



DECOLONISING ADOLESCENCE AND “RIGHTING” THE WRONGS OF GATE- KEEPER PSYCHOLOGY: AN AFRICENTRIC READING OF ADOLESCENCE IN SUB-SAHARA AFRICA

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Abstract

Adolescence has historically been dominated by Western-centric frameworks, often overlooking or misrepresenting the diverse realities of adolescents in non-Western societies. Their exclusion from global adolescent discourse reinforces a deficit and reductionist perspective that frames adolescence in the global South through lenses of “lack” or “difference” rather than recognising their unique strengths, resilience, and contextual adaptations with which they forge development. Non-Western adolescents navigate complex realities shaped by collective identities, intergenerational relationships, and resourceful responses to systemic challenges. These realities offer alternative pathways to development. For instance, their development is deeply embedded in communal values, personal strivings, social obligations, and cultural traditions that prioritise family, community, and cultural continuity. This review dwells on the limitations of dominant Eurocentric theoretical models and advocates for an inclusive approach that foregrounds cultural context in understanding adolescence in sub-Sahara Africa. Findings show that while adolescence in Euro-American traditions is typically understood as a universal, biological stage, with a focus on independence, cognitive development, and personal achievement/accomplishment as primary markers of maturity, emphasis is on the communal, contextual, and relational understanding of growth and development during adolescence in sub-Sahara Africa. In most societies in the region, cognitive development is viewed not just through the lens of individual achievement, but through collective participation, social responsibility, and the integration of cultural practices. Achievement is typically recognised through participation in cultural rites and rituals, the fulfillment of familial and societal roles, and the ability to maintain and strengthen relationships within the community. Personal accomplishments are deeply intertwined with collective welfare, and one’s success reflects the health and prosperity of their family, village, or social group. Rites of passage, such as initiation ceremonies, marriages, and communal work, serve as key milestones in marking personal growth and achievement. From a decolonial lens, this review emphasizes the importance of power dynamics, historical legacies, and global inequities in shaping adolescent experiences. It calls for a reimagining of adolescent development theory that not only acknowledges but also validates the richness and complexity of non-Western perspectives in conceiving and understanding adolescence.

Keywords:

Decolonise, adolescence, gate-keeper psychology, righting the wrongs, Africentric, sub-Sahara Africa.

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Introduction

Adolescent development theory has historically been dominated by Western-centric frameworks that often overlook or misrepresent the diverse realities of adolescents in non-Western societies. Initial efforts in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, influenced by G. Stanley Hall's *Adolescence* (1904), characterised it as a period of "storm and stress," emphasising biological and psychological upheavals common during the period. Hall (1904) emphasised that rapid physical changes during puberty, including hormonal shifts triggered heightened emotional sensitivity, mood swings, and impulsive behaviour which made adolescent lives stormy and stressful. Psychologically, adolescence was seen as a time of identity exploration, social adjustment, and advanced cognitive development, often marked by inner conflict and rebellion against existing societal norms (Crosnoe & Johnson, 2011). Drawing from Darwinian evolutionary theory, Hall (1904) argued that adolescence recapitulated stages of human evolution, blending primitive instincts with the emerging complexities of adult cognition. This perspective framed the period as a turbulent, yet necessary phase for achieving maturity. Critics of the era further associated these struggles with moral and social concerns, as they debated the implications of adolescent behaviour for education, family dynamics, and societal stability (e.g., Crosnoe, 2021). Of course, whether for or against, these conceptions were rooted in Western narratives, but portraying adolescence as a universal turbulent phase of development for all. That is why Ngwenya et al. (2023) insinuated that these Eurocentric theories often universalized concepts of identity, autonomy, and developmental milestones while neglecting the specificity of adolescents in non-Western societies.

However, by the mid-20th century, research expanded to incorporate sociocultural influences, with theorists like Erik Erikson highlighting identity formation as a central task of adolescence (Ragelienė, 2016). The rise of developmental psychology brought attention to cognitive, emotional, and social processes (Miller, 2022), while ecological models, such as Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory, emphasized the impact of family, peers, and broader societal systems (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Recent decades saw the integration of global, intersectional, and contextual approaches, challenging Western-centric paradigms and acknowledging the diversity of adolescent experiences across cultures. For example, studies conducted across diverse cultural contexts such as Kenya, China, India, and the United States, have demonstrated that adolescent experiences are shaped by local/cultural norms, economic conditions, and societal structures (e.g., Chandra-Mouli et al., 2017). For instance, the timing and impact of puberty vary widely, influenced by nutritional and environmental factors, challenging the notion of adolescence as a uniform biological phase that unfolds the same for everyone. Meanwhile, psychologists like Jeffrey Arnett have shown that identity exploration, a hallmark of adolescence, manifests differently across cultures (Arnett, 2015, 2006, 2000). In collectivist societies, identity is often shaped by family and community expectations, contrasting with the individualistic focus prevalent in Western Euro-American contexts.

Unfortunately, most adolescent studies are grounded in Euro-American ideals, arguably superimposed on non-Western cultures, thereby marginalizing the lived experiences of adolescents in those areas, especially the global South. This marginalisation perpetuates a narrow, restrictive and reductionist understanding of adolescence globally. It fails to account for the diverse cultural, social, and economic realities that shape adolescence in non-Euro-American contexts. For example, Erikson's theory emphasizes identity versus role confusion as a universal psychosocial crisis during adolescence, assuming individualistic processes of identity formation (Erikson, 1968). Jean Piaget's stages of cognitive development (e.g., formal operational stage) are considered universal but often fail to address the role of cultural practices, oral traditions, and non-linear problem-solving methods that influence cognitive development in other cultural settings (Dasen, 2022).

Meanwhile, Hall (1904) described adolescence as a universal period of emotional turmoil and rebellion, but overlooked how non-Western cultures (especially African), with their strong intergenerational and social support systems may experience adolescence differently. Also, even though Arnett's theory of emerging adulthood acknowledges the variability of the transition to adulthood (Arnett, 2000), it initially drew on data from Western industrialised societies, particularly North America, and emphasised individual exploration and delayed commitments. In non-Western societies, particularly sub-Sahara Africa, economic and familial obligations often necessitate earlier transitions to adult roles, also challenging the applicability of Arnett's framework in those societies. Generally, these traditional mainstream frameworks failed to capture the complexities and realities of adolescence in African societies, where communal values, extended family structures and traditions, and historical experiences such as colonialism and post-colonial transitions may significantly influence adolescent experiences.

The exclusion of non-Western adolescence in global adolescent discourse has definitely reinforced a deficit perspective that frames adolescence in the global South through the lens of "lack" or "difference" rather than recognising the unique strengths, resilience, and contextual adaptations of adolescents that forge development. Non-Western adolescents, especially those from sub-Sahara Africa navigate complex realities shaped by collective identities, intergenerational relationships, and resourceful responses to systemic challenges (Nsamenang, 2002), definitely offering alternative pathways to growth and maturity. Their development is deeply embedded in communal values, social obligations, and cultural traditions.

According to Nsamenang (2002), the adolescent experience in this region is deeply embedded in collective frameworks that prioritize family, community, and cultural continuity. Psycho-socialization processes emphasise identity formation, learning, respect for elders, interdependence, and the fulfillment of responsibilities within the family and community. Rooted in these deeply held cultural traditions, these practices serve as a foundation for preparing adolescents to contribute meaningfully to their social and cultural environments. These practices are intertwined with the challenges of modernity, including

urbanisation, globalisation, technology, and shifting gender dynamics, which increasingly influence adolescent experiences and aspirations (Zalli, 2024; Sakketa, 2023).

While Sakketa (2023) believes that urbanisation brings exposure to diverse lifestyles and opportunities, while also disrupting traditional communal structures and altering the socialization of young people; Zalli, (2024) insinuates that globalization introduces new ideals and aspirations, fostering ambitions that often diverge from conventional pathways. Therefore, while both processes often appear more promising with more opportunities, there are inherent downsides that may hurt development. For example, while globalization promotes Western ideals that conflict and erode local traditions propagating identity confusion and value dissonance (Urbaite, 2024); urbanization not only introduces higher risks of unemployment, exploitation, and crime in the cities; but also erodes traditional community structures that previously supported adolescent development (UNESCO, 2012).

Therefore, the need to decolonise adolescent development theory in the 21st century cannot be overemphasised. Decolonisation involves critiquing and reshaping these mainstream Western-centric theories to better reflect the experiences and contexts of non-Western societies, like in sub-Saharan Africa. It not only involves shifting power dynamics in academic scholarship, but also prioritising voices from marginalised communities and recognising the multiple ways adolescents navigate their lives. According to Abubakar et al. (2024), decolonisation validates the lived experiences, cultural practices, and resilience strategies of adolescents in underrepresented contexts, which define alternative pathways to development, different from those acclaimed by mainstream adolescent psychology.

Decolonisation re-centres indigenous and localised knowledge systems and highlights the multiplicity of pathways through which youth engage with their environments, balancing traditional knowledge systems with contemporary challenges. Abubakar et al. (2024) add that decolonisation values cultural pluralism, challenges hegemonic narratives, and prioritizes youth agency. Thus, understanding that development occurs in diverse cultural contexts, adolescent cultural identities should be supported, not erased or assimilated into a dominant Eurocentric and American culture. Additionally, sub-Saharan African adolescents are not just passive recipients of culture or development, but are active agents in shaping their own lives (Naudé & van Damme, 2024). Therefore, decolonisation not only fosters inclusivity but also enriches the understanding of adolescence as a dynamic, context-sensitive phase of life. This allows for a more equitable and holistic discourse that values diversity and challenges systemic inequities in knowledge production around adolescence. It calls for a rethinking of how adolescence should be defined, understood, and studied, incorporating a broader range of perspectives.

Adolescence as a Western-Centric/Eurocentric Enterprise

Adolescence, as it is commonly understood in contemporary developmental psychology, is largely a Western-centric or Eurocentric construct, whose discourse is largely shaped by those contexts. It generally reflects Euro-American values, norms, and social

structures. In those Western models, for example, adolescence is often defined as a distinct, universal, biologically driven developmental stage characterised by individual autonomy, cognitive development, emotional self-regulation, and the pursuit of personal achievement (e.g., Christie & Viner, 2005). Christie & Viner (2005) specify that these frameworks emphasise independence, self-reliance, and the achievement of milestones such as academic success or career advancement, attainment of emotional and cognitive maturity, the development of personal identity, and the pursuit of autonomy from family as key indicators of maturity. Adolescents in that context are expected to navigate processes such as formal education, career planning, and social independence, all of which are considered important markers of the transition to adulthood. In addition to cognitive and emotional development,

Western societies place a stronger emphasis on personal achievement and individual responsibility, where success is frequently measured by individual accomplishments, such as academic performance or professional aspirations (Nyström et al., 2018). The expectation of self-sufficiency, decision-making capacity, and personal goals often marks the shift from adolescence to adulthood, with the individual seen as a self-determining agent. That is why Hui & Tsang (2012) note that Western adolescents independently navigate personal choices, responsibilities, and identities without necessarily depending on others. They are expected to assert control over their lives, make decisions regarding education, career, relationships, and personal beliefs, and establish an identity separate from familial or communal influences.

However, when these Western ideals are universally applied the way they have been historically done in adolescent psychology, they fail to account for the diversity of adolescent experiences across other different cultures, particularly in non-Western societies, where adolescence may be perceived, understood and navigated through different social, familial, and community-oriented lenses. In many African cultures, for example, adolescence is not viewed as a separate or universal stage of life but as part of a continuous, interconnected process of growth that is deeply embedded in cultural and communal practices (Ngwenya et al., 2023; Nsamenang, 2002). In these societies, social roles, responsibilities, and rites of passage, rather than individual milestones or self-determination are the key markers of maturation. Therefore, development is viewed through a more collective and context-sensitive lens than the individual's personal journey towards independence.

Consequently, the apparent universal imposition of the Western framework of adolescence has created a narrow, super imposed individualistic view which undermines the importance of community, interdependence, and African cultural traditions in shaping adolescent lives (Scales et al., 2015). In most African cultures, adolescence is deeply intertwined with communal responsibilities, the guidance of elders, participation in rites of passage, and the integration of cultural practices that emphasize social cohesion and collective well-being (Lebese et al., 2022). Key examples include communal labour, where tasks such as farming, building, and celebration are carried out collectively, reinforcing

bonds of cooperation and mutual support. Rites of passage, including initiation ceremonies, weddings, and coming-of-age rituals, are significant socio-cultural markers that strengthen social ties and enable transition into new roles within the community.

Therefore, as has been popularised and institutionalized through developmental psychology, education systems and social policy, adolescence, is deeply rooted in Western historical, cultural, and epistemological frameworks. It is not merely a biological phase but a socially constructed category shaped by specific cultural thought, timelines, and normative expectations. As such, adolescence may be best understood not as a universal stage of human development, but as a Eurocentric enterprise that reflects and reinforces Western notions of individualism, linear life course progression, and capitalist economic structures (Nsamenang, 2002). To demonstrate this, Western psychological theories, have played a dominant role in defining adolescence in terms of identity crisis,

Emotional turbulence, and cognitive development (e.g., Hall, 1904; Erikson, 1968; Piaget, 1972). These frameworks presume a normative life trajectory where individuals pass through clearly delineated stages from childhood through adolescence to adulthood, and with specified processes and changes. Therefore, Eurocentric adolescence is steeped in linear temporality and progress narratives, apparently assuming that adolescents must “develop” toward autonomy, productivity, and citizenship (Wallace & Kovatcheva, 1998), arguably, in a manner that aligns with Western capitalist ideals (e.g., Larson et al., 2009). But in other cultures where conditions and factors may cause stagnation, define other trajectories that shape adolescent lives differently, the journey through adolescence to adulthood may become non-linear, diverse and context-based. Consequently, transitions are mostly defined by community rituals, responsibilities, and social roles that do not neatly align with Western age norms. Identity is formed through duty, relational engagement, and societal affirmation, not through self-reflection, contemplation or deferred commitments as may be the case in Western cultures.

From Gate-Keeper Psychology to Africentric Psychology

As already seen, mainstream Western-centric psychology prides itself as the gate-keeper of knowledge in general and psychology in particular. According to Gross (2018), gate-keeper psychology is built on psychological theories, models, and practices that are rooted in Euro-American cultural norms, values, and historical contexts. It often assumes that Western ways of thinking, understanding, and responding to psychological phenomena are universal and applicable to all cultures (Smith & Bond, 2022). Largely informed by Eurocentric psychology, Oppong (2024) and Naidoo (1996) insinuate that gate-keeper psychology typically emphasizes individualism, linear development, rationality, and autonomy, reflecting Western ideals of personal identity, mental health, and well-being. In this context, the individual is the primary unit of analysis, and prioritising personal achievement and self-reliance are key markers of development. Also, gate-keeper psychology assumes a linear, predictable trajectory of growth, where individuals are expected to navigate life through a series of well-defined stages, often emphasising cognitive and emotional independence as the ultimate goal (Ker, 2013). Viewing

adolescence in this way fails to account for the diverse cultural experiences, communal values, and alternative practices that inform adolescence in other world regions. It tends to undermine the complex, relational, and culturally embedded nature of human development, inadvertently marginalising alternative forms of identity, social belonging, and communal wellbeing (Alegria et al., 2010). This emphasis on autonomy and rationality does not capture the ways in which collective values and contextual factors shape overall well-being in most African cultural settings.

According to Beyers et al. (2024), Eurocentric models, constituting gate-keeper psychology emphasise individual growth, with an assumption that adolescents must navigate a linear pathway towards development. For example, cognitive development is viewed as a series of progressive stages leading to intellectual maturity. On the contrary, markers of cognitive development in most African societies diverge from those defined in Western models. Theirs emphasize a more communal, contextual, and relational understanding of growth. In most of them, cognitive development is often viewed not just through the lens of individual achievement, but through collective participation, social responsibility, and the integration of cultural practices into individual and collective lives. According to Nsamenang (2014), this perspective emphasizes the interconnectedness of cognitive growth with community life, where learning is seen as a shared experience involving family, peers, and elders. Knowledge is transmitted not only through formal education but also through oral traditions, rituals, storytelling, and participation in communal activities (Nsamenang, 2005). Cognitive development is thus, framed as a relational and communal process, where the development of intellectual abilities is inseparable from the cultivation of social and moral values. For example, the development of thinking, reasoning, and problem-solving abilities is deeply embedded in relationships, social responsibilities, cultural practices, and moral instruction. Tchombe (2011) adds that intellectual growth is something cultivated through participation in community life, guided by elders, and aligned with social harmony and ethical living, rather than a private, isolated achievement of the mind.

While personal achievement is often defined by individual academic/career success or material attainment in mainstream Euro-American societies, in most African societies, it is often defined by communal values, social responsibility, and contributions to the wellbeing of the community. In African cultures, achievement is typically recognised through participation in cultural rituals, the fulfillment of family and societal roles, and the ability to maintain and strengthen relationships within the community (Nyeseh Ofori & Mohangi, 2024; Razak et al., 2024). Personal accomplishments are deeply intertwined with collective welfare, and one's success reflects the health and prosperity of their family, village, or social group. If one's success and accomplishments do not benefit others, then, they are meaningless and have nothing to write home about. Therefore, personhood is relational and not individualistic such that one's achievements are not evaluated purely in individual terms, but by how they reinforce the social fabric, uplift kin, and enhance communal dignity.

Also, achievement is socially validated and not self-validated. Among the Kom of Cameroon, if achievement does not yield positive effects on others such as supporting siblings, building a house for one's family, sponsoring someone's education, or reinvesting wealth into community obligations, then, that is no achievement. In line with this, Baral (2023) concludes that private accumulation of wealth (achievement) without redistribution lacks social honour. Practices in most African cultures are also clear in the belief that moral worthiness is tied to responsibility, not only capability (Atuire, 2022; Husien & Kebede, 2017). Therefore, as among the Kom of Cameroon, an accomplished person who fails to fulfill social duties such as remittances, bridewealth responsibilities, funeral obligations, and community development may be seen as having failed morally even if they are materially successful. These examples demonstrate entirely that in most African societies, success is public (communal) and not private (individualistic). Transitions from adolescence to adulthood are recognized through fulfilling obligations to family and community; and a person with wealth or degrees who has not "given back" may be seen as not yet fully adult in the moral and social sense.

Adolescent psychology in sub-Sahara Africa

In many African cultures, traditional rites of passage, particularly initiation ceremonies, hold profound significance as pivotal markers of the transition from childhood through adolescence to adulthood. Deeply embedded in cultural and spiritual traditions, these rituals are not merely symbolic but function as structured developmental processes that shape individual and collective identities, instill values, and reinforce social cohesion (Ohaja & Anyim, 2021). To Schroeder et al. (2022) and Ohaja & Anyim (2021), they serve as transformative experiences that prepare individuals for the responsibilities of adulthood. These ceremonies often include the support of elders, transmission of cultural knowledge, and the imparting of moral and social values. Rites performed demarcate clear boundaries between childhood and adulthood.

In most cultures, rites provide a culturally sanctioned framework for the individual to navigate adolescence. Arrey et al. (2016) insinuate that through them, participants internalise their roles within the community and embrace leadership, caregiving, or spiritual responsibilities that uphold societal structures. Some of the rites are gender-specific, often distinct for boys and girls and serve as critical mechanisms for socialisation, identity formation, and the transmission of cultural values. For example, for boys, rites of passage often involve physical challenges, endurance tests, spirituality, and teachings that prepare them for roles as protectors, providers, and leaders (Schroeder et al., 2022). Common among the Kom of Cameroon, the ritual of *îtanî î mekûm* (initiation into masking or secret society) affirms traditional masculinity, connotes spiritual responsibility and eventual transition from boyhood to manhood. Conversely for girls, Munthali & Zulu (2007) report that initiation ceremonies in Malawi frequently focus on preparing them for family and social roles, emphasizing virtues like nurturing, caregiving, motherhood, and moral uprightness.

Gender-tailored rites often include teachings about being a man, womanhood, fertility, and marriage, delivered by elder men and women in the community. For example, among the Xhosa people of South Africa, *Xhosa Ulwaluko* is often conducted among adolescent boys to mark the transition to manhood and acceptance into the adult community (Mpateni & Kang'Ethe, 2021). Among the Maasai of Kenya and Tanzania, the *Maasai Eunoto* ritual marks the passage from boyhood to *moran* (warrior) (Siminyu, 2017; Kerubo, 2016). Meanwhile to test endurance, courage, and readiness for adult roles, especially marriage, *Sharo* is often performed among Fulani boys (Yaakugh, 2019). For girls, with *Dipo* among the Krobo people of Ghana, young girls are taught about womanhood, sexuality, marriage, and social etiquette (Nyeseh Ofori & Mohangi, 2024; Abbey & Nasidi, 2023).

In a similar manner, the Bemba girls of Zambia, through *Bemba Chisungu*, a ritual performed at first menstruation, girls are secluded and taught by elder women about reproduction, marriage, respect, and womanhood, marking their transition to womanhood and fertility (Rasing, 2021). During *Zulu Umemulo* of the Zulu people of South Africa, the young adolescent girl receives a spear symbolizing readiness for marriage (Magubane, 2011). These structured rites of passage serve as foundational mechanisms for guiding adolescents through the transition from childhood, through adolescence to adulthood. Ritually rich, socially embedded, and culturally specific, the ceremonies do not merely mark biological change; Nsamenang (1992) theorised that they function as institutionalized frameworks for moral education, identity formation, and social integration.

Also, in many African societies, adolescents are deeply embedded within extended family structures and communal networks that serve as vital sources of emotional, social, and material support. According to Somefun & Odimegwu (2018), these interconnected systems function as a protective framework that fosters resilience, identity development, and a sense of belonging. Extended families often operate as multigenerational units where adolescents are nurtured and guided by parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and older siblings. Among others, Nwanmuoh et al. (2024) argue that these relationships provide a rich tapestry of support, enabling adolescents to navigate challenges while receiving assistance and moral guidance. Nsamenang (2002) adds that communal networks, which may include neighbours, elders, and peers, extend this support system, reinforcing shared values, collective responsibility, and cultural continuity. In these contexts, adolescents learn to balance individual aspirations with communal obligations. This fosters a sense of interdependence and social accountability. That is why Layefa et al. (2022) feel that the material dimensions of extended family networks are foundational to the social and economic fabric of many communities, particularly in collectivist societies. The networks provide access to vital resources that are often distributed through family and community ties.

Among the Kom of Cameroon, for example, extended family members collectively pool financial and material resources to support education, ensuring that younger members can access schooling or vocational training. Similarly, it is common to have healthcare needs

addressed through shared responsibilities, with family members contributing to medical expenses or traveling to care for sick members. In most Cameroonian families, employment opportunities are frequently mediated through family connections (godfatherism), where networks serve as conduits for job placement and career growth. These practices highlight the centrality of kinship systems in shaping access to opportunities and mitigating risks. While they enhance opportunities for younger members to succeed, they also mitigate risks and offer a safety net during crises such as unemployment, illness, or economic hardship.

Therefore, adolescence in typical African societies occupies a deeply socialized and culturally embedded space, distinct from Western conceptions. Rather than being marked by individual autonomy and psychological transition alone, adolescence in these contexts is framed through communal expectations, structured rites of passage, and the integration of adolescents into collective responsibilities. Therefore, the experience, meaning, and transition of adolescence is not a universal biological stage, but a culturally constructed phase of life that reflects local values, collective responsibilities, spiritual beliefs, and intergenerational relationships that contribute to it (Ngwenya et al., 2023). Adolescence is not framed as a period of individual turmoil, identity crisis, or rebellion as did G. Stanley Hall and Erik Erikson, but rather as a collective and relational process, where young people are prepared for adulthood through rituals, mentoring, initiation, work, and moral training. The time is marked by culturally significant events and those living through it, adolescents, are not viewed as “in-between” or suspended in time (Arnett, 2000) but actively occupy a defined role within the social and generational order (Nsamenang, 2002). In terms of moral obligations and learning, adolescence in traditional African societies is the time for learning how to respect elders, fulfill kinship obligations, maintain self-discipline, and contribute to the community. That is why Nsamenang (1992) refers to it as a period of probation and socialized internship during which members are socialized into values, taboos, and responsibilities that ensure continuity and cohesion within the cultural group. Consequently, among Africans, adolescence is a functional, not merely a transitional phase of life as in Eurocentric conceptions. Being a functional phase of development, it prepares individuals for adulthood, family life, and community roles. It is neither a suspended or experimental life stage (Arnett, 2000; Erikson, 1968), nor is it characterised by delay or detachment from adult society (Côté, 2000). Rather, it is a practical phase of development, deeply rooted in apprenticeship, work, service, learning, and culturally appropriate behaviour.

Besides these socio-cultural processes shaping adolescent lives in sub-Saharan Africa, most adolescents navigate their transition to adulthood in a context marked by deep structural inequalities, economic precarity, and social instability that severely constrain their development. Rampant poverty, unemployment, and under-resourced education systems leave many young people trapped in cycles of vulnerability, with limited opportunities for upward mobility or meaningful participation in society (Zickafoose et al., 2024; Baah & Lakner, 2023; Fox et al., 2016). According to Baah & Lakner (2023), poverty remains a pervasive issue, with a significant portion of the population living below the poverty line, restricting access to essential resources.

To Fox et al. (2016) the growing youth population and insufficient job creation has led many young people in the region to struggle to find stable employment. Meanwhile, access to education is still a problem to many due to financial constraints, long distances to schools, and inadequate school infrastructure. For those who manage to attend school, Krzykawska & Żur (2020) note that the quality often remains below standard. These systemic deficits make schooling a fragile promise, producing credentials without capacities and reproducing inequality under the guise of educational access. In fact, such schools function more as warehouses for young people than as spaces that cultivate knowledge, skills, or cognitive development. In like manner, students graduate with diplomas that do not correspond to real literacy, numeracy, problem-solving or vocational readiness (Lo-oh, 2012). In fact, Escott-Stump (2012) assumes that the credential becomes a bureaucratic artefact, that is, a ticket to the next step not evidence of capability. Of course, for many young people, this hollows out the signaling function of education and devalues the credential itself. That is why many certificate holders, most of them young people are roaming the streets in many countries either without jobs or with jobs not commensurate to their credentials.

Health challenges, ranging from limited access to reproductive and mental health services to the lingering impact of HIV/AIDS, malnutrition and malaria continues to pose profound threats to the physical and psychological well-being of adolescents in sub-Sahara Africa. These interrelated health burdens not only weaken immune systems, stunt growth, and increase morbidity and mortality rates but also exacerbate emotional distress, social stigma, and educational disruption (Penda et al., 2018; Duggal et al., 2012). Adolescents living with or affected by these conditions may experience anxiety, depression, and social exclusion, which further compromise their self-esteem, resilience, and developmental outcomes. Jindal et al. (2023) add that the combined effect of these challenges perpetuates a cycle of vulnerability in which poor health undermines cognitive performance, limits opportunities for socio-economic advancement, and constrains the realization of potential. In addition, while gender disparities and harmful cultural practices, including early marriage and gender-based violence, often marginalize young women (Somefun & Odimegwu, 2018), political insecurity and armed conflicts expose adolescents to displacement, trauma, and loss of hope (Azeng & Yogo, 2013). According to Lwamba et al. (2022), gender disparities not only restrict access to education, economic opportunities, and decision-making power, but also reinforce patriarchal norms that normalize female subordination in the region, silencing their voices and perpetuating intergenerational cycles of inequality and poverty.

Meanwhile, the constant exposure to fear, loss, and violence due to socio-political insecurity inflicts deep psychological wounds which hinder emotional growth and resilience (Hobfoll et al., 2012). Moreover, when opportunities for stability, education, and future prospects disappear, many adolescents lose their sense of purpose and optimism, leading to a profound erosion of hope and trust in society's ability to offer them a better life and future.

Collectively, these intersecting issues reveal that adolescent development in sub-Saharan Africa is not only shaped by unique socio-cultural practices but is lived under intense pressure, where existence often supersedes essence, and where the promise of youth as a demographic dividend remains unfulfilled due to systemic neglect and policy inertia. In contexts marked by chronic poverty, political instability, educational deficits, and fragile health systems, young people are compelled to focus on immediate survival rather than pursuing pathways of growth, innovation, or civic participation (Chigunta, 2019; Honwana, 2012). The region's demographic expansion, where over 60% of the population is under 25, has not translated into socio-economic transformation because policy responses have been reactive, fragmented, and largely symbolic (Filmer & Fox, 2014). Instead of investing in human capital formation and youth-centered governance, many countries in the region exhibit policy inertia with underfunded education systems, weak labour markets, and limited social protection mechanisms (Gyimah-Brempong & Kimenyi, 2013). Adolescents and youth therefore develop within a broader context of "waithood" where transitions to adulthood are delayed due to unemployment, political exclusion, and limited access to opportunity (Honwana, 2012). This is unlike in most Eurocentric societies where services and resources abound to accompany young people to positive and productive adult futures. These are realities that make adolescence in sub-Saharan Africa different, but which in the most part have often been brushed aside. It is imperative to run a developmental and research agenda that is unique to the region and tells the story of growing up adolescent in sub-Saharan Africa.

Conclusion

Decolonising and Africanising adolescent development theory and "righting" the wrongs of gate-keeper psychology represents a critical, transformative shift in understanding the developmental trajectories available to African adolescents, youth, and emerging adults. Arguably, mainstream psychology, for a long time has operated as a gate-keeping epistemic regime, universalizing Western constructs of adolescence, personhood, and well-being while simultaneously silencing alternative epistemologies rooted in "other" cultures (Moore & Minchington, 2013). This dominance has not been merely academic but structurally reproductive, shaping diagnostic criteria, research funding, institutional curricula, and policy interventions in ways that render African minds legible only through Western lenses (Steinmetz, 2022; Naidoo, 1996). Adopting Africentric psychology that informs the understanding of adolescence in the African context does not simply translate to pursuing cultural decoration or additive "indigenization." Rather, it enacts a paradigm shift that foregrounds the continent's own ontological assumptions about selfhood as relational and embodied in lineage, spirituality, and community (Nsamenang, 2002), about distress (as socio-moral and existential rather than only intra-psychic (Ciofalo et al., 2022), and about healing (as collective, ritual, and ecological (Uzuegbunam, 2025).

Such a shift recasts Africa not as a site of application or "dumping ground" of external theory but as a site of theory-generation and knowledge production which expands and not limit global psychology. This paradigm shift builds on the premise that human

knowledge and understanding cannot be complete if its foundational categories are provincial and policed. In this sense, an Africentric psychology is a project of epistemic decolonization, methodological repair, and ontological re-opening (Malherbe et al., 2021). It is a liberating project that refuses the gate-keeping abstractions of Western knowledge hegemony (Adjei, 2019). To Tani (2020) and Makhubela (2016), Africentric psychology replaces Western normativity with frameworks that are African, emerging from its histories and experiences, moral orders, and lived realities of resilience and meaning.

Decolonisation begs for dismantling of paternalistic and hierarchical structures embedded in Western developmental psychology. It recognises in part, that African children and adolescents do not exist and grow up in a vacuum but do so within dynamic socio-cultural environments that significantly shape their development. For example, they may be expected to navigate complex gender roles, family and cultural expectations, and societal norms which Western developmental models do not adequately address (Nyeseh Ofori & Mohangi, 2024; Ngwanya et al., 2023). These Africentric practices must not be perceived as obstacles or deviations from a “universal” developmental framework but rather as valuable, contextually relevant processes that not only shape development in that context but also explains how and why it unfolds the way it does. In this regard, decolonisation prompts an expanded understanding of the diverse factors that influence adolescent development, globally. Also, in sub-Sahara Africa, where issues such as poverty, conflict, difficult access to quality education, and adolescent health (e.g., teenage pregnancy) are still particularly pressing (e.g., Maharaj, 2022), adolescent development theories should integrate these realities into their intended “universal” framework. The resilience showcased by African adolescents and youth to surmount these challenges highlights their resourcefulness and agency growing up in such difficulties. But these personal strivings are hardly acknowledged and documented in mainstream adolescent psychology.

Righting the wrongs of gate-keeper psychology also begs for amplification of African adolescent voices themselves, recognising them as active agents in shaping their own lives, their identities, aspirations, and futures (Lo-oh, 2017). Despite a growing body of research on adolescent development, dominant narratives often reflect external or adult-centric perspectives that marginalise adolescent voices with their lived experiences. For example, African Governments are quick to label them as “*leaders of tomorrow*” or “*the continent’s future*,” but this framing erases their present struggles and treats them as passive beneficiaries of development rather than active participants and agents of it. Therefore, giving young people voice not only empowers them as co-producers of knowledge about them but also reveals insights often obscured in top-down, survey-driven studies. That is why Abubakar et al. (2024) insinuate that centering adolescent voices provides a better appreciation of the complexities of adolescence in sub-Sahara Africa. Pfeifer & Berkman (2018) add that giving them voice permits a shift beyond deficit models that portray them as passive recipients of external influences and highlights their resilience, creativity, and ability to navigate multiple identities. By the way, mainstream adolescent literature historically conceptualized them through deficit reductionist models, as incomplete, vulnerable, or at-risk, predominantly shaped by external forces.

Decolonising and Africanising adolescent theory may not simply be an academic or scholarly exercise but actually a liberation of knowledge (Lo-oh, 2005) and the empowerment of African adolescents and youth. In many African societies, adolescence is not perceived as a phase of “storm and stress,” as popularized by G. Stanley Hall (1904) and later reinforced by Western developmental psychology. Instead, it is understood as a socially embedded and community managed transition from childhood to adulthood, guided by elders, rituals, and moral instruction. Within Western paradigms, adolescence is often portrayed as a period marked by psychological turmoil, identity crises, and conflict with authority (Arnett, 1999). However, African conceptions of growing up emphasize collective responsibility and moral formation rather than individual struggle. For instance, initiation rituals mark the entry into adulthood through mentorship by older adults, who transmit moral, reproductive, and social knowledge essential for adulthood (Nsamenang, 2002).

Across African indigenous societies, adolescents are integrated into community life through initiation ceremonies, storytelling, and apprenticeship systems that reinforce discipline, respect, and social belonging rather than psychological rebellion. These processes affirm that the individual’s development is inseparable from the community’s moral and cultural fabric. As Nsamenang (1992) argues, African ontogeny situates adolescence within a framework of social interdependence, where the goal is not autonomy but responsible personhood. Thus, to interpret African adolescence through Western constructs of “storm and stress” is to impose an ethnocentric model that overlooks and undermines the cultural mediation of developmental experiences. A decolonized understanding of adolescence, therefore, is a call to ground developmental theory in indigenous epistemologies.

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