African-Centred Education and African Languages

Content and Curriculum in Post-Apartheid Education and Training in South Africa

Neo Lekgotla laga Ramoupi

I want to be honest. Race is not absent from this issue, but this is not a question that pits black against white. Broadly, it is a question about curriculum transformation, and about who should be making these decisions. Narrowly, it is a question about how Africa is to be taught in a post-apartheid academy. The curriculum transformation, re-teaching of Africa in post-apartheid university, and appointments of African and black professors are, and must be at the heart of institutions of higher learning in South Africa today. It is more urgent now after we have celebrated a decade of freedom.

Mahmood Mamdani (1998) [own emphasis]¹

Wits [Witwatersrand University] must realize that the cultural ethos which apparently served the institution so well in the past must change to accommodate other cultural values. The curricula have to change fundamentally as the University comes to terms with the reality that it is educating all South Africans in Africa. Africans in particular do not come to university to escape or erase the Africanness, but to confirm and articulate their roots.

Malegapuru W. Makgoba (1997) [own emphasis]²

Introduction

The following three statements made recently about African languages provide a perfect entry point into this policy brief recommendation on African-centred education, curriculum and content. It is hoped that this brief will firstly, serve to inform the national departments of Basic Education and Higher Education and Training in South Africa in their ongoing efforts to Africanise and humanise education; and secondly, give power to the School Governing Bodies (SGBs) that

¹ Mahmood Mamdani (1998) [own emphasis]
² Malegapuru W. Makgoba (1997) [own emphasis]
are constitutionally mandated, as communities, to be part of the education of their children.

This first statement is by Blade Nzimande, the Minister of Higher Education and Training in South Africa. Nzimande said, ‘Akukwazi ukuba yithi kuyaphele ukuthi isifundu isingisi nesibhunu bakwethu, kodwa ezethu yilimi nabanye bangaZifundu.’ It was important that the minister communicated this idea and frustration in his mother-tongue, isiZulu. The minister was speaking in Tshwane at the launch of the Teacher Education and Development Plan for the next 15 years.4

This second statement was made by the leader of South Africa’s Democratic Alliance (DA), Helen Zille, in an interview. Zille said, ‘When you speak a language that isn’t your mother tongue, you understand what it means to feel disempowered. This is very important. Most English speakers never experience this. English is the norm – we expect everyone else to speak our language, use our language. It puts other people at a disadvantage. Learning another language changes the power relationship. It puts you on the back foot and makes you much humbler. It’s also a reminder of what a miracle language is.’5

This third statement was made by Herbert Vilakazi: ‘The fact that the African population can communicate in English or Afrikaans with whites, Indians and coloureds, but that whites, Indians, and coloureds, in general, cannot communicate with Africans in any of the indigenous languages of the African population, is a serious barrier to true reconciliation.’6

In order for the reader to understand these statements, it is justifiable that a context be provided in the form of an account of the roots of this research study, and of its historical background.

**Research Study Project**

This policy brief is part of the larger research project that I am conducting in the Unit of Knowledge Transfer and Skills Development in the Research Division of the Africa Institute of South Africa (AISA), entitled Deconstructing Eurocentric education: Teaching African-Centred curriculum at the Universities of Cape Town and Fort Hare: A comparative study with the University of Ghana, Legon.7

The two selected South African universities are, firstly, the University of Cape Town (UCT) and the University of Fort Hare (UFH). The rationale for selecting UCT is twofold: firstly, because of the colonial heritage of the institution; and secondly, because as a result of some authorities wanting to preserve that heritage, the Centre for African Studies (CAS) at UCT exploded into the public in 1997 concerning the topics that should constitute the African Studies programmes. This explosion stimulated questions about the lack of African-centred education in the university in the post-apartheid era.8

The second university is the University of Fort Hare, chosen for its relation to and place in the history of the liberation struggles in Southern Africa, and for the educative role it played in the leadership of those struggles and for being the the sole custodian of the historic archives of the liberation movements of South Africa.

Furthermore, I draw from my own experience of university education curricula in South Africa and abroad. The massive challenges in our education system were made acutely aware to me during my own experience of education at the various institutions of higher learning and training during my own academic education. Throughout this period I recognised that the education system that had been legally endorsed by the establishment of the Union of South Africa in 1910, with its colonial and apartheid mindset is for the most part still in place in South Africa today – 17 years after the inauguration of Rolihlahla Nelson Mandela in 1994.

**Historical Background**

In this great future, you cannot forget your past
– Bob Marley

The establishment of the Union of South Africa in May 1910 by the white settler communities of English and Dutch peoples in South Africa legally identified their languages, namely English and Dutch, as the only official languages of the Union of South Africa. According to the South Africa Act, 1909, in the Arrangement of Councils’ section of Provincial Councils, No. 137, the ‘Equality of English and Dutch languages’ states that,
‘Both the English and Dutch languages shall be official languages of the Union, and shall be treated on a footing of equality, and possess and enjoy equal freedom, rights, and privileges; all records, journals, and proceedings of Parliament shall be kept in both languages, and all Bills, Acts, and notices of general public importance or interest issued by the Government of the Union shall be in both languages.’

The importance accorded to the Dutch language in South Africa attracted large numbers of Dutch, Flemish and other north-west European farmer (in Dutch, boer) settlers, all of whom were quickly assimilated. After the colony passed into British hands in the early nineteenth century, the settlers spread into the hinterland, taking their language with them. The subsequent isolation from the rest of the Dutch-speaking world resulted in the Dutch of Southern Africa evolving into what is now Afrikaans. European Dutch remained the literary language until the early twentieth century, when under pressure of Afrikaner nationalism, the local ‘African’ Dutch was preferred over the written, European-based standard. In 1925, section 137 of the 1909 Constitution of the Union of South Africa was amended by Act 8 of 1925, stating that ‘the word Dutch in article 137 […] is hereby declared to include Afrikaans’. The new constitution of 1961 listed only English and Afrikaans as official languages. It is estimated that between ninety and ninety-five per cent of Afrikaans vocabulary is ultimately of Dutch origin.

After the South African War (Anglo Boer War) of 1899–1902 and after the British defeated the Africans in the Impi yamakhanda14, or Bambatha Rebellion, of 1906, which is generally considered to be the last African resistance to the British in South Africa at the turn of the twentieth century, the British felt confident that their government could impose the British empire on the landscape of Southern Africa. It took almost a hundred years for the African people of South Africa, assisted by the solidarity of the international community, to fight for the liberation of their country.

A free South Africa became a legal reality in May 1994, when Mandela and the African National Congress (ANC) became the first African president and political party to rule South Africa, beginning with the Government of National Unity (GNU), established by the Interim Constitution, which included the National Party (NP) and the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP).

Due to the nature of the negotiated settlement of South Africa, compromises were made to avoid civil war between the white people and the African peoples in South Africa. While the major victory of this negotiated settlement was, perhaps, the reconciliation and nation-building policies of the Mandela presidency, national education of the country was probably the area that was most unaffected by the policies of reconciliation and nation building. This was more so when it came to curriculum and content of the education of South Africa, in schools and in higher education and training.

It is in this context and content of reconciliation that Herbert Vilakazi’s statement above, pointing out that while most Africans can communicate in English or Afrikaans with whites, Indians and coloureds, but that the reverse is not true, is most relevant. The same message came out of the speech above by the Minister of Higher Education and Training. In that speech, Nzimande added, ‘One of the things we are looking into is ... to what extent should we consider that every university student in South Africa must at least learn one African language as a condition for graduating’.16

That same day and for a few days later, the media, including radio talk shows such as 702, had their listenership calling in support for or in rejection of the Minister’s future plans about African languages in the institutions of higher learning and training. For example, the day after Nzimande’s speech, Alana Bailey, Deputy CEO of AfriForum, responded to the Minister’s proposal by stating that ‘the state should create conditions conducive to multilingualism, rather than to try and force people to learn more official languages.’17

Multilingualism as a language policy for post-1994 South Africa has been proclaimed by President Mandela and all the ministers of education from Sibusiso Bengu to the present. But the truth is that within this multilingual and multi-cultural policy, some languages and cultures are ‘more equal than others’; and it is those previously official languages – English and Afrikaans – that continue to be the de facto official languages at the expense of the African languages of the country’s majority. That is why, for AfriForum and the majority of non-speakers of African languages, ‘multilingualism’ is the preferred option, because multilingualism does not force their children to study Setswana, xiTsonga, Tshivenda, isiNdebele, and other African languages.18 From the Union of South Africa in 1910 to today, the Africans have been forced to learn, study and know English and Afrikaans.

In 1997 the Parliament of South Africa passed the South African Language in Education Policy, which states that ‘the home language of students
African people would have preferred the act to be specific and say that the one additional language must be an African language other than Afrikaans.

My research tasks in the Department of Education and Basic Education included drafting a School Governing Bodies training manual that infused the ‘values in education and human rights’ issue into the SGBs. In 1996 the Government of South Africa passed the South African Schools Act (SASA) (Act No. 84 of 1996) to deal explicitly with undoing the country’s discriminatory past and smoothing the path for an open, just and equitable system. The essential idea behind the act was to put ownership and control of schools in the hands of parents. It mandated the establishment of democratically elected community-based SGBs at every public school in the country.19

Researching for the SGB training manual, I noted that SASA, as an act and document, protects the rights of all language groups; and that one important aspect is to ensure that parents and SGBs have access to information and training in their home languages; because with their languages they bring skills, including cultural and traditional practices of the communities, to these bodies. But the experiences of African parents, their children who are learners in the schools, and African teachers is that these provisions are often just theory and information that is not put into practice. The former two official languages of pre-1994, English and Afrikaans, continue to be the two official languages of post-1994.20 The point I am labouring is that language policy remains a serious challenge to both the school system and higher education institutions.

In 2001, during the tenure of Kader Asmal as the Minister of Education, the Manifesto on values, education and democracy was workedshop and published by his department.21 In the section on Language in Education Policy in this document, Neville Alexander, who is experienced in language policy issues, is quoted as saying, ‘To be enslaved is to be silenced; while to speak truth from the heart is to speak freely the language of one’s self, one’s history’.22 One could also interpret this quotation to imply that when we are not speaking our own languages, we are enslaved and colonised.

Thabo Mbeki, who was the President of South Africa during the publication of the document, also mentions,

‘... the building blocks of this nation are all our languages working together, our unique idiomatic expressions that reveal the inner meanings of our experiences. These are the foundations on which our common dream of nationhood should be built...The nurturing of this reality depends on our willingness to learn the languages of others, so that we in practice accord all our languages the same respect. In sharing one’s language with another, one does not lose possession of one’s words, but agrees to share these words so as to enrich the lives of others. For it is when the borderline between one language and another is erased, when the social barriers between the speaker of one language and another are broken, that a bridge is built, connecting what were previously two separate sites into one big space for human interaction, and, out of this, a new world emerges and a new nation is born.’ 23

But the ideal of ‘all our languages working together’ has not been realised. Nzimande’s recent proposal about knowing an African language being a condition for graduation, if it is supported and gets passed by parliament into a bill and act, could see at least the possibility of realising this Mbekian ideal of all our languages working together. Time will tell.

The role of all our languages working together to build a common sense of nationhood is consistent with the values of ‘democracy, social justice and fundamental rights’, which are enshrined in the Constitution. The Constitution, in line with its founding provisions of non-racialism, non-sexism, human dignity and equity, not only accords equal status to all our languages, but recognises that given the marginalisation of indigenous languages in the past, the state ‘must take practical and positive measures to elevate the status and advance the use of these languages’.24

Having laboured this point, it is significant that we stress that Zille’s statement quoted above highlights the ‘dismpowerment’ and ‘disadvantageousness’ of ‘forcing’ all peoples of South Africa to speak English and Afrikaans languages. The African majority in South Africa have been feeling disempowered and disadvantaged since 1910, like all African people in the African continent from the time of their colonisation. As a result, domination of society by Western culture, including doing almost everything official and legal in the
English and Afrikaans languages, continuously disempowers and disadvantages the majority of our country’s citizens.

Our countrymen and women who do not speak any African language do not have the slightest idea what it means to be disempowered by simply speaking a language that is not your mother tongue in formal settings. For example, in a primary school setting an African child may have to write, speak and read in the language – mother-tongue – of his or her classmates. From early years in the primary schools, to high schools, to universities and to the workplace, most English and Afrikaans people never experience this disempowerment that disadvantages the majority of African and black South Africans – young and old.

The education system in the universities and schools continues to be Eurocentric, meaning that European and white values are perceived as the standards on which the country’s education system is based and rooted. Content of education is informed by European authorities and languages at the expense of African authors and African languages. In a sense the colonisation of Africa continues even in this post-colonial post-apartheid period. Decolonisation of Africa cannot be achieved under these circumstances. Education, schools and universities in African countries are the centres of cultural domination, and need to be transformed.

**African-centred Education and African Languages: Knowledge Investment that is Long Overdue**

“It was long overdue that special attention be paid to indigenous languages”
– Chris Swepu, Acting Chief Executive of Pan South African Language Board

The reality of the South African situation is that while the buzz-word from at least the 1990s was ‘transformation’ of all things, the education system in our country remained largely the same as far as curriculum and content were concerned. In 1998 the inaugural post-1994 Ministry of Justice, under the leadership of Dullah Omar, and the historic University of Fort Hare organised a conference entitled Transforming South African Universities: Capacity Building for Historically Black Universities; and the proceedings of this conference were edited into a book by the same title.

Seventeen years into our liberation, this has not changed. The 2008 Report of the Ministerial Committee on Transformation and Social Cohesion and the Elimination of Discrimination in Public Higher Education Institutions indicates this non-transformative aspect of the curriculum and content of national education in South Africa. For example, in the report the government stresses that it is concerned about reformulation of curricula for African-centred education in the universities, as well as in pre-university education. The report states categorically that the education system has not taken on board the knowledge production of the majority of its citizens who are Africans. For example, Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) continue to be mentioned in passing in the policy documents, without any indication of implementation issues. African-centred education recommends that IKS content be considered in the designing of curricula.

In place of the term Indigenous Knowledge Systems I prefer the term of the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (Unesco), which encompasses the peoples of the world: Local and Indigenous Knowledge Systems in a Global Society (LINKS), which states:

‘In all regions of the world are found local communities who have long histories of interaction with the natural environment. Associated with many of these communities is a cumulative body of knowledge, know-how, practices and representations. These sophisticated sets of understandings, interpretations and meanings are part and parcel of a cultural complex that encompasses language, naming and classification systems, resource use practices, ritual, spirituality and worldview. This local and indigenous knowledge is a key resource for empowering communities to combat marginalization, poverty and impoverishment.’

Within such a context, what may be known as traditional or local or indigenous knowledge is being addressed in a range of Unesco activities in the fields of education, science, culture and communication. These activities include research on traditional resource use, strategies and practices in land and water (including marine) ecosystems, initiatives to nurture new kinds of partnerships between indigenous peoples and multi-use protected areas, cultural dimensions of traditional knowledge and the possible creation of an international normative instrument on the protection of folklore and traditional culture, ethnobotany and the equitable and sustainable use of plant resources, synthesis and diffusion of information on local and traditional knowledge.
and capacity building and the role of traditional knowledge within today’s knowledge society.

Western and European systems are based on Eurocentric epistemology, which is steeped in Western traditions and ways of life. It thus indicates a Western view of life. On the other hand, African-centred education bases epistemology on African knowledge production, which is largely drawn from African traditions and technologies as well as other related ways of knowing.  

Decolonisation of knowledge, knowledge production, curriculum and content in our national education in Africa require a policy of African-centred education, curriculum and content. African-centred curriculum and content is defined to mean – and includes – the fact that ‘the education of any people should begin with the people themselves; that African centeredness is the placement of African people and students at the centre of human process. This is based on the belief that all humans have their physical, social and intellectual origins in Africa.

Furthermore, it does not imply that students will learn only about African issues; they will learn about other cultures, because African-centred education acknowledges the scientific fact that humanity began in Africa. Therefore, African-centred education is an approach which celebrates the culture, heritage, contributions and traditions of all humans whose origins are in Africa. This makes groundless the claim advanced, mainly by Western scholars, that African-centred education is not about ‘the universality of knowledge’ – which assumes that Eurocentric education is about the universality of knowledge.

A close reading of the current literature on African-centred education indicates that the curriculum in the post-apartheid university in South Africa has not changed to reflect the reality of a liberated African country. The country is not fully liberated from European colonialism because the country’s education system is still trapped in the Eurocentric curriculum and education system that was one of the cornerstones of the colonising project for Africa. There is still no shift from the Eurocentric education system to an education system that is African-centred in its content and focus. The content, theories and methods of the education system should be centred in the African experience of knowledge, civilization, production and pedagogy.

As Mahmood Mamdani has noted, the fact that the writings of African intellectuals were missing from the UCT African History course was a reflection of the continuing legacy of the colonial mindset. Since colonial times there has been a mindset within academia that has, in its most extreme form, regarded intellectual activity as the preserve of white scholarship and the indigene as performing mundane functions. As Mamdani puts it, ‘… [that] natives can only be informants, and not intellectuals, is part of an old imperial tradition. It is part of the conviction that natives cannot think for themselves; they need tutelage.’

The discussion by Molefi Kete Asante about ‘Africa and the origin of humanity’ below explains pointedly what we mean when we say that African-centred education means that ‘the education of any people should begin with the people themselves’.

‘In the 1950s and 1960s the Senegalese genius Cheikh Anta Diop, scientist, linguist, and historian, proposed the important thesis that Africa was not only the cradle of humanity but also the cradle of civilization (Diop, 1995). He was not the first to make such a suggestion but he was the first African scholar to defend the thesis in several provocative books including The African Origin of Civilization (1974) and the major anthropological work Civilization or Barbarism (1991). Diop’s work challenged the very heart of the doctrines of racism and the negative arguments that had been made against Africa by many European and American authors. It was Diop's contention in his doctoral dissertation at the Sorbonne in France not only that Africa was the home of humanity and civilization but that Europe had “stolen” or “distorted” much of the African record. This charge created a wave of intellectual resistance that would follow Diop for most of his life because he had challenged the idea of European superiority. Diop's arguments gained in respectability as the wall of ignorance established by decades of racist science came tumbling down. Indeed, a host of other scientists in fields as dissimilar as archaeology and linguistics wrote books and articles that illuminated the findings of Cheikh Anta Diop. Authors such as Martin Bernal, Theophile Obenga, and Basil Davidson have shown the truth of Diop's initial thesis. Indeed, Africa is the home of all living humans. Furthermore, it is source of many of the technological innovations that laid the foundation for modern industrial and informational societies. Africa stands at the very beginning of the origin of humanity. In no other continent have scientists found such extensive evidence of our origins as in Africa.”

Let us consider two examples that are closer to home – and are South African. In the first...
instance, as we express it in the mixture of the two official languages of the Union of South Africa, English and Afrikaans: ‘Local is Lekker.’ This is the poverty of language to speak’ that Mamphela Ramphele writes about in Laying ghosts to rest: Dilemmas of the transformation in South Africa.35

Ramphele talks about ‘the poverty of language to speak’ in relation to the denial of the role of the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) in the struggle for liberation in South Africa by those in power; and she makes reference to Mandela’s Long Walk to Freedom to make the point.36 This frustration is a continuing one in South Africa. The Sunday Times of 5 June 2011 carried a piece which, ironically, was a response to Ramphele’s previous Sunday article, ‘Mandela belongs to all’.37 Kenosi Mosalakae of Houghton writes in ‘We tend to invoke a fantasy Mandela’ that

“We would be in a better position in terms of ‘national’ unity if Mandela had unequivocally acknowledged the Robert Sobukwes, Steve Bikos and Tsietsi Mashininis of this world for what they did and sacrificed for the emancipation of the people rather than ignore them for not being ANC.’ 38

In order to reverse this situation so that we can have ‘the richness of language to speak’ African-centred education, ‘we need to remind ourselves that the South African Students’ Organization (SASO) under Biko’s leadership had been responsible for introducing a whole new language that challenged the assumptions of our racist society.”39

Bantubonke Stephen Biko was the most cultured activist-intellectual of our generation. His African-centred and Africa-focus writings, I Write What I Like,40 should be at the centre of curriculum and content today in pre-schools, schools and higher education training institutions. In particular, Biko’s chapter 8 in this seminal book, ‘Some African cultural aspects’, should be compulsory reading for any course and interdisciplinary study in the arts, humanities, and sciences and technologies training.

This chapter was initially a paper that Biko delivered to the Association of African Ministers of Religion and the Association of Educational and Cultural Development of the African People, at Edendale in the then Natal province in 1971. He writes

‘One of the most difficult things to do these days is to talk with authority on anything to do with African culture. Somehow Africans are not expected to have any deep understanding of their own culture or even of themselves. Other people have become authorities on all aspects of African life or to be more accurate on Bantu life. In my opinion it is not necessary to talk with Africans about African culture. However, in the light of the above statements one realises that there is so much confusion sown, not only amongst casual non-African readers, but even amongst Africans themselves, that perhaps a sincere attempt should be made at emphasising the authentic cultural aspects of the African people by Africans themselves.’ 41

My suggestion of making the writings of Biko, among others, compulsory reading in the South African education system as part of this proposal for African-centred education, was conceptualised from some of the encouraging findings of my fieldwork research at the Institute of African Studies (IAS) at the University of Ghana, Legon, in Accra in February 2011. At this institution it is a university requirement that every student who graduates has taken a course in African Studies, whether that student is studying in the medical or engineering, or arts and humanities faculty.42 The Chief Executive Officer of the Africa Institute of South Africa, Matlotleng Matlou, who is a graduate of the University of Ghana, showed me the academic transcript of his BA degree (1976–1979), which reads: ‘The student also passed an examination in African Studies: a requirement for a Bachelor’s degree course at this University’.43

What will happen when the children of all races in South Africa read and are allowed to have a dialogue with Biko’s thinking? These children who are our future will comprehend the country of their birth, or country of their settlement, better than if we marginalise African knowledge producers like Bantu Biko. When we allow Biko and his generation of the Black Consciousness Movement to become part and parcel of our education, curriculum and content, we are putting into practice the central argument of African-centred education, that ‘the education of any people should begin with the people themselves’.

The colonial and apartheid education systems have been teaching world civilisation by teaching European civilisation – as if Europe is the world. Teaching about African civilization has not been part of the curriculum and content of post-colonial and post-apartheid education.

Former President Thabo Mbeki illustrated this point in his address at the Conference of the Association of African Universities, in Cape Town, 22 February 2005:
The colonial and apartheid education systems have been teaching world civilisation by teaching European civilisation—as if Europe is the world.

As we know, Timbuktu was not only a great intellectual centre of the West African civilizations of Ghana, Mali and Songhai. It was also one of the most splendid scientific centres and contributors to the period described as the European Medieval and Renaissance eras. Its incomplete collection of books and manuscripts leaves us in no doubt as to the magnificence of its intellectual contribution.

Indeed, because of the importance of the manuscripts at Timbuktu, the governments of Mali and South Africa have established a project of restoring and preserving these priceless documents, so that as we look at the challenges facing our continent, we will be able to draw from this invaluable fount of knowledge.

After the stimulating fieldwork in Ghana, I travelled in mid-March 2011 to the Centre for African Studies (CAS) at UCT for more fieldwork research on the same theme of African-centred education. There I found African Studies, as a discipline and as a centre, under a heavy cloud of what the Concerned CAS Students referred to as the ‘destablishment’ of the CAS at this premier liberal university in Cape Town.

My fieldwork at the CAS at UCT happened at the right time. On my first day at UCT (Friday, 11 March 2011), the Mail & Guardian newspaper published an article on African Studies at the university. This article, entitled ‘UCT’s African Studies War’, reported that moves had been afoot for some time to merge the CAS department with Gender and other departments to form a new school. The Concerned CAS Students organisation had been formed in protest at the threat to CAS.

The reference by the Mail and Guardian to ‘Bantu education’ recalled a question posed by former director of CAS, Mahmood Mamdani, the distinguished intellectual of Ugandan descent who had left the university soon after his draft syllabus for a foundation course on Africa in 1997 was drastically revised by what he called ‘UCT’s liberal-academic powerbrokers’. The question he then posed was, ‘Is UCT a new home for Bantu education?’ During that period of the mid-1990s, I was writing my MA history thesis at the then University of Natal, Durban, in what is now KwaZulu-Natal; and as an emerging African scholar/intellectual, writing in a culture that was biased towards Europe, I felt deeply affected by what was taking place at UCT.

The ‘UCT African Studies War’ article became part of the CAS graduate class on 11 March, 2011, under the course module title ‘Problematising the study of Africa: Interrogating the disciplines’ (CAS-5007F), facilitated by Nick Shepherd (Associate Professor). I observed the class and was a participant with other CAS faculty members, including Heidi Grunebaum (PhD). It was such a powerful debate that ‘Week Four: 11 March 2011’ in this course outline was listed as ‘African Studies at UCT: The Mamdani debate’.

Incidentally, the faculty and graduate students whom I interviewed at the CAS informed me that the Faculty of Engineering at UCT allows its engineering students to take courses at the Centre for African Studies. CAS faculty members who evaluated this process found that students from outside the arts and humanities such as these engineering students were grateful for taking African Studies courses that, in their own words, awoke their consciousness to concerns, issues, and challenges in the arena of knowledge production, which their engineering degree would not necessarily do.

From March 2011 onwards, the Mail & Guardian in particular has published articles on this debate, including the latest contribution by Mahmood Mamdani, entitled ‘Africa’s post-colonial scourge’. This was originally a keynote address entitled ‘The importance of research in a university’, which Mamdani gave at Makerere University’s Research and Innovations Dissemination Conference in Kampala, Uganda, on 11 April 2011.

This debate surrounding the discipline of African Studies has been left to the academics and their academic freedom. The national Departments of Basic Education and Higher Education and Training have been silent on this matter of national and continental African significance. It...
is difficult to know what the thinking is within education departments, and more so within the ruling party, the African National Congress (ANC).

The Way Forward: African-centred Education Content and Curriculum

This policy brief recommendation proposal is directed specifically at strengthening the Department of Basic Education and Higher Education and Training on a national and provincial level in South Africa on the one hand; and the communities that make up the School Governing Bodies, on the other hand. This is so that, as government and communities, the leadership would be able to provide direction towards an education system with a curriculum and content that has its roots in African knowledge production and that our foundation of continental knowledge is accepted and embraced before other global knowledge production systems. The process that would be enriching for us all as South Africans in the academic, private and public arenas, would be for us all to have an honest and frank engagement with the 142 pages of the Report of the Ministerial Committee on Transformation … already referred to, which is perhaps one of the most important legacies of the previous Minister of Education, Ms Naledi Pandor. It is freely accessible on the internet.

Some of its conclusions that have relevance to African-centred Education content and curriculum include:

‘3. Costs to society in terms of social cohesion and social and economic development. In relation to the former, with institutions failing to transform and not, as merely one result of this failure, making the space of Africa a primary site for their knowledge production endeavours, higher education would not provide the leadership and the guidance to other arenas of work and social delivery, via the kind of knowledge that would be useful in dealing with the country’s endemic poverty and the attendant problems of crime and anti-social behaviour.’

In the longer term, the big question that needs to be posed relates to the role of the university in the developing context of South Africa and Africa. This question must pivot around knowledge and knowledge production. There is no doubt that the university as an institution is going to become even more crucial in terms of the social, economic and environmental challenges that the country, the region, and indeed the world are facing. What kind of university is required in this new space?

With regard to this challenge, an open relationship of trust and mutuality is required between the university, government, the world of work and the broader community. It is only through robust, critical, far-sighted and ongoing engagement that options will emerge that will come to shape the outlines of what a university of the future might look like. In practice, this focus must be on:

- Reviewing the nature of the curriculum; and
- Reviewing the relationship of the university with broader society.

In South Africa, we are good at sweeping issues under the carpet thinking that they will disappear. Nick Shepherd made this comment in the CAS lecture class on 11 March 2011, referring to the ‘Mamdani affair’ in 1996/67. In his conclusion to this affair, Mamdani said something important, and relevant to my MA struggles. I repeat this quotation:

‘I want to be honest. Race is not absent from this issue, but this is not a question that pits black against white. Broadly, it is a question about curriculum transformation, and about who should be making these decisions. Narrowly, it is a question about how Africa is to be taught in a post-apartheid academy. The curriculum transformation, re-teaching of Africa in a post-apartheid university, and appointments of African and black professors are, and must be at the heart of institutions of higher learning in South Africa today. It is more urgent now after we have celebrated a decade of freedom.’

The issues we sweep under the carpets find their way out when we least expect it. What is currently (2011) eliciting heated debate at UCT about African Studies is what Cape Town, UCT, the Western Cape Provincial Education Department, the National Department of Education and the Government of South Africa did not address back in 1997 when Mamdani made his stand. The Mamdani story was just left to disappear. But because it is such an important part of the South African colonial and apartheid past, present and future, its ghost lives on.

While at UCT for my fieldwork in March 2011 I interviewed Lungisile Ntsebeza, Professor of Sociology, who told me more about this ‘ghost living at UCT’. Ntsebeza told me that when we talk about the current situation at UCT and about its Centre of African Studies, we cannot start the
story with Mamdani, but with the internationally acclaimed South African and distinguished Professor of Sociology, Archibald ‘Archie’ Mafeje. During the apartheid era in 1968, Mafeje, who was a former graduate of UCT, applied for a senior lecturer position at the university, and because of his distinguished international academic career, he was selected on merit by the interviewing/selection panel. But before his appointment as senior lecturer was finalised, the university council was pressurised by the apartheid government not to appoint him.52

Therefore, plans for the way forward also imply that higher education and training in South Africa must revisit ‘two key incidents in the academy in the last fifteen years, namely the Mamdani Debate at UCT and what has come to be known as the Makgoba Affair at Wits’.53 These two cases demonstrated the contentiousness of notions such as the ‘public good’ and ‘social change’ in determining what counts as high-quality research and knowledge production. The former issue has already been referred to in this report. The latter requires brief mention, if only to emphasise how contested the terrain of knowledge production is and how easily struggles over ideas and intellectual positions assume a racial character.

The Report of the Ministerial Committee on Transformation states under sub-heading 6.2, Curriculum Transformation:54

‘The growing awareness of the need for higher education institutions to ‘provide intellectual leadership to society’, including the recognition in some institutions, as raised during the Committee’s visits, of a need for epistemological transformation, has not translated into any significant shifts in the structure and content of the curriculum to date. In fact, the curriculum was not discussed in most of the institutional submissions and, in the few instances when it was, it merited at best an acknowledgement of its importance and the discussion of specific but limited interventions. More often than not, where the relevance of the curriculum was raised in the context of institutional responsiveness to national goals and objectives, it tended to be narrowly defined in terms of the skills and competencies required by graduates in a technical sense, rather than a deeper engagement with the social, cultural and political skills that are essential if graduates are to function as ‘enlightened, responsible and constructively critical citizens’. This is not surprising, as epistemological transformation, according to one academic, ‘goes further than the curriculum; it is about a priori assumptions and a world view’ (NMMU meeting with staff). In this sense the curriculum is inextricably intertwined with the institutional culture and, given that the latter remains white and Eurocentric in the historically white institutions, the institutional environment is not conducive to curriculum reform.’

Conclusion

We cannot deny or ignore the fact that the university curriculum is contested – and will continue to be contested for a long time to come. It must, however, be said that in 1998 at the University of Fort Hare conference on Transforming South African Universities,55 organised in partnership with the Ministry of Justice led by Dullah Omar, a change in the curriculum and content of post-apartheid education was a critical recommendation. In the subsection titled ‘The challenge of the future’, Professor BP Banda wrote ‘Constitutional interpretation must reflect an African character in which the fundamental values are African in character and outlook. Such an African outlook will have to be achieved through an input made by black academics as well as legal practitioners’.56

I am writing today, a decade later, about the same concern. That policy change and shift from a Eurocentric focus to an African character of education has not occurred in national and provincial education in South Africa. In essence, our education, both in basic education and in higher education and training, is still colonial and ‘apartheid-ised’ in the eras that we call ‘post-colonial’, ‘post-apartheid’ and ‘liberation’.

I return to Minister Nzimande’s statement in his mother tongue, isiZulu: ‘Akukwazi ukuba yithi kuphela ekuthiwa sifunde isingisi nesibhunu bakwethu, kodwa ezethu yilimi nabanye bangazifundi’ (‘We cannot be expected to learn English and Afrikaans, yet they do not learn our languages’). The matter is not really about Africans being the only ones learning and knowing the English and Afrikaans languages while the English- and Afrikaans-speakers do not learn our African languages. The greatest concern for the African majority in South Africa is to return to the source; African languages are our sources that carry knowledge about ourselves, our arts, culture, history, heritage and traditions. That is why this policy brief calls for an African-centred education in our schools and our universities.

Furthermore, it is common knowledge that those who do not understand an African language tend to feel insecure in the company of Africans...
having a conversation in an African language. Biko talks about how it always has to be the Africans who have to make the other feel secure and comfortable by switching from Setswana or any African language to English or Afrikaans. This one-sided approach defeats the whole purpose of reconciliation and nation-building that Madiba has made perhaps the greatest investment for humanity.

Reflecting African-centred and Africa-focused education in our curriculum and its content, in basic education and higher education and training, calls for genuine reconciliation and nation building. The continuous neglect of South Africa’s African languages in the curriculum and content of education, like the special treatment of English and Afrikaans for more than a hundred years, is not reconciliation; but subjugation, conquest and denial of social justice to the majority in South Africa. We need to restore the balance.

Notes and References


3. The English translation from IsiZulu of the minister’s statement is, “We cannot be expected to learn English and Afrikaans, yet they do not learn our languages”.


6. Research fieldwork in Ghana, Cape Town and Eastern Cape (Alice and East London), was conducted between February 22 and May 11, 2011.


8. As a result of the political unrest in Bophuthatswana, especially after the failed coup d’état of Rocky Malebana in 1988, I transferred my studies to the UND.

9. South Africa Act of 1909, p. 4. This act established the Union of South Africa.

10. Ibid., p. 26. See also pp. 15, 18, and 27.


12. Ibid.


30. Ibid., p. 91.
Deconstructing Eurocentric education: Teaching African-centred curriculum at the Universities of Cape Town and Fort Hare in South Africa.

A comparative study with the University of Ghana, Legon. Current research study is at the Africa Institute of South Africa.


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Mosalakoe, K., 2011. We tend to invoke a fantasy Mandela. Sunday Times, 5 June, p. 3.

Ibid., 2008. op. cit., p. 80.

Biko, S. 1978, op. cit.

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Rampoupi Neo, Lekgotla laga, fieldwork research at the Institute of African Studies (IAS) at the University of Ghana, Legon, in Accra, Ghana, February 22–March 5, 2011.

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