The coloniality of Cambridge International in present-day Africa: An overview and call for research

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Abstract

Cambridge Assessment International Education (CAIE), founded in Britain in 1858, is the world's largest provider of international education programmes and qualifications. Currently, the organisation is affiliated with over 10,000 schools across more than 160 countries. This essay shows that of the approximately 956 CAIE schools in Africa, 888 are located in countries formerly colonised by Britain. Concerned by this association, I employ the concept of coloniality to analyse CAIE's colonial history and critiqued curricula. Addressing these topics individually and in tandem, I argue that the organisation is perpetuating coloniality in present-day Africa. CAIE claims it sets the global standard for international education. If this is indeed true, and there is evidence of coloniality in CAIE's history and practices, then there are grave implications for international education. Due to the remarkable dearth of literature that critically examines the organisation, I point to existing research that can help shape future studies of CAIE.

Introduction

In *The Geopolitics of Knowledge and the Colonial Difference*, Walter Mignolo states, "the scenario is simple: Western expansion was not only economic and

political but also educational and intellectual" (2002, p. 63). As Western educational organisations expand their presence in the twenty-first century (Bunnell, 2008; Fielding and Vidovich, 2017; Yemini and Fulop, 2015), particularly throughout the global South (Bunnell, 2016; 2017; Kopsick, 2018), Mignolo's message is crucially relevant. While the formal colonial structures constituting Western expansion have ceased, colonial legacies still affect educational spaces. Cambridge Assessment International Education (CAIE),[i] the world's largest provider of international education programmes and qualifications, is perhaps at the forefront of this troubling reality. Founded in Britain in 1858, during the height of the British Empire, CAIE now annually administers approximately eight million examinations to more than one million students each year. These examinations are used to measure academic performance to determine whether students are awarded Cambridge certification, an achievement that is an important determinant for university access and the job market. The organisation presides in over 10,000 public and private schools across more than 160 countries (CAIEa,b 2020).

This essay situates CAIE's colonial history and critiqued curricula within the organisation's current standing in present-day Africa. Data compiled shows that of the 956 CAIE schools on the continent, approximately 888 are located in countries formerly colonised by Britain. To make sense of this colonial association, I use the concept of coloniality (Maldonado-Torres, 2007; Mignolo, 2011; Quijano, 2000) to analyse CAIE's colonial history and critiqued curricula. Addressing these topics individually and in tandem, I argue that CAIE is perpetuating coloniality in present-day Africa. Cambridge claims its "programmes and qualifications set the global standard for international education" (CAIEa, 2020). If this is indeed true, and there is evidence of coloniality in CAIE's history and practices, then what are the implications for international education? In what ways does coloniality manifest in CAIE

schools throughout present-day Africa and the broader global South? How do students and school communities navigate their educational experiences with CAIE? These kinds of questions are largely ignored in current educational research. Accordingly, I conclude by reviewing existing studies that can help shape and motivate further research on CAIE.

Conceptual framework

At the crux of this essay is the argument that colonialism and coloniality are constitutive of Cambridge. Colonialism refers to the historical act of European empires conquering land, resources, and people through violence and methods of administrative control. In an upcoming section on the history of Cambridge, I review how British administration and CAIE shaped educational policy during colonialism to expand their global presence. Coloniality survives formal colonialism and embodies the ongoing patterns of colonial power (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). Given Cambridge's apparent indifference to addressing its colonial history (Kopsick, 2018), coloniality likely permeates its current practices. This is explored later in a section on the recent critiques of Cambridge curricula. Below I further explain the concept of coloniality and its relation to decolonial and postcolonial theory.

The conceptual roots of coloniality originate with Anibal Quijano (2000), who argues that European colonisation, starting in the fifteenth century in the Americas, constructed a new model of global power that created intersubjective relations of domination in three main ways. First, colonisers expropriated cultural discoveries of the colonised to aid their own development. Second, colonisers repressed the epistemologies of the colonised. Third, colonisers forced the colonised to learn dominant cultures in ways that reproduced hegemony. A major consequence of colonialism is coloniality, which Maldonado-Torres (2007) describes as:

> a long-standing pattern of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that defines culture, labour, intersubjectivity relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations. Thus, coloniality survives colonialism. It is maintained in books, in the criteria for academic performance...In a way, as modern subjects we breathe coloniality all the time (p. 243).

As Maldonado-Torres highlights, colonial dynamics did not disappear when colonies gained independence from their former colonisers. Instead, colonial power dynamics transformed into subtler, but still ubiquitous, forms of control. As the quote above shows, these colonial power dynamics often permeate educational spaces. Thus, while the middle of the twentieth century roughly marks theend of formal colonialism in Africa, it does not mark the end of coloniality.[ii]

Ndlovu (2018) argues that coloniality pervades itself because of the resilience of its structure. Employing Sahlins's (1985) notion of prescriptive and performative structures, Ndlovu (2018) posits that coloniality is both prescriptive and performative. It is prescriptive because it resists complete change or removal but performative in that it is willing to rearrange itself in order to avoid this said removal. Ndlovu (2018) further explains that:

> coloniality has always, performatively, been producing a 'dust of history' that masquerades as 'real history' in order to mislead the anti-systemic movements that are after its destruction. This is why many today confuse the end of colonialism with the end of coloniality. They mistake a dust of history produced by the performance of coloniality with the collapse of a synchronically prescriptive historical structure of coloniality (p. 97).

Quijano (2007) highlights one of the major effects of colonial domination, stating that "what the Europeans did was to deprive Africans of legitimacy and recognition in the global cultural order dominated by European patterns" (p.

169). This deprivation is especially relevant to education because coloniality often functions epistemically and can lead to the "colonisation of the imagination" and the "colonisation of the mind" (Quijano, 2007; Thiong'o, 1986). This epistemic and cultural control is discussed in more detail in the upcoming sections on the Cambridge's colonial history and problematic curricula.

Exposing and transforming coloniality is one of the main goals of decolonial and postcolonial educational theory. While there are important distinctions in these two frameworks, this essay focuses on their complementarity. This decision comes from Mignolo's (2011) reminder that postcolonial and decolonial theory, even with their genealogical differences, are "complementary trajectories with similar goals of social transformation" (p. xxvi). Andreotti (2011) espouses that postcolonial theory can serve as theoretical and actionable agents of change in the decolonisation of education. By exposing the power dynamics in educational settings through a contextualisation of colonial histories, coloniality can be identified, decolonial pedagogy can be practiced, and education can become more liberatory. Dei's (2010; 2011; 2012) work connects to Andreotti by developing decolonial frameworks that seek to restore Africanness and indigenous knowledge, providing decolonial conceptions of how to combat the effects of coloniality in educational spaces. Similarly, postcolonial feminism reminds us that making sense of colonial legacies requires conducting close, intersectional examinations of the dynamics between actors, communities, and broader structural powers (Mohanty, 1988).

In the context of this essay and future research on CAIE in Africa, understanding what happens to students, teachers, and parents during their partnership with CAIE is imperative. To only study Cambridge from an organisational level would devalue the experiences and agency of local students

and families. Moreover, it is essential to acknowledge that African students in former British colonies will not all have had the same experiences with Cambridge. To deny this complexity would perpetuate the myth of the monolithic image of Southern identities (Mohanty, 1988). Still, even with a variety of experiences, this essay argues that Cambridge's colonial history and problematic curricula present a scenario that should be examined from multiple levels. In a later section of this essay, I review decolonial and postcolonial research that can guide future studies of CAIE.

The colonial history of CAIE

Formal British colonial education has been addressed by many scholars (Altbach & Kelly, 1984; Omolewa, 1976; 1997; 2006; White, 1996; Whitehead, 2003; 2005). While policies of control sometimes differed, for example stricter colonial management could be found in Indian education (Whitehead, 2005) compared to more adaptive approaches in West African education (White, 1996), the overall objectives of colonial educational policy were similar across the British Empire. Three of these main objectives included: "civilising" colonised subjects, controlling knowledge production, and preparing students for professions in colonial administration (Altbach, 1975; Bray 1993, 1997; Quist,2001; Thiong'o, 1986; Urch, 1971; Whitehead, 2003). Scholars have noted that Cambridge International and other English examination boards were key to Britain's attempt to solidify knowledge production during colonialism (Ball, 1983; Bray, 1997; 1998; Lillis, 1985; Omolewa, 1976). From this viewpoint, we can begin to link Cambridge's colonial history to the ongoing coloniality of CAIE's present-day operations.

CAIE examinations were originally developed within the branch of the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (UCLES), which is now more widely known as Cambridge Assessment. International examinations

were distributed throughout British colonies starting in 1864 in Trinidad. This places CAIE's origin in the midst of British colonial rule when entities, such as the University of London and the Oxford Delegacy, were competing for educational control over colonies. Beating out its competition, CAIE became the most prominent British certificate-granting institution, providing colonial subjects with access to local employment in government, commerce, and professional markets (Stockwell, 2011). As Omolewa (1976) points out, certification with Cambridge became "a passport to comfortable living in the colonial situation" (p. 111). This success in colonies was a point of pride for Cambridge, as seen in an 1898 publication of *Cambridge Review* celebrating the completion of examinations by 1,220 colonial subjects across thirty-six testing centres:

> Though Roman legions ruled the world,
> Though Britain's thunderbolts are hurled
> At monarchs in Ashanti plains;
> The Locals Syndicate preside
> O'er realms more gloriously wide,
> Broad as the sky are their domains
> Black babes or yellow, brown or white,
> Cram manuals from morn to night (28 Nov. 1895, quoted in Roach, Public Examinations, p. 172).

Language in this poem elucidates CAIE's motive as one of dominance. It even goes as far as to declare the organisation as more effective and powerful than the Roman and British Empire. More than a century later, this desire for worldwide educational control can be more subtly found in Cambridge's geographic spread and its claim to "set the global standard for international education" (CAIEa, 2020).

By the beginning of the twentieth century, CAIE had consolidated its standing in colonies due to the perceived value of Cambridge-led, English-medium education over local education (Stockwell, 2011). Omolewa (1976; 1977; 2006) specifically examines this control by CAIE, and other British examination entities, in Nigerian secondary education during the early twentieth century. Central to his discussion is Fafunwa's (1974) claim that "examinations control the curriculum and whoever controls a country's examination system controls its education" (p. 193). Thus, even as the secondary school curricula were technically managed within the Nigerian Education Department and the Advisory Committee on Native Education in Tropical Africa, CAIE commanded secondary education through its examination system. Although CAIE certification proved helpful for many, the examination system was steeped in colonial mentalities. For instance, when African candidates failed examinations, they were described as "images of their backward society", but when they passed, they often had to take additional tests to prove their capability (Omolewa 1976, p. 112). McLean (1932) claims that when colonial students succeeded in exams, they did so merely because of "their highly developed faculty for passing our usual type of examination by feat of memory without any understanding" (n.p.). Even as colonial students succeeded in CAIE examinations, the colonial mentality of the educational system dismissed them from being true achievers.

While Stockwell (2011) does not firmly take a position on whether Cambridge carried out "cultural imperialism" (p. 217) before 1957, his historical review of CAIE's practices begin to expose how cultural, educational, and linguistic imperialism co-articulated during Cambridge's colonial era. The dissemination of the English language and Western values to the non-European world, the control of educational content and examination in colonies, the employment of Cambridge graduates to colonial administrations, and the social capital gained

for natives who were Cambridge certified created a situation where CAIE had significant authority over the social and cultural capital of colonial subjects. This historical impact is fundamental to better understanding Cambridge's current standing and practices in Africa.

CAIE schools in present-day Africa

To make better sense of Cambridge's standing in present-day Africa, data was compiled to show the number of CAIE schools in each African country. While the data is not exact, and some is likely to be missing due to what CAIE permits as public access, Table 1confirmsa strong association between a country's colonial history and its current affiliation with CAIE. Of the approximately 956 CAIE schools in present-day Africa, 888 are located in former British colonies. This undeniable association between British colonialism and present-day affiliation with CAIE should be carefully considered with the organisation's colonial history and critiqued curricula.

Table 1: CAIE schools in present-day Africa (as of September 2020)[iii]

Country	Former coloniser	Year of colonial independence	Official language(s)	# of CAIE Schools
Botswana	Britain	1966	English; Setswana	39
Egypt	Britain	1922	Arabic	144
Gambia	Britain	1965	English	10
Ghana	Britain	1960	English	71
Kenya	Britain	1963	English; Swahili	53
Lesotho	Britain	1966	English; Sesotho	4
Malawi	Britain	1964	English; Chewa	21
Nigeria	Britain	1960	English	266
Seychelles	Britain	1976	English; French	3
Sierra Leone	Britain	1961	English	3

South Africa	Britain	1961 (republic)	English (+10 more)	94
Sudan	Britain (Anglo-Egyptian)	1956	English; Literary Arabic	18
Swaziland	Britain	1968	English; Siswati	5
Tanzania	Britain	1961	English; Swahili; Arabic	32
Uganda	Britain	1962	English; Swahili	20
Zambia	Britain	1964	English	26
Zimbabwe	Britain	1965	English (+15 more)	79
Cameroon	France	1960	English; French	5
Côte d'Ivoire	France	1960	French	2
Gabon	France	1960	French	--
Madagascar	France	1960	French; Malagasy	--
Mauritius	France & Britain	1968	-------	--
Morocco	France & Spain	1956	Arabic; Berber	7
Niger	France	1960	French	1
Senegal	France	1960	French	1
Togo	France	1960	French; Yoruba	1
Tunisia	France	1956	Tunisian Arabic	2
Angola	Portugal	1975	Portuguese	3
Mozambique	Portugal	1975	Portuguese	19
Democratic Republic of Congo	Belgium	1960	French	--
Rwanda	Belgium	1962	English; French Kinyarwanda; Swahili	14
Namibia	Germany/South Africa	1990	English	6
Ethiopia	-------	-------	Amharic	7
TOTAL				**956**

Critiques of CAIE curricula

Combining CAIE's colonial history with the recent critiques of its curricula begin to suggest what may be occurring in CAIE schools in Africa. While the studies discussed below do not explicitly use the language of coloniality, they

do offer insight into problematic characteristics of CAIE curricula. I begin by underscoring CAIE's portrayal of curriculum in West Africa to help situate the subsequent critiques of CAIE's *Thinking Skills* and world literature syllabi.

Golding and Kopsick (2019) point to CAIE's deficit thinking of West African curricular approaches in a promotional video published and advertised by Cambridge. The video features James Tooley (2014), a professor at University of Newcastle, speaking about curriculum in "developed and developing countries." He states:

> they [West African countries] have not been able to bring their curriculum and assessment system up to date for the modern interconnected world...in terms of national curricula, and national examinations, I'm not convinced that governments are equipping people very well for the international world.

The publication of this CAIE promotional video suggests that Cambridge still does not consider West African countries capable of guiding their own educational experiences. This idea parallels the paternalistic approaches of Britain's educational policy during its late colonial period (Whitehead, 2003). Furthermore, Tooley's negation of West African education systems is rooted in a Western-centric discourse of development, aligning with Mignolo's (2018) discussion of the underlying functionality and belief system of coloniality:

> Coloniality is more than a word: it is shorthand for a complex configuration of building, managing, and controlling enacted by Western actors who...figure themselves as subjects guided by a totality of knowledge that they themselves have in fact generated (p. 197).

CAIE curricula have been critiqued, albeit infrequently, for being uncritical in nature. *Thinking Skills* is a CAIE curriculum that teaches students how to problem solve and think critically. According to the official syllabus, published

in 2017, specific objectives of the curriculum are "to develop a facility to present logical, ordered and coherent arguments" and "to develop a transferable set of critical thinking, reasoning and problem-solving which are essential for success in higher education and employment" (p. 5). Lim (2011; 2012) critiques *Thinking Skills*, arguing that it perpetuates middle-class thought and broader neoliberal ideology. Specifically, he posits that the *Thinking Skills* curriculum privileges "morally indifferent and emotionally apathetic" reasoning that "depoliticises democracy" (Lim, 2011, p. 783). By dissuading students from considering morality during their critical thinking lessons, CAIE is morally silencing the histories of communities and limiting student access to forms of critical thinking that fit the production of Western-centric thought. Kumashiro (2000) highlights the danger of this kind of pedagogical position, arguing that the removal of emotionality for the goal of rationality is an oppressive, Western-centric form of education that devalues the feelings of students who have first-hand experience of violence and oppression (Kumashiro, 2000).These critical thinking parameters are particularly concerning given CAIE's colonial history and its strong current presence in former British colonies. Moreover, they link to Maldonado-Torres's (2004) discussion of Europe as a site of epistemic privilege:

> There is in much of critical thinking the tendency to recognise critical thought only when it uses the terms of debate that derive from consideration of certain coordinates typically located in crucial spaces for the production of modern and postmodern ideologies (p. 40-41).

Similarly concerning are the findings in Golding and Kopsick's (2019) analysis of the prescribed authors in CAIE world literature syllabi, which feature an overwhelming bias toward men from the global North. Specifically, authors from the Middle East-North African region are wholly absent, while women authors from Latin America are nearly entirely excluded. Golding and Kopsick

(2019)argue these syllabi reflect a continuation of British colonial legacies and devalue the copious amount of literature published in the global South. The underwhelming representation of authors from the global South in CAIE syllabi resembles the "double bind" often facing African philosophers. Bernasconi (1997) writes, "either African philosophy is so similar to Western philosophy that it makes no distinctive contribution and effectively disappears; or it is so different that its credentials to be genuine philosophy will always be in doubt" (p. 70).These findings in CAIE curricula identify scenarios that can lead to internalised oppression and the colonisation of the mind (Lowery, 2016; Quijano, 2007; Thiong'o, 1986), suggesting a link between CAIE practices and epistemic violence rooted in coloniality.

Calls for future research

Given the over 10,000 schools that Cambridge accredits, it is surprising how little critical research exists on the organisation. CAIE's colonial history, current standing in former British colonies in Africa, and critiqued curricula point to the need for more critical research. While the studies mentioned throughout this essay provide a starting point, it will be necessary to look to other existing educational studies to guide future investigation. I offer the following research methodologies and areas of exploration as possible starting points.

There is an abundance of critical studies on the International Baccalaureate (IB), an educational organisation that is similar enough to CAIE to warrant useful comparison. Tarc (2009) reveals how the IB's goals have been shaped by the broader historical movements of liberalism, neoliberalism, and the post-9/11 era. This type of historical analysis of Cambridge would help make sense of the organisation's past and current actions by further uncovering the colonial histories of British education and the ongoing practices of CAIE. Other IB

discourse analyses argue that the language and perspectives in the IB are Western-centric (Drone, 1988; Drake, 2004; Hahn, 2003; Hughes, 2009; Van Oord, 2007). Similar studies of Cambridge could expose colonial language, mentalities, and practices.

Ethnographic research at Cambridge schools is imperative for better understanding the relationship between CAIE and local communities. These kinds of studies are ample in educational research and often highlight the relationships between students, teachers, administration, parents, and broader educational organisations. For example, Dyrness and Sepúlveda (2020) use focus groups and interviews to look at how students in El Salvador critique broader power dynamics between their schools and US imperialism. Drawing from the students and teachers who experience the effects of CAIE on a daily basis could begin to expose problematic dynamics and practices that need to be addressed. Ethnographic research could also compare what community stakeholders desire from CAIE affiliation with the history and practices of the organisation.

Broader critical educational research conducted in Africa can also provide helpful frameworks for future studies. For instance, Botha (2010) exposes *Curriculum 2005,* South Africa's most prevalent western education system, for devaluing important aspects of learning processes found in traditional-based communities in South Africa. Furthermore, the piece broadly rejects the concept of universality in educational approaches. Likewise, Matemba and Lilemba (2015) employ Dei's (2011) anticolonial discursive framework to argue that there has been a failure to value indigenous knowledge in the current education system of Namibia. This failure negatively affects the survival of indigenous knowledge while also denying its applicability in diverse cultural contexts. A mirrored approach to Cambridge's educational philosophy could reveal a

similar situation, but at a level that affects close to 1,000 schools on the continent. Future research can also look to Antal and Easton's (2009) study of African-based civic-educational practices in Madagascar and Sahelian West Africa. The piece challenges the usefulness of Northern-centric ideals of democracy in African educational spaces, arguing that there are bountiful examples of civic-educational practices in Africa that can be taught in schools.

Ultimately, future research will be enhanced if Cambridge is willing to be more transparent. Statistics on regional breakdowns of schools, histories of schools' affiliations, and clearer statements of pedagogical philosophies would provide a grounding for researchers to better understand Cambridge. However, until this is done, Cambridge will continue to appear to be operating from a position that is more concerned with growing its presence than reckoning with its own colonial history. If Cambridge International believes it sets the "global standard for international education", then it should have confidence in its ability to withstand the scrutiny of its practices.

Conclusion

This essay begins to pinpoint the coloniality of Cambridge International in present-day Africa through an analysis of the organisation's history and critiqued curricula. First, CAIE's origins are constituted by colonialism and coloniality. In conjunction with being founded during the height of the British Empire, CAIE's original educational policies were clearly driven by colonial mentalities and objectives. There has been no indication that Cambridge is willing to reckon with this history. Second, there are noteworthy patterns between an African country's former colonial power and its current affiliation with Cambridge; CAIE schools are most prevalent in African countries that were once colonised by Britain. Third, although there is little of it, extant research on CAIE's curricula point to problematic characteristics. Its world

literature syllabi ignore authors from the global Southand its approaches to critical thinking are Western-centric. These findings underscore a strong need for educational scholars to critically examine CAIE. Future studies can address these situations at the structural level, through analyses of Cambridge's philosophies and practices, as well as at the local level, through ethnographic research with students and community stakeholders. African postcolonial and decolonial research provide helpful frameworks that can guide these investigations. The coloniality of Cambridge in present-day Africa demands that the organisation's purported "global standard of international education" be carefully examined and directly challenged.

Notes

[i]Cambridge Assessment International Education (CAIE) is the main international examination board of Cambridge Assessment. All mentions of 'Cambridge', 'Cambridge International', and 'CAIE' in this essay refer to this main international examination board, not to the larger Cambridge Assessment group.

[ii]Although beyond the scope of this essay, imperative to understanding coloniality is the relationship between coloniality and modernity, which are "two sides of the same coin" (Mignolo, 2011, p. 66). Modernity must be viewed as a product of colonialism, rather than a cause of European expansion. This reality represents 'the darker side of modernity': the fact that modernity exists because of colonialism and coloniality (Quijano, 2000; Mignolo, 2002).

[iii] All data was compiled from CAIE and country government's official web pages in September of 2020. A country's former coloniser and independence year are determined by common historical accounts. In the case of unclear or multi-colonial histories, all countries are listed. For the sake of consistency, the date of colonial independence is set at the independence date of a country, not the officially recognised republic date. A country's official language is determined by government official languages, not by national languages. All cases of multiple official languages are noted. The last column in the table shows the total amount of CAIE schools located in the given country. A school is defined as an institution that offers at least one CAIE programme, meaning that schools that offer more than one programme are weighted the same as schools that only offer one programme. It is important to note that this data is imperfect. Colonial histories and official languages are often contested, which is recognised and respected in this study. Likewise, all numbers presented are approximate. Given the large quantity of international schools on the continent, it is probable that some schools have been left out of this count. Cambridge's website explicitly states that the data they provide is not definitive, as only schools that have given permission to release contact details are listed on its webpage. Cambridge would not allow the author access to its private database of school information.

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