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Beyond Gaudeamus Igitur: Decolonising South African Graduation Ceremonies

Beyond Gaudeamus Igitur: Decolonising South African Graduation Ceremonies

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Abstract
In South Africa, decolonisation efforts, exemplified by the #RhodesMustFall movement, have gained significant momentum. This article investigates the persistent challenge of decolonisation within academia, using the continued performance of *Gaudeamus Igitur* at African graduation ceremonies as a case study. Through observations, interviews, and Document Analysis, this study explores why some universities, particularly historically Black institutions, maintain this tradition. The analysis reveals a complex interplay of factors, including cultural identity politics, cultural representation, and institutional inertia that impede the full embrace of decoloniality. The conclusion may offer insights on this and similar concerns, and my also inform policies and practices promoting the expression of diverse African identities in academic rituals.

Introduction
South Africa's colonial history began with the arrival of Dutch Governor Jan van Riebeeck in 1652 (Lehning, 2013), followed by the British conquest and the subsequent establishment of the Cape of Good Hope settlement in 1795 (Legassick & Ross, 2009). These regimes initiated racial stratification, which culminated in a fully developed apartheid system in 1948. The apartheid system, as an evil colonial localisation, displaced indigenous ways of life (Vakulyk, 2020). Consequently, these racial divisions permeated the country's social structure. This is why South African universities still reflect European models from two former white regimes: the British and the Dutch. The British introduced elements of their culture, while Afrikaners incorporated Dutch traditions. These white university traditions were regarded as established or urban. Under the apartheid policy of separate development, the Afrikaner regime created substandard "Bush Universities" for native Africans, with institutions for Coloured people and Indians situated between the extremes of White and Black universities (Makola et al., 2023). Post-1994, universities grappled with the mandate to eradicate colonial influences from education. It is expected that this mandate will be perceived differently by historically White and historically Black universities. Unfortunately, Black universities often express intentions for decolonization but have, thus far, taken minimal action in this regard (Baloyi, 2024). They continue to uphold colonial symbols within curricula, governance, and ceremonies to align with Eurocentric definitions of higher education and satisfy liberal standards. This exemplifies 'performative allyship,' lacking genuine support for transformation (Sue, 2020). The gap between rhetoric and action raises questions about the obstacles to change (Crossman & Devisch, 2019).

Gaudeamus Igitur ("Let us rejoice") is a hymn central to Euro-American academic traditions. Originating from medieval student culture at Italian universities like Bologna and Padua (Horeczy, 2022), it is now recited at graduation ceremonies. For African universities, particularly Black South African institutions, the hymn is integral to academic processions. While celebrated, it contrasts with the pressures of academia and the rising consumption of alcohol among students (Hammerschmidt, 2011). Its use in South African universities highlights the complexities of addressing historical injustices. Introduced through colonial imposition (Vakulyk, 2020), it aligned scholarly achievement with Eurocentric status. This reflects cultural dominance, where European traditions were deemed universal (Said, 1993). Its continued use in South African graduations, especially at historically Black universities, demonstrates a paradox: institutions shaped by anti-colonial struggles maintain rituals that marginalise African culture (Chigudu, 2020; Mthombeni, 2024). This reflects broader decolonisation debates about rejecting or repurposing colonial frameworks (Dumbuya, 2024).

This article examines the enduring presence of *Gaudeamus Igitur* amidst decolonial critiques, focusing on arguments for its retention as a tradition versus its rejection as cultural violence. It highlights institutional resistance to change and explores themes that suggest an awakening is too slow to effect systemic change. The anthem *Gaudeamus Igitur* could simply be a placeholder, replaceable by any other symbol of Euro-American hegemony within academia. The question is, why is the use of *Gaudeamus* in African graduate ceremonies still prevalent in South Africa?

Methodology

This qualitative study employs multiple research strategies, including *Document Analysis*, *Phenomenology*, and *Narrative Inquiry*. Kusimba (2023) defines Document Analysis as the systematic evaluation of documents to extract and synthesise information. This method is helpful in historical research for exploring patterns. Document analysis has been instrumental in tracing the origins of "*Gaudeamus Igitur*" and understanding concepts related to university anthems. Phenomenology focuses on understanding lived experiences through reflective thinking and descriptions to uncover how individuals interpret their world (Mortari, 2005). This approach facilitated the observation of graduation ceremonies through direct participation and social media. Narrative inquiry uses stories to understand human experience (Polkinghorne, 1995). It captures reflections from composers, university leaders, and council members, providing clear insights for this study.

Theoretical framework

This study employs decolonial theory to analyse colonial symbols in South African graduation ceremonies, using *Gaudeamus Igitur* as a case study. It addresses epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007), which highlights the marginalisation of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) through Eurocentric rituals. The framework incorporates cultural imperialism (Schiller, 1976), where Western traditions, such as those exemplified by *Gaudeamus,* are imposed as universal norms. Epistemic inertia (Manson, 2009) explains institutional resistance to decolonisation, as universities favour colonial legacies. Mbembe's (2016) decolonial theory critiques neoliberal university structures that sideline African epistemologies, juxtaposed with IKS. The tension between performative allyship and substantive decolonisation (Sue, 2020) reveals how institutional inertia perpetuates coloniality, highlighting the disconnect between decolonial rhetoric and practice in higher education.

In support of the sounding of *Gaudeamus Igitur*

The integration of Gaudeamus Igitur into African graduation ceremonies is based on three main reasons. First, it promotes unity among individuals from diverse backgrounds. Second, it enhances the emotional significance of the event by celebrating academic achievements. Third, it embodies

academic tradition and acts as a bridge across generations of scholars, fostering solidarity among graduates (Jaeck, 2025). These points suggest that the anthem's value lies in its ability to create a shared experience and connect individuals to a broader academic community (Durkheim, 1912).

The song's lyrics and melody evoke joy and introspection, celebrating the vitality of youth and the brevity of life, thereby adding emotional depth to the ceremony. Its performance at graduations also maintains a connection to the enduring values of academia, illustrating continuity within the global academic community (Magolda, 2002). This perspective emphasises the importance of ritual and symbolism in fostering a sense of belonging and shared identity within educational institutions (Geertz, 1973). The Latin lyrics, particularly the recurring phrase "Vivat academia!", if discernible to the celebrating family members and guests, would arguably create a participatory experience that mirrors the South African political sloganeering culture (Swartz et al., 2020), while also linking to global scholarly networks. The use of Latin, even if not fully understood, can evoke a sense of historical gravitas and connection to the traditions of Western scholarship (Ong, 1982).

As a ceremonial centrepiece, *Gaudeamus Igitur* arguably transcends its cultural origins to cultivate a collective identity among graduates from diverse backgrounds (Nhlapo & Garuba, 2012). This is why Yale University could adopt it as a university anthem despite its European roots. Its enduring presence is said to reflect not colonial nostalgia, but rather the practical value of shared academic rituals and the promotion of institutional cohesion (Wanyama & Shitandi, 2023). The adoption of Gaudeamus Igitur by institutions outside Europe suggests its potential for reinterpretation and adaptation to different cultural contexts (Appiah, 2005). Furthermore, its significance lies in its ability to transform individual achievements into a communal celebration. Graduates of a particular year, such as the "class of 2020," become part of a collective, ultimately leading to membership in a more prestigious cohort of alumni. The individual is thus connected to a larger group, united by, among other significant factors, the nostalgic sound of the *Gaudeamus Igitur* march. This collective identity can foster a sense of loyalty and commitment to the institution, encouraging alumni to support and contribute to its future success (Anderson, 1983).

Despite Gaudeamus Igitur being in a 3/4-time signature, it remains celebratory when considered within the broader context and history of student graduation ceremonies. In medieval times, the term "gaudium," meaning joy, was often used to convey feelings of happiness and festivity (Alexandre 2021). This notion of joy extends beyond mere musicality, appearing in various cultural contexts, including literature, where it symbolises a community coming together to celebrate significant moments (Saavedra, 2008). The association of Gaudeamus Igitur with joy and celebration can be seen as a means to create a positive and memorable experience for graduates and their families (Turner, 1969). Thus, the piece serves as a reminder of the enduring power of shared joy and collective celebration throughout history. The ceremonial context amplifies this effect, with academic regalia and procession rituals framing it as a sonic emblem of intellectual transformation (Stokes, 2009). The visual and auditory elements of the graduation ceremony combine to form a powerful and symbolic representation of the transition from student to graduate (van Gennep, 1960).

The lyrical themes of "*Gaudeamus Igitur, Juvenes dum sumus...*" ("Let us rejoice therefore while we are young...") are seen by some as having a cross-cultural resonance. This celebration of youthful graduation mirrors indigenous traditions, particularly those marking the transition of initiates from one social status to another. Makgopa (2019) argues that within African communities, each stage of individual and collective achievement is celebrated. The emphasis on youth and celebration in Gaudeamus Igitur aligns with the values of many cultures, where youth is associated with potential

and hope for the future (Eisenstadt, 1956). In this context, the graduation ceremony serves a similar purpose to the reception of initiates as they transition from childhood to young adulthood. In the African context, the event is characterised by poetic expressions and chanting that embody the triumphant spirit of the occasion. In Tshivenda, there is a saying, "*Mutevhela thadu u do la mazhana*" (the follower of the honeybird is bound to enjoy the sweetness of honey). This proverb illustrates the idea that those who follow wisdom and guidance will be rewarded with success and fulfilment (Scheub, 1975).

When juxtaposed with the *Gaudeamus Igitur lyrics* "*Vita nostra brevis est...Pereat tristitia...Vivat academia!*" (Our life is short... Let sadness perish... Long live the academy!), one can appreciate the universal values of the anthem. From this perspective, the anthem is far from being a colonial relic; it represents what Gibbons et al. (2020) describe as a "living tradition"—a flexible ritual that institutions continually reinterpret. The ability of traditions to adapt and evolve is crucial for their continued relevance and survival (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983).

Its preservation should therefore not reflect cultural subjugation but rather academic agency, as African universities consciously maintain elements of global scholarly heritage while transforming others. This perspective suggests that African universities can actively engage with and shape global traditions, rather than passively accepting them (Mbembe, 2016).

To grasp the cultural significance of *Gaudeamus Igitur* for Europeans, Claude Jaek's (2025) exploration in "The Spirit of Gaudeamus Igitur" offers a remarkable perspective when viewed from a monolithic cultural standpoint. However, through a decolonial lens, the song's preservation reveals what Manson (2009) describes as "epistemic inertia"—the privileging of colonial knowledge systems despite claims of political liberation. Epistemic inertia shows how dominant knowledge systems resist change, even when faced with compelling evidence (Harding, 1998). While "*Gaudeamus Igitur*" is sung in academic ceremonies as representing global unity and shared tradition, its role as a symbol of cohesion remains debated. Cultural perspectives challenge its universal appreciation, especially during ceremonies with non-European graduates. This shared global tradition can be viewed as cultural imperialism, where Western traditions are presented as universal (Schiller, 1976).

While it is typically viewed as emphasising shared heritage and interconnectedness in academia, it also highlights the complex tensions that exist within post-colonial education, particularly as institutions navigate between honouring global academic traditions and respecting local cultural identities. These tensions reveal how graduation rituals serve as sites where colonial legacies and contemporary educational aspirations intersect in meaningful ways. The graduation ceremony becomes a contested space where different cultural values and historical narratives are negotiated and expressed (Bourdieu, 1977).

Against the sounding of *Gaudeamus Igitur*

This section contends that *Gaudeamus Igitur* serves as both an artefact and a performance that perpetuates cultural imperialism, embedding colonial legacies into contemporary academic ceremonies in ways that marginalise indigenous identities. Its performance can be interpreted as a symbolic act reinforcing the power and authority of Western knowledge systems while simultaneously silencing and marginalising indigenous voices and perspectives (Foucault, 1977). This cultural marginalisation and subjugation are entrenched within the very framework of education, the Church, governance systems, and the judiciary. Key features of systemic cultural imperialism include linguistic domination, musicological assertiveness, and pedagogical elitism. The impact of this system

is so profound that those affected become desensitised to the extent that their mental conditions are self-submissive to existential abuse.

A significant concern regarding the continued use of the anthem in African graduation ceremonies is its linguistic inaccessibility. The Latin lyrics are unintelligible to many attendees at South African university ceremonies. Latin, as a classical language, is primarily associated with academic disciplines such as law and theology, rather than with everyday communication in South Africa. The use of Latin can create a sense of exclusion and alienation for those who do not have access to this specialised knowledge (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). For the majority of Africans without exposure to higher education, encountering Latin is rare and alienating. This disconnect is particularly pronounced for graduates and their families, many of whom come from rural or under-resourced backgrounds, who struggle to relate to a 19th-century European text that belongs to a different world, one only recently introduced to rural African communities through various forms of colonialism. This linguistic barrier reflects a colonial mindset that assumes if something is acceptable in Europe or America, it should be accepted uncritically by Africans. This imposition can be seen as a form of linguistic imperialism, where the dominance of one language is used to marginalise and suppress other languages and cultures (Phillipson, 1992).

Musically, the 3/4 metre of *Gaudeamus Igitur* further alienates African participants. This rhythmic pattern, which gained prominence in the 17th century as European composers incorporated folk-dance formats such as the waltz (Houle, 1987), became canonised as a marker of European elegance (Stratton, 2024). In contrast, African music predominantly features a 6/8 metre characterised by complex polyrhythms, rhythmic-syllabic splitting, and position prolongation, contributing to its rich diversity (Anku, 1997; Frishkopf, 2021). The imposition of a 3/4 metre can be perceived as a form of musical colonialism, where the dominance of one musical tradition is used to marginalise and suppress other musical traditions. Imposing a 3/4 metre on populations attuned to 6/8 rhythms signals a colonial mindset rooted in cultural dominance (Agawu, 2014), effectively alienating African graduates from the musical expression of their ceremonies. This alienation can lead to a sense of disengagement and disconnect from the graduation ceremony, undermining its potential to be a meaningful and celebratory experience (Connell, 1995).

Beyond its rhythmic elements, the anthem's harmonic structure implicitly excludes spontaneous African participation, relegating attendees to the role of passive observers during events intended to celebrate their achievements (Nyamnjoh, 2012). African ceremonies traditionally encompass communal singing, improvisation, ululations, and poetic affirmations, expressions that *Gaudeamus Igitur* neither accommodates nor considers conventional. This exclusion underscores the anthem's discordance with African cultural frameworks and exemplifies epistemicide, the systematic erasure of IKS (Mignolo, 2009).

The insistence on using *Gaudeamus Igitur* in African graduation ceremonies undermines decolonial efforts in higher education. Playing this anthem at what should be a liberating event mocks the process and reflects the validation-seeking nature of African institutions within Western paradigms (Mamdani, 1996). Prioritising foreign traditions diminishes local ones, perpetuating marginalisation among groups with indigenous heritages. Ceremonial programmes that elevate colonial symbols over African traditions highlight underlying cultural dominance. Mbembe (2015) notes that African universities frequently overlook alternative traditions by adhering to Eurocentric models. This stifles their transformative potential and limits their contribution to Africa's development (Lebakeng, 2022). Decolonisation requires adopting African-centred knowledge systems and integrating African

perspectives. However, institutional inertia and the global commodification of higher education incentivise retaining colonial markers for international recognition (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2021). Translation alone is insufficient to address cultural dominance and epistemic injustice (Benjamin, 2016). Musical traditions express distinct cultural values; the waltz rhythm conveys European social structures, while African polyrhythms express communal experiences. Perpetuating musical colonialism endorses "aesthetic assimilation" (Chakabwata, 2022), undermining the diversity of cultural expressions. Deliberate efforts to decolonise are essential to ensure universities reflect the values and identities of their diverse student bodies.

Proponents of the anthem misinterpret opposition as anti-intellectualism rather than a plea for epistemic justice. As Stevens highlights in Mapaya's (2015) commentary, the issue transcends "Black versus white" binaries, questioning why African institutions maintain traditions that European universities are abandoning. The debate over *Gaudeamus Igitur* concerns power, identity, and self-determination. Modern students are increasingly detached from medieval academic rituals (Morreira, 2017), making *Gaudeamus* especially alienating in African contexts where it lacks cultural significance. The absence of connection to African cultures intensifies this alienation (Hannerz, 1992).

The solution lies in reimagining. Institutions like the University of Cape Town demonstrate how transitional approaches, alternating *Gaudeamus* with indigenous compositions, can honour tradition while promoting decolonial goals (Chigudu, 2020). This approach respects the anthem while affirming African universities' right to develop ceremonies reflecting contemporary values and cultural identities. Such initiatives create academic ceremonies that are culturally resonant and transformative, fostering intellectual sovereignty among African graduates (hooks, 1994).

Institutional Paralysis towards abandoning *Gaudeamus Igitur*

After examining the arguments for and against retaining *Gaudeamus Igitur* in South African universities, we can now identify why the desire to abandon the anthem is slow to develop. The continued presence of *Gaudeamus Igitur* in South African graduation ceremonies reveals a complex interplay of institutional, political, and cultural factors that go beyond mere tradition. Despite widespread calls for decolonisation and the removal of colonial symbols from academic spaces, universities across the country still struggle with the decision to abandon this European anthem. This institutional inertia arises from a multitude of interconnected challenges that underscore broader questions about transformation, identity, and power in post-apartheid higher education.

Historically Black universities face an acute dilemma regarding colonial symbols. These institutions, emerging from apartheid's policies, are caught between their anti-colonial origins and the need to establish academic credibility (Mgadla & Nkomo, 1988). Universities born from colonial resistance continue validating their worth through European traditions. At the University of Venda, attempts to replace Gaudeamus Igitur met resistance from council members who "could not imagine graduation without it" (Mapaya, 2015). This reflects anxiety about academic legitimacy in Black universities. Council members equate European ceremonial elements with international educational standards (Jansen & Walters, 2022). When ceremonies deviate from global formats, concerns arise about disconnection from academic norms. This creates what Balogun and Woldegiorgis (2023) refer to as a colonial mentality that undermines the development of African universities. The pressure to maintain European symbols becomes institutional self-surveillance, as universities police themselves to meet external standards of respectability.

The material realities facing South African universities significantly influence their approach to cultural transformation. Historically privileged institutions possess greater cultural and economic

capital, allowing them to navigate changes more effectively than their historically disadvantaged counterparts (Gultig, 2000). This disparity creates uneven capacities for engaging with decolonial initiatives. The universities of Cape Town, the Witwatersrand, and KwaZulu-Natal have successfully adopted "iHele" by Simon Bhekathina Phelelani Mnomiya as a replacement for "*Gaudeamus Igitur*" (Chigudu, 2020; Cini, 2019). These institutions, central to movements like #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall, demonstrate how resource advantages translate into greater flexibility for cultural experimentation. Their ability to champion decolonial efforts stems partly from their financial stability and established reputations. Conversely, historically Black universities have faced systemic underfunding and marginalisation that constrain their transformative capacity (Chakabwata, 2022). When administrators confront limited budgets and competing priorities, questioning ceremonial traditions appears less urgent than addressing infrastructure deficits or faculty shortages. The entrenched inequality between university sectors creates differential abilities to engage meaningfully with decolonisation processes (Hlongwane & Kgosinyane, 2021).

University councils wield significant authority over institutional policies, including ceremonial practices. The composition of these governing bodies reflects older cohorts who experienced higher education when academic traditions remained unquestioned (Jansen & Walters, 2022). Despite expressing support for decolonisation principles, council members often lack concrete action plans. Many completed their education when challenging academic authority was uncommon, leading to a reluctance to depart from traditional practices. Council decisions tend toward established precedents rather than experimental directions, making ceremonial reform politically risky. This governance challenge intersects with institutional resistance patterns. Responses to decolonisation efforts vary from rejection to cautious support, with obstacles emerging from Eurocentric orientations and insufficient attention to African traditions (Govender & Naidoo, 2023). Western-centred epistemologies and management cultures actively obstruct transformation efforts (Hendricks, 2018; Lombaard, 2006).

Attempts to introduce African alternatives to '*Gaudeamus Igitur*' encounter complex ethnic and linguistic negotiations that European traditions often avoid. The University of Venda's failed experiment with S.J. Khosa's Xitsonga composition "*Mintiro Ya Bulbula*" illustrates how language choices can exacerbate rather than resolve cultural tensions (Mafukata, 2021). The composition's perceived incompatibility with regional tribal dynamics demonstrates how selecting one African language risks alienating other linguistic communities within university populations. This challenge reflects broader national struggles with multilingual representation. South Africa's failure to successfully integrate its anthem, resulting in what Mokgoatšana (1999) describes as the "bastardisation of *Nkosi Sikelel'iAfrika*," exemplifies the country's paralysis when confronting decolonial imperatives. The anthem symbolises an inability to transcend apartheid legacies, creating what Nattrass and Seekings (2001) term the "irreconcilable two-nations-in-one problem." Universities serving ethnically diverse populations find themselves navigating similar terrain when attempting to select representative cultural expressions. The apparent neutrality of European traditions masks their political function as culturally imposed solutions that avoid complex negotiations about African representation. Maintaining *Gaudeamus Igitur* becomes a way of postponing rather than resolving fundamental questions about cultural identity and institutional character.

Most troubling is that Black academics are becoming active defenders of European traditions to establish professional credibility. Maistry (2023) observes that "Black academics, in their quest to impress their white counterparts, always do a perfect job" of maintaining colonial structures. This pattern reflects hierarchies that position European knowledge systems as superior to those of Africa.

The phenomenon extends beyond individual psychology to institutional dynamics. When Black universities adopt European ceremonial practices, they signal alignment with global standards while marginalising African cultural expressions. This creates "epistemic inertia" – the continued privileging of colonial knowledge systems despite political liberation (Morreira, 2017). University administrators often lack appreciation for education's cultural dimensions, making connections between ceremonial practices and outcomes less apparent (Masoga, 2024). This cultural blindness perpetuates colonial symbols without recognition of their symbolic violence against African identities and knowledge systems.

Conclusion

Gaudeamus Igitur is a cornerstone of academic traditions in graduation ceremonies worldwide, though its symbolic importance has diminished globally. Its incorporation into the African context presents significant challenges. For Euro-Americans, this anthem symbolises their cultural heritage, while for Africans, graduation ceremonies represent the suppression of indigenous cultural expressions. The rise of liberal thought and African voices has sparked debate over discontinuing *Gaudeamus* Igitur in African universities. This paper examines arguments for and against retaining the composition and advocates for decolonisation to reduce Eurocentric symbolism in African life. Decolonising graduation ceremonies aims to foster an inclusive educational environment that celebrates African cultures. The struggle of South African universities in moving away from *Gaudeamus Igitur* reflects deeper decolonisation challenges. With only four out of twenty-six universities exploring vernacular alternatives, the challenge involves institutional governance, cultural politics, and questions about academic identity in post-colonial contexts. Understanding this inertia requires acknowledging how colonial legacies shape institutional practices through mechanisms operating across university life. Progress requires addressing both symbolic changes and structural conditions that sustain colonial cultural dominance in South African higher education.

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