (1962:7), "... there is a profound cultural unity still alive beneath the deceptive appearance of cultural heterogeneity present in Africa which gives rise to certain commonalities in indigenous African knowledge systems."

One such commonality which is highlighted by Letseka (2000:181-187), is communalism. According to Letseka (2000:181), the importance of communality to traditional African life cannot be overemphasised. This is because community and belonging to a community of people constitute the very fabric of traditional African life. Unlike the Western liberal notion of the individual as some sort of entity that is capable of existing and flourishing on its own, unconnected to any community of other individuals, not bound by any biological relationships or socio-economic, political and cultural relationships, obligations, duties, responsibilities and conventions that frame and define any community of individuals, the communal conception of the individual in most traditional African settings is described by Mbiti (1970:108) in the following way: "Whatever happens to the individual happens to the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual. The individual can only say, 'I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am'."

This, Mbiti (1970:109) claims, is a cardinal point in the understanding of the African view of man. Commenting on traditional life in Kenya, Kenyatta (1965:297) echoes similar views:

According to Gikuyu's ways of thinking, nobody is an isolated individual, or rather, his uniqueness is a secondary fact about him; first and foremost he is several people's relative and several people's contemporary.

Menkiti (1979:158) concurs when he states:

A crucial distinction thus exists between the African view of man and the view of man found in Western thought: In the African view it is the community which defines the person as a person, not some isolated static quality of rationality, will or memory.

In traditional African life then, a person depends on others just as much as others depend on him or her. In fact, in terms of an African communitarian view, the individual's life and fulfilment is only to be found in community with others. My concern in noting the discourse of community in Africa has been directed at highlighting the role of community knowledge in theological education in Africa. It is evident from the discourse of community in Africa that:

- Theological education in Africa should be sensitive to the double role of individuals in African societies (see Kaphagawani and Malherbe 1998:214). Elders and other 'epistemic

authorities' in communities should not only be perceived as important informants, but also as research colleagues with critical perspectives on theological practices in theological education. Also, in that learning is an individual endeavour, it will be important to open the necessary spaces for individuals in African community-based theological education.

- The communal nature of African societies indicates that community-based education needs to be taken into consideration by theological education if it is to be relevant in an African context.

I would, therefore, argue that the significance of indigenous African knowledge systems for theological education in Africa is centred in the question of communalism. In other words, if we can speak of indigenous African knowledge systems which are characterised by discourses of community, I would argue that theological education, if it is to be relevant in its outreach in Africa, then not only needs to take into account indigenous African knowledge systems, but also needs to direct attention towards the needs of local African communities. The argument here is one of advocating an appropriate and relevant theological education for a given set of circumstances, because the logical implication of the significance of indigenous African knowledge systems for theological education is that theological education should be closely linked to communal values. This means that theological education should take cognisance of the values which strengthen communal behaviours, and regard these values as fundamental to its outreach to African communities. In other words, African community-based theological education should take cognisance of indigenous African knowledge systems and values present in the community for purposes of fostering the communal discourses of that community. In doing so, African community-based theological education becomes a kind of theological education that is conducted by, with, and for the community. Such an African community-based theological education is evidenced, for example, in the work of the Ujamaa Centre at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. The centre has worked extensively throughout South Africa and across the African continent, and has an international reputation for its community-based work and research. The core characteristic of African community-based theological education is, what I call, a participatory involvement – that is, a form of involvement that seeks to enhance the capacity of the community members to participate in the process that shapes theological education and intervention strategies. The active co-operation and participation of members within the community are the essential components of African community-based theological education. This allows for the community to become an active agenda setter for theological education rather than just be a passive recipient of such an education. In this sense, theological education is applied democratically to respond to the needs of the community. African community-based theological education will, therefore, give theological education in Africa a communal basis by linking theological education with community needs and experiences. Indeed, I would argue that African community-based theological education can play a significant role in theological education in an African context, since it forces the inclusion of grassroots perspectives on

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theological education, and contributes to a desalination of theological education as being solely Western and Eurocentric.

However, also to be noted in African community-based theological education is what I refer to as its trans-traditional vantage. This means that it is important for African community-based theological education to acknowledge the validity of other non-African knowledge systems in theological education, and, at the same time, integrate indigenous African knowledge systems with these (see also Hoppers 2002). If this is not done, attempts at the indigenisation of theological education in Africa will itself become hegemonic and be guilty of a universalistic intent. However, in considering the decolonisation of theological education in Africa, cognisance also needs to be taken of the other commonality revealed in African indigenous knowledge systems, namely the African ethic of *ubuntu*.

Theological education and *ubuntu*

There is an extensive literature on the African ethic of *ubuntu* – see, for example, Appiah (1998), Gyekye (2004), Louw (2010), Higgs and Smith (2010a, 2010b), Letseka (2000), Metz (2010), and Waghid (2007). Letseka (2000:182–184) observes that traditional African morality is known for its concern with human welfare and that this finds expression in the African ethic of *ubuntu*, which means ‘humanness’. *Ubuntu*, therefore, has to do with the essential humanness of the individual where “... the inner being is understood to be the centre of human personalities, feelings, thought and will” (Mafunisa, in Nicholson 2008:116). Gyekye (1997:158) argues that:

... if one were to look for a pervasive and fundamental concept in African socio-ethical thought generally – a concept that animates other intellectual activities and forms of behaviour, including religious behaviour, and provides continuity, resilience, nourishment, and meaning to life – that concept would most probably be humanism as given expression in the *ubuntu*. Humanism is used here to refer to a philosophy that sees human needs, interests and dignity as of fundamental importance and concern.

Letseka (2000:184) points out that the expression *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* (I am a person through other persons) captures the underlying principles of interdependence and humanism in African life. It illuminates the communal embeddedness and connectedness of a person to other persons, and highlights the importance attached to people and to human relationships. As Sindane (1994:8–9) suggests, “*Ubuntu* inspires us to expose ourselves to others, to encounter the difference of their humanness so as to inform and enrich our own.”

In other words, to be human is to affirm one’s humanity by recognising the humanity of others. Teffo (2000:45) argues that *ubuntu*, as one of the commonalities identified in African experience, indicates that there is a way of thinking, of knowing and of acting

that is peculiar to the African. For Africans, what they know is inseparable from how they know it in the lived experience of their African culture. This sense of African-ness is, in other words, born out of a deep socio-ethical sense of cultural unity that provides African identity with its distinctiveness. In the light of such a striving for an African identity, what then are the implications for theological education when it comes to a consideration of the African ethic of *ubuntu*? Briefly, it means that theological education in post-colonial Africa needs to:

- ensure that the values and principles enshrined in the African ethic of *ubuntu* which concern a person's integrity and dignity, are acknowledged and respected;
- embed its content and activities in the values of *ubuntu*; values such as compassion, kindness, benevolence, helpfulness, forgiveness, understanding, caring, sharing, wisdom, humility and godliness (Ng'weshemi 2002:23);
- recognise that the core value of *ubuntu* in African ethics is the community; and
- fundamentally concern itself with *ubuntu* in the service of the community and personal well-being.

In this sense, theological education in an African context will be characterised not only by its concern with the person, but also by its interweaving of social, economic, political, cultural, and educational threads into a common tapestry. As a result it will be distinguished by the importance attached to its collective nature, as well as its intimate tie with communal life. Theological education, in an African setting, cannot, and indeed should not, be separated from life itself if it is to be inspired by a spirit of *ubuntu* in the service of the community.

Communalism and the African spirit of *ubuntu* represent the resources for the decolonisation of theological education in Africa in the search for a theological education that will speak to the continent's local communities. However, these resources, as Maluleke (2000:24) reminds us, should "adopt a critical gaze which takes seriously the ambiguities of intercultural discourses and the elusive character of meaning."

Conclusion

The need to construct an African hermeneutic for theological education has been acknowledged by a number of theologians, both in South Africa and abroad (see, for example, Khumalo 2008, Poling 2004, and West 2012).

In similar vein, this chapter has attempted to explore the need for the reconstruction of theological education in an African context in the light of Africa's colonial past, as well as the call for an African Renaissance on the African continent. Such a re-imagining of theological education in Africa is necessary since theological curricula across the continent have followed Western and European models – a situation still persisting well into the 21st century.

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Indigenous African epistemologies, I have argued, provide a framework that can contribute to the decolonisation of theological education in Africa – primarily because these epistemologies respect diversity, acknowledge lived experience, and challenge the hegemony of Western Eurocentric forms of universal knowledge. Furthermore, such community sensitive frameworks, as articulated in indigenous African epistemologies, can also contribute to the construction of empowering knowledge that will enable communities in Africa to participate in their own theological education development. In turn, such a liberating context will lead to the rediscovery of what Maluleke (2000:36) refers to as the “agency of Africans” in theological education in Africa.

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