

## The Last Word

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### The “Africanisation” of communication studies

#### WHERE DO WE STAND WITH THE “AFRICANISATION” OF COMMUNICATION STUDIES?

As academics and lecturers we are well aware of the demands of transformation. Many of us have been and are going through the demanding, time-consuming and bureaucratic exercises of SAQAtising our syllabi. In the process, meaningless and unimaginative templates tend to dictate the academic activity, leaving little to the creative intellectual mind. We have been and are going through the processes of adapting our syllabi to outcome-based education and teaching, now to be turned into problem-solving education and teaching; of turning year courses into semester courses, and probably now converting them back to year courses; and of merging institutions and, in so doing, trying to marry different educational philosophies, practices, attitudes and organisational cultures.

At Unisa, the above have been and are taxing experiences. Distance education demands that every word you utter has to go through a rigorous process of educational planning and design, writing, evaluation by critical readers, re-writing, re-evaluation, and proofreading over and again, before it goes through the processes of production and despatch. Now, a new phase of transformation has entered: the Africanisation of our courses. But what is Africanisation?

The purpose of what follows is not to problematise and intellectualise the concept. That is done, more than often, in a stream of academic articles and in discussions among academics. The discussions usually begin with: “What the hell is Africanisation?” Neither is the purpose to deconstruct related concepts such as “conceptual engineering”, “cultural revolution”, “power”, “ideology”, “hegemony” and so on. Somewhere in the debate, they all feature.

In the following paragraphs I prefer to quote verbatim, and in a paraphrased way, from two presentations given by two Unisa scholars at a seminar held on 3 March 2005 at Unisa on the topic of Africanisation. They are Prof. T.S. Maluleke, the Deputy Executive Dean of Unisa’s College of Human Sciences, and Prof. A.M.B. Mangu of Unisa’s Department of Constitutional, International and Indigenous Law. The purpose is not to comment on their presentations, but rather to uphold them as possible yardsticks against which to measure the resistance to, and/or progress or lack of progress in, the Africanisation of South African communication studies.

For Professor Maluleke (2005), Africanisation is “to become fully conscious of and accountable for (a university, faculty, department’s) location in the African context and to do so at all levels of its life: tuition, research and community service”. It involves “the reorientation of persons, institutions, structures, products, processes and ideas towards a fresh, creative and constructive imaging of Africa and African contexts which take past, present and future African reality and African potential seriously, consciously and deliberately. It is largely a re-orientation rather than a replacement exercise ... there is enough presence and or potential of aspects of Africanisation in virtually all our major disciplinary offerings ... but the presence of which we speak is seldom fully and consciously utilized for purposes of the Africanisation of tuition”.

With regard to the reorientation of staff, he argues that to ensure that the Africanisation of tuition becomes a reality and is not made “totally dependent on the whims of individual lecturers”, it may become necessary to develop some instruments. More specifically, he suggests (i) “a brief manual to be supplied to all staff who are engaging in the writing of course material on how to ensure that the study material is specifically orientated towards African contexts and realities”, (ii) “a check-list to be completed by course writers either at the beginning or at the end of each lesson/chapter”, and (iii) “while for practical purposes the composition may not be changed overnight, strategies should be put in place to ensure that, as much as possible, the demographics of our staff reflect the realities of our contexts”.

According to Maluleke, a radical change has to take place with regard to reorientating processes and ideas.

“At the heart of the Africanisation of Tuition is the creation of space for African ideas and African intellectual traditions alongside other ideas and traditions. African thinkers, ideas and traditions are often unnecessarily absent or underestimated in our tuition material. In some cases we do not try hard enough to seek and find African ideas and thinkers ... a special effort should be made to valorise African thinkers and ideas by making them an integral part of the contents and required readings. African contexts, realities and issues should be the centre of our reflections. In doing this we must be careful not to merely fall into the usual clichés and stereotypes so that Africa is only represented by reference to poverty, disease and underdevelopment. In this regard Africanization of Tuition may degenerate into yet another Africa-bashing exercise this time done in the noble guise of pedagogy. Africanization of tuition will mean the production of material whose content takes Africa seriously. This means that the material will take seriously the good news, the bad news as well as the potential of Africa. Above all Africa will be regarded both realistically and creatively, so that as stock is being taken of what Africa is and has been, new ideas and new possibilities of what African can and might be are also explored.”

In his presentation, Professor Mangu (2005) argues that universities such as Fez (Morocco), Cairo, the University of Sankoré and others on the African continent were established and renowned centres of knowledge, long before Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard and Leuven, to name but a few Western universities. The idea of a university is thus not a gift from Europe.

He argues, however, that with the slave trade and colonisation came the decline of African civilisation.

"To make tabula rasa of any indigenous knowledge, Western universities were exported to Africa ... to produce knowledge required by the conquerors to sustain and consolidate their colonial enterprise ... Africans were taught that Africans produce no knowledge ... were created to serve and not lead as they were incapable of thinking ... The universities that many African countries inherited from colonialisation were African in name and location only ... the curricula were dictated by London, Paris or Portugal ... academics and researchers had to perform for their colonial masters ... recycling knowledge produced elsewhere in a different context and for a specific milieu ..."

To Mangu, Africanisation does not mean changing knowledge as such, but refers to the Africanisation of the universities that we inherited from colonialism or apartheid and "... which were set up to produce knowledge in line with the hegemony of the colonial and apartheid masters. What needs to be asked is: What does it mean to be an "African university"? What does this imply in terms of teaching and research?, and, because there can not be an "African University" without "Africans" who are "Africans"?"

In answering these questions and in giving concrete meaning to them, it does not help to simply formulate "colourful and powerful vision and mission statements" as most South African universities now have done ...in many cases they remain dead letters and empty slogans just to adapt to the dominant discourse of the change characteristic of the post-apartheid era. Slogans like these do not affirm an African identity. Neither does the Africanisation of curricula mean the insertion of a few examples where the name of Mary and London, would be swapped for Mabisela or Polokwane...

More profound than this, Africanisation means

"the challenge faced by many African scholars to decolonise their minds; to challenge the "masters" generally based outside the continent; to be Afro-optimistic; to behave as Africans or learn to do so; to remain open-minded; to exchange with colleagues throughout the continent; and to produce high quality knowledge, not just recycle theories from Western masters. On the other hand ... the fact that a university is located in Africa, is under an African management and most of its staff members and students are Africans and even black people, does not qualify it to be a truly African university. Three critical elements would help define a university as an African one. First is the Africanity of its management, students, and staff members. Second is the Africanisation of its curricula and their relevance. Third is its vision or commitment to Africa and its people. It means ...infusing the spirit of Africa".

As far as curricula are concerned, Africanisation means

"... an attempt to move away from the course syllabi received from colonial or the apartheid educational system ... It goes far beyond a simple adaptation to include transformation and innovation in the sense that the curricula should respond to the needs of our people and help them in their fight against underdevelopment, poverty, wars, diseases, unemployment, illiteracy, and for a better life, African renaissance

and progress. Africanisation implies that African academics should concentrate on the needs of African people and design new curricula to improve the life conditions of their people and help them overcome the multifaceted challenges of nation-building, national reconstruction, economic, technological, and scientific development, national, sub-regional and African integration, democratisation, globalisation, and so on. Africanisation does not imply we should make tabula rasa and change all the curricula. Some will certainly be redesigned; others may be progressively phased out and new ones will have to be designed. Africanisation of the curricula would demand that we research more on African-related issues and enhance our expertise on African affairs, whether from a Southern African or a continental perspective”.

But, Mangu (2005) emphasises that Africanisation does not mean compromising quality or lowering the standards as is often feared by conservatives and radicals from the left and right who oppose Africanisation. It does not oppose globalisation as the doors must be kept open to the world of knowledge.

Finally, what does it mean to be an African? Mangu argues that

“... under Apartheid, as currently in the United States, “African” was synonymous with “non-white”. Accordingly, black, coloured and Indians were and still consider themselves “African”. While people or people of European descent did not see themselves as Africans. This created a sense that Afrikaners, for instance, were not Africans. This is changing and has changed, indeed, as most of us now feel “proudly South African”. ...it is worth stressing that under Apartheid, “South Africans”, including black South Africans, did not see themselves as part of the African people on the continent. Although they were suffering under Apartheid, they were still told that they were in a far better position than other people under military and authoritarian rule in the rest of the continent ... Africans are not only black people of Africa, but also people of European, Arabic and Asian descent living in Africa or outside the continent, and who claim to be Africans and are committed to Africa”.

Where does all of the above leave communication studies? I have no problem with the idea of “Africanisation” as set out above. It seems as if the emphasis should be on social relevance and on the practice of a discipline from an African perspective. Being a social science, the subject of communication studies has always been involved with the society in which it is practised.

At the heart of the discipline’s epistemology is the quest for meaning. How do people, regardless of their race, ethnicity and gender, produce, disseminate and use meaning to make sense of their contexts, cultures, circumstances and relationships? This is true for interpersonal, intercultural, organisational, group, mass communication, etcetera. As such, communication seeks to break down the barriers between people and groups in order to arrive at mutual understandings towards the achievement of a universal ideal, namely to make the world a better place for all. Although our interpretations about this may differ and be informed by different cultural backgrounds, intellectual traditions and paradigms, the bottom-line is the same: mutual understanding and respect.

We can also admit that South African communication studies has, in the past, relied too heavily on Western theories and models of communication. These are theories and models grounded in a Western empiricist epistemology in which there is little room for anything beyond observable and measurable facts. We may be "guilty" of recycling theories from our "Western masters" without testing these theories and models from the perspective of an African anthropology and in the context of a sound knowledge of the history of African communications, including the impact of colonialism and apartheid on communication in whatever form. In this regard, I emphasised the need for more fundamental anthropological research at the SACOMM Conference of 2004 in Port Elizabeth. Knowledge accumulated through such research should become an integral part of our teaching. However, care should be taken not to use anthropology for the purpose of emphasising differences, but rather to arrive at mutual understandings of, and respect for, each other's cultures.

However, if "Africanisation" means the ostracism or ridiculing of "non-African" knowledge or a replacement of Western knowledge, then it is unacceptable. Then "Africanisation" means ideological manipulation, conceptual engineering, and education in the service of political power and dominance. Then it is a deliberate and conscious effort to manipulate teaching and research in the interest of political goals.

It has always been my view that in their quest for knowledge, and regardless of their location, race, ethnicity and gender, students should be empowered to make informed decisions based on as many varied interpretations of a phenomenon and related theories, models and paradigms as possible.

Yet, such a view will not be acceptable to people such as the University of KwaZulu-Natal's vice-chancellor, Professor Malegapuru Makgoba. In the *Mail&Guardian* (24 - 31 March 2005: 23) he equated white men with the dethroned male baboon: alienated, quarrelsome, spoilers of the new order, depressed and who eventually become ostracised from the colony to lead a frustrated, lonely and unhappy life. He urges them to receive "treatment and proper African rehabilitation", and if rephrased, to adopt African culture as their only salvation.

He writes:

"Africans will transform and reconcile this society by ensuring that the fingerprints of their African culture, value and knowledge systems and notions of social order are embedded in and are the blueprints of a future South African society. Africans will not transform this country through previously dominant foreign rules, values or cultures. No dominant group ever transforms society through subservience and alien values. This would simply be against our primate heritage. When the English were dominant we were anglicised, when the Afrikaners were dominant we were Europeanised, now that Africans are dominant we must Africanise and not apologise for our Africaness".

Essays like that of Makgoba nullify the ideal of communication studies, namely to arrive at mutual understanding of, and respect for, each other and each other's cultures. It is

depressing in the sense that it is no different from the racist and offending human views that have characterised both Western, African and for that matter the world's history of bloodshed and delusions of power. Has our teaching helped in no way at all?

#### References

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