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## **RETHINKING AND REPOSITIONING THE UNIVERSITY AS CADRE AND ACTIVIST FOR THE POST-APARTHEID STATE: EVIDENCE FROM RURAL SOUTH AFRICA**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper investigated the role of the post-colonial-apartheid university in (South) Africa using a case study sourced from Vhembe District, Limpopo Province to back its argument. A mixed method approach blending secondary data obtained from reviewed sources, and participant interviews was used to collect data. Three (n=3) doctoral studies conducted in the area were found and reviewed accordingly. Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were held with various participant stakeholders. Collected data were recorded as field notes for analysis, and analysed using the thematic analysis method. This paper was guided by the theories of decolonization and Africanisation of post-colonial-apartheid (South) African universities. The results revealed that the post-colonial-apartheid university undermined and sidelined African indigenous knowledge. African indigenous communities were also impeding knowledge development because of their refusal to divulge information. Furthermore, universities had difficulty conducting ethical and usable research. The paper concludes that the*

*university has a role to play in the post-colonial-apartheid era provided it transforms to become relevant for the course.*

### **Keywords**

Apartheid, Africanisation, Decolonisation, University, Indigenous Knowledge, Western-Centrism

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## **1. Introduction and Background of this Paper**

Post-colonial-apartheid university in (South) Africa still perpetuates and upholds distorted Western-centric epistemological views on Africa and Africans. This university has been “intended first and foremost to meet the theoretical and practical needs of Northern societies” (Hountondji, 2009). Despite its limitations of bad intentions, this university can still play a role in the discourse of the post-colonial-apartheid state if reconstructed into the university the “new” (South) Africa needs. On this, the former president of the Republic of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki once said:

“The African universities, [including Unisa], have a special responsibility to strive to occupy the front trenches in terms of producing the ideas and knowledge, cadres and activists who will drive Africa’s effort to realise that renaissance.” (Mthombeni, 2017).

President Mbeki’s insinuations suggest and present the ideal post-colonial-apartheid university as a university with cadre-activist proposition with regards to the new era of post-colonial-apartheid (South) African development imperatives. In this context, this paper seeks to rethink and re-position the post-colonial-apartheid (South) African university in the discourse of the post-colonial-apartheid state. This paper investigates three crucial issues:

- The role of the university in the development of African indigenous knowledge
- The engagement of the post-colonial-apartheid university in research
- The post-colonial-apartheid university’s response to Western-centrism in African research

## **2. Research Methods and Theoretical Underpinnings**

This paper used a mixed method approach blending secondary data obtained from reviewed sources, and participant interviews. Three (n=3) doctoral studies that were conducted in the area were found and reviewed accordingly. The paper will refer to these studies as study “X”, “Y” and “Q” respectively. Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were conducted with specific

participants. Snowballing techniques were used to identify the key informants. Two key informants were interviewed face to face while one was telephonically interviewed. The fourth informant was an author of one of the reviewed doctoral studies. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were held with a village chief, whose village had featured prominently in the earlier studies, a local agricultural extension officer and a former political Ward Councilor. Data was recorded as field notes for analysis, and analysed using the thematic method. This paper is guided by the theories of decolonization and Africanisation of post-colonial-apartheid (South) African universities (Ndlovu, 2018; Letsekha, 2013; Maila and Loubser, 2003). Africanisation speaks to the call for the African university to focus on Africa with a commitment of salvaging what the continent lost to Western-centrism with an objective of aligning teaching and learning “to African realities and conditions” (Letsekha, 2013). Decolonisation of an African university and knowledge speaks to empowering the post-colonial-apartheid university to dislodge Western-centric paradigms of education on Africans “that have deliberately and otherwise distorted, and continue to distort, the reality of who Africans really are” (Ndlovu, 2018).

### **3. Results and Discussion**

#### **3.1 The Role of the University in the Development of African Indigenous Knowledge**

A review of doctoral study “X” revealed that the researcher could not specifically report on indigenous methods and knowledge which the farmers used in their farming. The entire document speaks to conventional methods and knowledge. However, an interview with the researcher revealed that the inclusion of such methods and knowledge were discouraged by the study promoter during the study proposal stage who advised that it was not necessary. One of the participants revealed that they had discussed issues of indigenous methods and knowledge in farming, citing an example of certain cattle diseases which farmers could treat indigenously. Also, in the feeding of the animals, farmers would resort to indigenous methods and knowledge to cope with, amongst others, stressful drought periods and high costs of purchasing animal feed. The participant was surprised that this researcher was indicating that such discussions never appeared in the study report. It shows that the farmer’s indigenous knowledge was ignored and set aside. In this case, it is not the African indigenous communities which sideline African indigenous knowledge but researchers. This result is contrary to Maila and Loubser (2003) who reasoned that African indigenous knowledge had lower status in society. This is a negativity on

this knowledge which is portrayed as being of no use on “the improvement of the quality of human life” (Maila and Loubser, 2003). This exclusion could have been motivated by preconceived ideas of the researcher on African indigenous knowledge rather than reality on the ground. In fact, Maila and Loubser (2003) corroborate this view reporting that the exclusions of African indigenous knowledge from the knowledge economy could be racial and ethnic. Some Western-centric researchers still believe that African indigenous knowledge lacks universal usage opportunities, and could therefore be only limited to providing local solutions for local (rural) people (Maila and Loubser, 2003). This explains why indigenous knowledge would not find space in the knowledge economy. “The exclusion of Indigenous know ledges from the academy leaves unchallenged space for the (re)colonisation of knowledges and cultures in local environments and contexts” (Dei, 2000 as cited in le Grange, 2004). The incorrect notion created in this study is that the farmers only used Western methods and knowledge in their farming. Contrary to what the study seems to suggest, that farmers had increased preference of Western methods and knowledge in their farming, indigenous methods and knowledge were still widely visible and adopted by many farmers in the area. Nthakheni (2006) corroborates this assertion revealing that in some parts of Vhembe District of Limpopo Province, the majority of pig farmers entirely used indigenous methods and knowledge on pig farming rather than Western methods and knowledge common with commercial pig farms.

The second doctoral study review (Study “Y”), revealed that indigenous knowledge was never delved on in that the researcher was focused on conventional methods and knowledge of the farmers. How could this researcher have studied these people without interest in what they did and how they did it remains a myth. The researcher mentions that the farmers in this study area had specific interest in keeping indigenous livestock because of their environmental adaptability. How these animals (indigenously) were managed was not of interest to the researcher Unlike the first study (“X”), study “Y” totally sidelines indigenous knowledge.

In an exciting twist, in the third review (Study “Q”), the researcher seems to have had some interest in the indigenous methods and knowledge in farming but this interest could not be pursued any further because, with regard cases of indigenous medicines used in treating animal diseases, it was rather impossible to obtain any details because participant farmers in the study were allegedly not keen to reveal information. The methods and knowledge remained a closely guarded family secret. Revealing the details was considered taboo, and it was like giving away

the family's cultural heritage meant to safeguard the livelihood of the family. This knowledge is considered sacred and only revealed to the family through ancestral connections. Luseba and Tshisikhawe (2013) have also reported similar tendencies amongst traditional herbalists and healers in Vhembe District. Looking at this behavior, it could be said that, also, some blame should be apportioned to African people themselves who refuse to cooperate with researchers to bring their knowledge forward. This conduct limits and confines African indigenous knowledge to the respective communities without exposing it to the broader user society. Misconceptions arise then that this knowledge is unscientific, local, of low status, and therefore unusable (Maila and Loubser, 2003).

### **3.2 Post-Colonial-Apartheid University and Research in African Communities**

From what the participants (Key informants and FGDs) expressed, it is evident that they viewed the university with suspicion. The participants thought that the university had a narrow focus interested only on generating “knowledge” for the researcher to earn a research degree, and other related university incentives (Francis et al., 2016). The Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) would give universities a subsidy for published work as incentive to promote and increase publication capacities of universities. Researchers and universities pre-occupied themselves with these incentives relegating the needs of society to the periphery because, universities have become entrepreneurial and market driven (Francis et al., 2016). After the research, whatever emerges is quickly smuggled out of the researched community, and stashed in university libraries that the communities could not access. Participants felt abandoned by the university which comes to them as something which would bring hope – and solution(s) to their problems, however ending up dumping the researched communities out of the process. The participants revealed that the last time communities would hear from the researcher would be during the last data collection meetings. There would be no report-back on the results of the research where the same would be made known to the participants and their communities. It is left upon the researcher to decide if further contacts with the researched communities is required, and in most cases, that does not happen. The participants viewed themselves as the main sources of the “knowledge” generated by the university, and that they were therefore the main stakeholder and contributor in the knowledge process. They lamented that this crucial stakeholder gets excluded even before the process could be completed. One respondent asked: “I would love to see where the information we give these researchers ends. What do they get? What

do we get – us the owners of the information? We get nothing, I think” The participants were of the view that the research process should be democratic and transparent. Wood and Louw (2018) support this assertion arguing that there should be “democratisation of knowledge production” (However, as to who “owns” the information remains controversial and difficult to answer. Iphofen (n.d) tries to reason this out in earlier research, however with a lot more questions than answers surfacing. It was evident that the knowledge process was still dictatorial, authoritarian and imposing in a process that solely depends on the intentions of the university with the role of the researched sidelined and undermined. This practice denies the researched “individuals the right to decide which freedoms or capabilities they need to reach the outcomes that they consider to be valuable for improving their quality of life” (Wood and Louw, 2018). The university only “window dresses” collaborative research without having it in practice. When asked why these participants thought the university undermines them, one respondent put the response in a question:

They are called researchers, and what are we? They are called universities, what are we? On this, there was interjection from the chief who retorted: Researchers represent universities; don't they know that we represent our communities? Would you believe that these people do not only “smuggle” information out of us but prized resources as well? [The researcher noted this part as crucial for a follow-up later in the discussions].

The above-mentioned statements from the participants prompted a follow-up question:

What would you – participants on behalf of communities want to see with regards to your role here?

The participant retorted: The knowledge belongs to us. We must also know where it is being taken to – and for what...you get my point? It is in fact widely believed that the researched has no determination on where the generated knowledge ends. This could be easily identified in the research process. The researcher, who is the would-be-degree earner based on the research is expected to submit to the university copies of the final research. Depending on universities, the beneficiaries to this newly found knowledge would, amongst others be the university library, the supervisors/promoters and the appointed external assessors of the final research. The researched communities are left out of the beneficiary club. The researched are excluded because they are unequal with the rest. Excluding these participants in this regard suggests that the knowledge they assisted to produce is hidden away from them. Regrettably, these communities are remote

and located far away from university libraries they would never have access to their own knowledge. One of the respondent asked:

We thought they would teach us the best way to do cattle farming since they came from the highest level of education. Sometimes we give out information thinking that one day we would read a book about ourselves and how we do our farming so that our children learn from such experiences. Instead, such information ends in big books which are taken into university libraries where that information just rots with no one from ourselves using it.

A follow-up on the matter raised by the chief earlier in discussion revealed that there were researchers who were unethical. They removed prized resources such as animal and tree species from the research stations without permission from the researched. Some of these rare tree species are later found sold in commercial nurseries in towns and cities. It appears there is use of deception (Vanclay et al., 2013) by the researcher(s) to gain access to the resources in the researched areas mimicking research while the intention is pure theft of these resources. Furthermore, the generated monies from these “loots” never benefit the researched communities and the universities but the individual researcher. This behavior compromises moral standards in research (Vanclay et al., 2013). The chief revealed that he had discussed this conduct with community members. Suggestions were that researchers who were allowed into the villages would have to be required to get exit clearance from the village leadership to ensure that resources were protected.

#### **4. Conclusion and Recommendations**

This paper explored the role which the post-apartheid university could play in the creation of knowledge in post-apartheid South Africa. A multi-methodology approach combining literature review and active participation of respondents was used. This paper found the following:

- Western-centric knowledge systems were still dominant over African indigenous knowledge because universities seem to be more interested in it than the latter
- African indigenous knowledge is ignored and received less interest in research
- Some research unearthed relevant and usable African indigenous knowledge
- Some knowledge emerging from university research gets to be archived in university libraries without any further use

- The “researched” African communities can’t access the knowledge they assisted to produce
- Universities and researchers sidelined the creators of the knowledge by not reporting and disclosing the final outcome of a research process
- Rural economies were rich with economic, livelihood and developmental resources and opportunities which could mitigate communities out of poverty but these resources lacked proper exploitations to benefit these communities
- These communities need the post-apartheid university to provide research expertise which could assist communities identify potential opportunities for livelihoods
- In some cases, research has been fundamentally unethical with incidences of theft of resources having been reported

The post-apartheid university would need to make itself relevant by:

Confronting Western-centrism by increasing visibility of the scholarship of African knowledge in universities. The decolonization and Africanisation discourse should be intensified beyond curriculum transformation. The university should unearth and develop genuine academe with interest and expertise to see this project through. Usable knowledge should be made available to communities, not stored in university archives and libraries away from the people. Universities should assist communities in identifying livelihood opportunities from their own resource bases by strengthening their community engagement strategies and approaches. Ethics in research should guide the university’s principles and values on the research process so as to enforce certain set of professional rules and conduct for researchers. Provision of feedback to the researched should be an ethical requirement, and universities should demand this be met as a matter of ethics in research.

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