

# Folklore Studies: Lynchpin for Curriculum Transformation?

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## Abstract

Towards the end of 2015, the South African Higher Education landscape experienced a number of interesting and/or frustrating events such as the #RhodesMustFall, #FeesMustFall movements, to mention a few. It is evident that within the status quo there are a multitude of challenges in the Higher Education sector, such as low completion rates within tertiary institutions, high rates of graduate unemployment, and the inability to achieve the overarching mandate—namely, to produce the relevant workforce capable of responding to the needs of the country and the continent. This article argues for the transformation of the curriculum as an instrument to address these challenges. Transformation of the curriculum subsumes Africanisation of the curriculum to make it more responsive and relevant to our situation as an African country. The ethnographic method of research was employed. The study also revealed that valuable research was conducted on folklore over the past two decades—and the analysis thereof suggests that folklore might be the lynchpin that can successfully be used to transform our curriculum and make it more responsive to the needs of our students, the country and the continent. In conclusion, the article argues that the transformed curriculum must include African lores.

**Keywords:** Africanisation; Curriculum transformation; Decolonised; Folklore and Higher Education

## Introduction

The overarching mandate of higher education is to produce a relevant workforce that would respond to the needs of the country and the continent, by equipping students to be critical thinkers. Yousafzai (as quoted by Moseneke 2016), emphasises this point when he asserts that the country is faced with so many problems, but that the solution



to all these problems lies in education only. However, despite the fact that South Africa boasts 26 public Higher Education institutions and more than 15 private Higher Education institutions, the country and the continent continue to be plagued by economic and social challenges. One may argue that our educational system is not responding to the current needs of the communities it serves. Amongst the current immediate and short-term needs are issues of social justice, in particular, addressing the past imbalances regarding the skewed educational participation. Closely linked to the issue of participation, is its evil twin sister—that is, low throughput rates. Many of those who successfully graduate struggle to find employment.

The South African higher education and political landscapes are rapidly becoming a common battleground, to say the least. Since the past three years, South Africa experienced a number of interesting and/or frustrating events and movements such as #RhodesMustFall, #FeesMustFall, the torching of schools and other public institutions, as well as an increasing number of service delivery protests, just to mention a few. Generally, one might argue that the culture of the country is generally of low productivity in almost every aspect—except in service delivery protests. There is underperformance in the educational, economic, social and political spheres. Alongside the said movements is one serious but less sung about monster facing higher education, which is the transformation of the South African curriculum.

### **What are the Issues?**

The country is at the moment facing a number of challenges, such as rapidly growing lawlessness. Crime is increasing daily, at an alarming rate, with seemingly very few successful convictions, if any. The country is experiencing an economic meltdown at such an alarmingly high rate, and the rate of unemployment (including that of graduates) is very high. Some of these challenges are common on the African continent as a whole. Universities as the conscience of the nation and producers of knowledge can, and are expected to find solutions to these problems. Tertiary institutions will have to produce graduates with analytical skills, and reflective thinkers who will be able to address the challenges that communities are seemingly unable to solve at the moment. For universities to produce these types of graduates, they have to do things differently, change their method, the curriculum and bring in new perspectives and views.

### **Methodology**

For these issues to be effectively resolved, it is imperative for one to acknowledge and understand the prevailing situation, as well as the existence of undeniable lived experiences of the concerned communities—in this case, Africans. This dovetails very well with Waghid (2004)'s line of thought—and his argument that due to lack of tangible empirical evidence to justify African beliefs, such beliefs have, in most

instances, been rejected and perhaps relegated to nothingness. According to Waghid (2004), the best way to respond to society's needs is to understand their lore and how they lead their lives. Therefore, one can argue that this is the missing link in the current higher education curriculum.

In order to consider the lived experiences of Africans, then the ethnographic approach, supplemented by the contextual theory—as advocated by Jensen (2005), are the relevant methods to be used. The ethnographic approach is relevant as it assisted this researcher to properly shed light on the experiences of Africans and their beliefs. On the other hand, the use of contextual theory assisted the researcher in linking the event and the context, so as to enable the learner to construct meaning, based on their own experiences. The argument is that at the moment, many learners are unable to associate their lessons with their experiences, thus leading to misunderstanding and high failure rates.

### **Where and how does Higher Education fit in the Picture?**

Higher education, in any country, has the responsibility of pressing forward with career processes and ultimately enable communities to achieve their goals and ambitions. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2016) buttresses this point when he asserts that universities must think, and force us to think... Reasonable expectation will then be on universities to produce a high quality and quantity of graduates. Unfortunately, this expectation remains an elusive dream to educationists.

Much has been said about the underperformance of the tertiary education system, its possible causes, as well as possible solutions. Unfortunately, an array of proposed solutions, dating to as far back as the 1930s—including Academic Literacy Programmes, Tutorial lessons, Supplemental Instruction, peer mentorship, foundation programmes and extended curriculum programmes, do not seem to be yielding the much-desired solutions. As the education system is consistently failing the nation, the country is busy and rapidly plunging into serious crises economically, socially and in virtually every aspect. It is now an open secret that the current generation is definitely losing trust in its elders, and are now taking the bull by its horns. This is clearly indicated by the current demands for free education and a decolonised curriculum. The young generation has already registered their aversion of the current inherited colonial curriculum. Several scholars such as Gumbo (2015), Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2016), Kamwendo (2015) and professional bodies such as HELTASA amongst others, have also called for the transformation of the curriculum.

History tells us that the colonialists, with a specific purpose in mind many decades ago, engineered our current educational system, including the curriculum. This assertion is supported by Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2016), who argues that universities were exported to Africa. He argues that these universities sought to introduce foreign

cultures and alienate Africans from themselves. Despite the fact that so many changes took place in the process, the country is still stuck with the same curriculum, with minor changes. Defending its stance on undergraduate curriculum reform, the Council on Higher Education (CHE) task team argues that South Africa's current curriculum structure was adopted almost a century ago, during the colonial period, and has remained largely unchanged—despite the major changes that have occurred in social and economic conditions (CHE 2013).

The colonisers prudently championed their curricula and their envisaged output was a colonised graduate and not necessarily an empowered African student. Their curriculum was used to perpetuate social injustices—hence even today Higher Education is still struggling to address the past social injustices, particularly that of producing improved quantity and quality graduates. Based on the ever-changing socio-political conditions, the current visualised outcomes should be totally different from the colonial one. It is, however, unfortunate that the country is still following the same curriculum, but with the hope of achieving a different outcome, thus making one to think of the Psalmist, who asked a critical question “How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?” (Psalm 137:4); hence, the general outcry for the transformation of the curriculum. Tiro (1972) laments the state of affairs when he avers:

We black graduates, by virtue of our age and academic standing are being called upon to greater responsibilities in the liberation of our people. Our so-called leaders have become the bolts of the same machine, which is crushing us as a nation. We have to back them and educate them. Times are changing and we should change with them.

As one reads this quotation, a few questions rattle through their mind. Some of them are:

How do academics, as leaders in their own right, respond to this statement, where they are called to greater responsibilities? Do academics really need to be backed and educated? Do academics need to wait for Pretoria High School girls to revolt before they can stand up?

Transformation of the curriculum needs rigorous engagement and serious thinking in order to make it more responsive and relevant to an African situation. “Curriculum transformation” has been a buzz phrase for at least over a decade now, as witnessed by Cloete (1999). Many institutions have been focusing on the issue, even though more focus has always been on an attempt to transform institutional cultures and very little on transforming the curriculum. Generally, basic transformation endeavours tilted towards Afrocentrism, but one can justifiably say that one of its major failures is the continued marginalisation of the indigenous values and lores.

The importance of indigenous values and lores is evidenced in the works of several scholars— amongst them are Leibowitz and Bozalek (2015), UK and American studies such as those of Gee (2014) and Street (1997). These studies indicated that academic success was somehow related to race and social class, and also suggested that universities privileged some cultural ways of being and knowing over others. Mugo (1999) also advocates for the importance of culture in education. He argues that culture and education have always occupied a very central place in the formation of the individual, his or her socialisation, as well as the overall progress of the collective.

Mphahlele (2002) echoes more or less the same sentiments when he argues that the norms and values embedded in the education system should meet the cultural needs of society.

This congenital current curriculum might be seen to be the key driver used to perpetuate and reinforce colonial point of breeding within Africans self-hatred, a profound sense of inferiority, and a culture of never questioning the master's voice. It is the type of curriculum that condemns African ways of knowing to nothingness and unscientific. The curriculum seems to portray Africans as objects and describe them in terms of others, as if they were not born into any functional Indigenous knowledge system.

Looking at the ongoing challenges, the first call for real transformation, even though not explicit, was made more than four decades ago by Tiro (1972). His Turfloop testimony is still very much relevant today. His question on how black lecturers contribute to the administration of the university can be rephrased today to ask how black lecturers contribute to the Africanisation of the curriculum. Students are still echoing his remark when he said "Here and there one finds two or three Africans who, in the opinion of students are white black men." The same observation has been made by Ndlovu-Gatsheni, who sees the current academics, produced by Westernised universities as part of the problem. He argues that academics suffer from alienation imposed on them through their education.

More than 40 years after Tiro's call, there are now increasing calls for the curriculum to be transformed, showing the truth of the scientific adage, "light travels faster than sound." Drawing on Tiro (1972), Mphahlele (2002), Gumbo (2015), Gee (2014) and Street (1997), it becomes evident that all is not well with our current curricula and the missing component is the African context. Gumbo (2015) shares the same sentiments as Vygotsky, who avers that learning should be culturally and socially contextualised. This is due to the fact that development is based on people's experiences. Based on the arguments of the scholars mentioned above, the colonial curriculum gradually but

surely eroded African norms and values. Transformed curriculum must be the one that confirms African history that was rejected by the colonial curriculum. It is therefore, important to ensure the inclusion of these norms and values in the transformed curriculum.

The argument here is that Western ideologies, in particular, capitalism, had a disastrous effect on Africans, who are generally known for their communal belief system. These two belief systems are two poles apart; as capitalism puts emphasis on self (me), while communalism puts emphasis on us. This might explain some of the perennial ailments that the country and the continent are facing—for example rapidly mouldering morals, greediness, selfishness, rampaging lawlessness and the ongoing disrespectful society. Capitalism brought with it new ways of reconstructing knowledge, while completely twisting ways of perceiving African social reality on the other hand. A number of institutions are doing everything possible to undo this evil. For instance, in psychology, as an acknowledgement of the importance of all cultures, UNISA is incorporating, amongst other efforts, African epistemology as part of its curriculum.

This aspect is important in that there is a growing pattern lately, of many students and even staff members who are being initiated as traditional healers. Our colonial curriculum never included this aspect. Thus in the past, it was strange to hear someone saying “my ancestors are talking to me.” Such a person would be condemned and categorised as being psychotic. Based on the foregone discussion, it becomes clear that curriculum transformation is long overdue, but that it will only be relevant and responsive to the people’s needs if it is located within the community it is supposed to serve—in this context an African community.

## **Curriculum Transformation**

There has always been calls for Africanisation, using different terms and phrases, such as African Renaissance, Moral Regeneration and Reclaiming “our” identity, which resonate very well with the 2016 heritage celebrations theme.

Rather than have an Africanised curriculum, the South African curriculum was developed, and modelled in line with the Western curriculum, and must therefore, be transformed as it basically excluded, and continues to exclude the lived experiences of Africans. The debate is no longer about the need for an Africanised curriculum, but how to go about the process. Both Gumbo (2015) and Kamwendo (2015) suggest models to be followed in Africanising the curriculum. Kamwendo raises a number of questions that first need to be answered in order to come up with an effective model. One appreciates the fact that he goes on to argue for a culture of a common, shared understanding. Gumbo proposed a model for College of Education (CEDU) Masters programme at UNISA.

A closer look at the initiatives around the transformation of the curriculum reveals that there are pockets of excellence within our institutions. Different tertiary institutions are hard at work, claiming to be Africanising their institutions, including their curriculum. A careful analysis of their efforts reveals that one common strategy among institutions is the constant reviewing and tweaking of language policies, coupled with translating existing material into indigenous languages. In certain instances, students are forced to learn at least one indigenous language. All these are done in the name of Africanisation. Evidently, more needs to be done in this area. The following are some of the activities taking place in different institutions:

- As seen earlier on, UNISA has started with the inclusion of African epistemology in its offerings. The institution is also busy with the project of Africanising its curricula. One strategy as such is the translation of certain modules. While one may have reservations and fears around translations, which may stem from the concern whether the translated version will be a true reflection of the source text; it must at least be acknowledged that something is being done on the issue. One may not necessarily talk about African epistemology in this case.
- The University of Venda developed and offered an “African Civilization” module in 1999.
- The University of Fort Hare designed a Grounding Programme that was launched in 2009. This programme, known as “The Life Knowledge Action”, was to be embedded in their curricula.
- The University of the Free State developed and offered the “UFS-101” module in 2012. The University of Stellenbosch started in 2016 to offer a course titled “Teaching for Change: An African Philosophical Approach”. The course focuses on the understandings of African philosophies of education. All these attempts are acknowledged, without any prejudice, but an imperative question here will be, *In order to build on these projects, what lessons did we learn from them?*

## **Proposed Way Forward**

This researcher does not in any way, claim to be coming up with a model for Africanising the curriculum, but only suggest an approach that will definitely end with a model other than Gumbo’s. Gumbo’s proposed model is meant for a specific programme. This suggests that only a selected group of students will benefit from this model. Folklore cuts across all disciplines and at all levels—therefore, the proposed generic model in this case, should be the one that can be used across all programmes.

If quality curriculum is to be expected, the demand made by students during the #RhodesMustFall, #FeesMustFall movement and its supporters for a fee-free, decolonised education in our lifetime may not be completely met. It is possible to

achieve a fee-free education, but quality, decolonised curriculum that will produce efficient and functional graduates, who are able to respond to the needs of the community cannot be achieved overnight, and may not necessarily be achieved during our lifetime.

More often than not, we fail to resolve challenges, because we are searching for answers in places where we will never find them. For this challenge, management teams do not have answers, government does not have answers and neither do politicians. The South African Folklore Society (SAFOS) has done so much valuable research on folklore-related matters. All what is needed as a starting point, is an appreciative enquiry session to build on the lessons learnt, experiences and expertise within the society.

The kind of a transformed relevant curriculum one can think of might be a value-based curriculum that will put African social reality at its centre. One way of achieving this mammoth task is to consider including, on a serious note, African values, norms and cultures at the core of the curriculum. This is in line with Mphahlele's (2002) line of reasoning that "African culture can provide moral force if we listen to voices that echo the wisdom of our African 'ancestors.'

Such an approach will be an endeavor to respond to the call made in the White Paper on Post-secondary Education and Training (PSET), of improving and broadening curriculum relevance to include learning that is professionally and socially important in the contemporary world, and that lays foundations for critical citizenship.

Perhaps one way of attending to this social aspect might be through listening—as Mphahlele argues—to the wisdom of our African ancestors – listening in particular to the one that encourages communalism as opposed to the currently-abused and destructive capitalistic belief. This could easily be done by, amongst other things, using African languages as a vital ingress into any culture. Given the power of language, one cannot downplay the fact that given one's own personal experiences and understanding of the worldview, language and culture can also be maliciously used.

### **Listening to the Ancestors through Languages**

The idea of an extended family is central to Africans; as opposed to the Western idea of a nuclear family. One may be pardoned to think that the idea of a modern nuclear family is creating untold miseries, and contribute to the high rate of divorce in recent times. It must be borne in mind that divorce is now an acceptable concept that used to be taboo in the past. There are indigenous wise sayings that could be used to address these ailments. Experiences have shown that language teaching can enhance efficient learning, as long as it is not taught separately, and in decontextualised ways as is currently the case. If language teaching is to be used profitably, there is a need for



collaboration with other disciplines. Language teachers can no longer afford to keep language teaching services within the language disciplinary confines. It is common knowledge that in Northern Sotho, *monna ke thaka o a naba*, meaning like a bean straw, man must stretch.

Unfortunately, based on the current societal experiences and expectations, this saying is abused and interpreted differently. From the feminist point of view, the most common definition of this saying is that it encourages adultery amongst men. It is true that it can be interpreted in that manner. Important questions are: *Whose interpretation is that? What informed that interpretation? Is it the only interpretation?* It must also be borne in mind that effective education must assist the learner to be analytical and ask questions; rather than just accept the status quo.

The truth is that this is one of the many interpretations. In the African culture, this saying can be seen to be encouraging communalism, the idea of an extended family. It is considered wrong in the African culture for one to be rich and not assist one's poor neighbours. If one is rich, the poor neighbour's boys will be looking after his/her cattle. They will, in turn, benefit by getting the milk and meat during slaughter, and also ploughing their parents' fields, once the rich neighbour is done ploughing his. All these benefits would be completely free. It does not necessarily mean that the rich man will have sexual relationship with the poor woman. Thus, the saying man stretches, can also be positively interpreted in terms of material provision and support for the needy, in terms of discouraging selfishness and stinginess.

The same sentiment is also articulated in the Bible, where it is said in Isaiah 4:1 that during the end of times, seven women will cling to one man. Just like the African saying about one man stretching, one possible meaning of this saying is that it encourages communalism and does not necessarily make any reference to sexual relationships. The current practice is that wives own husbands and vice versa, but this saying actually presupposes the absence of private ownership as it was practiced amongst Africans. This discourages the idea of only looking out for oneself, while disregarding a neighbour, who is in need.

If this was something that was practised now, the country would definitely not be experiencing the current crisis as in service delivery protests, and students who are supposed to be in class, but are currently on the streets fighting for what they have been promised—access to free education. They are very clear, and rightly so, that you cannot come now and tell us that there is no money amidst the current level of corruption taking place, not only in the country, but generally on the continent. A careful analysis of the root of this corruption is greed and selfishness.

If men were really stretching, as it was the case in the past, students would not be destroying property, but rather protecting it, like the poor neighbour's children, who are benefiting from it. If men were really stretching as it was the case in the past, more than 30 schools in Vuwani and elsewhere would not have been burnt, as a result of this barbaric act. Generally, people only destroy things that are no longer useful to them, things that they cannot benefit from. If men were really stretching, being fathers to all the fatherless children of neighbours, many such figures would have received love and material provision. There would have been no reason for students to take to the streets.

Unfortunately, this is no longer the case. Many are without food, fatherly love, guidance and care, while their neighbours are rich and do not even bother to help. Children get used to the idea that people only look out to themselves, and regard this as the only way of life—thus they learn to be on their own, and to fend for themselves. When they steal stock, break into houses, destroy property, rape and even kill, they don't even think twice—because many of them have never experienced that love, and were never taught to respect one's property. They are further aware that 90 per cent of the times they may not even be prosecuted. In cases where men stretch, the tribal *kgoro* (“royal court”) will always be there to administer discipline. At the tribal *kgoro*, there are no excuses of getting away with murder on the basis of technicalities. That was probably done with the understanding that every child belongs to every adult person. Thus, children must be taught from an early age that men must stretch in a true sense of the word, and must do it for a good cause, and not for selfish reasons.

The saying *monna ke thaka o a naba* could in one way or another, be used to inculcate African norms in the curriculum, to emphasise the idea of communalism. It is never going to be easy to change the mind-set of society—learners and students included, regarding the saying—that it should not be understood to be perpetrating the abuse of women and encouraging the immoral and loose sexual behaviour that is rampant in society today. This is because experience is always the best teacher, and students are likely to understand the lessons better when they have encountered that reality in the lives.

The same experience can be used to benefit learners in all other subjects. Academics in tertiary institutions are better equipped to shape the community, and probably the development of the economy. Academics have the right to amend, influence and develop their own modules. Unfortunately, there seems to be a common trend in academia of going out to conduct research, come up with findings from foreign countries, and implement them raw as they are in the curriculum. This might be the reason why Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2016) believe that academics are part of the problem.

It is important to use both language and real African experiences to enhance and come up with a transformed curriculum. An example can be given in terms of Maths. Some schools are currently using Singapore Maths. What is interesting is that even though there is so much in common, it is still called Singapore Maths. What message is being sent to African learners? And what lessons are they being taught? How are we different from the black academics, whose position Tiro questioned in 1972?

Another example is a popular joke about a Maths teacher currently trending on social media. In her class, the teacher was teaching about subtraction. She wanted to be innovative and use learners' experiences to facilitate the lesson. She asked them: "There are five sheep on the other side of the road. A car travelling along that road was approaching and one sheep managed to cross the road. Now the question is: 'How many would be left on the other side of the road.'" She discovered to her dismay that the logical answer is zero and not four. Shepherds and people who have travelled to rural areas are aware that the nature of sheep is such that if they are next to the road, and one of them crosses the road, they all follow, irrespective of the impending dangers.

One well-known story is that of a young shepherd who used to look after his rich father's sheep from a young age until he was 10, when he went to school to enrol for Sub A and was in the same class with mostly seven-year-old kids. The father had over hundred sheep. Unfortunately, in the classroom this boy struggled to count up to 10, and because of his age, he was always teased and condemned to be less intelligent, and that he is only "Ambag" (technical) school material, as technical schools were deemed to be useless places in the past for learners who were not gifted. The boy ultimately dropped out of school. An important assumption is: If the boy used to look after his father's sheep, and would know when one out of over 100 sheep was missing, then surely he had a way of counting them. It therefore, stands to reason that the same method he used to count the sheep, could have been adapted and used to teach him how to count from one to 10 in the classroom.

### **Build on Existing Structures**

Based on the existing different pockets of excellence in different institutions, there is a need to come up with a generic model that will inform further endeavors in this mammoth task across all disciplines. One common mistake that is currently happening is that of thinking that African norms can best and successfully be taught by language teachers, and using indigenous languages only. Existing challenges and successes from the current projects should serve as basic building blocks. Many institutions are currently struggling with language policy issues, and some are now in and out of the courts of law defending their decisions on institutional language policies that are, truly speaking never implemented. What lesson can be learnt from this process?

The problem compounding to unemployment and overcrowding in universities could be solved, moving forward, if, with the dawn of democracy, we can stop throwing the baby with the bath water. For instance, our curriculum discontinued handwork from lower grades at primary school. In the past learners used to produce cultural artifacts. This can serve as one way of encouraging Proudly South African products. Handwork was an important component of developing the learner as a whole, and its re-introduction into the curriculum might reduce the high rate of unemployment. It does not make sense for technical colleges to issue out a tender for a locksmith (as it happened recently with one technical college), when our technical colleges are supposed to be training locksmiths and giving them practical work. Is this not one way of saying we don't have confidence in our own products? How then, will learners be able to secure employment out there?

Due to the current economic status of the country, universities as producers of knowledge are morally expected to help improve the lives of the people they service. Any plan that is put on the table must be worth every cent. Therefore, the proposed model should be a well-planned credit-bearing model that will attract DoHET funding. A good example to follow here is the current Extended Degree Programme that evolved over a period of two decades in some South African public universities, and was first funded in 2005 on a fixed- triennium funding period.

## **Conclusion**

Covey (1989) always advises to always begin with the end in mind. In this case, the end is very clear—that is a transformed curriculum that will locate African experiences and the environment at the centre stage—a curriculum that will be responsive to the needs of the country, a curriculum that will enable education to make sense to the learners and other consumers of knowledge in the country and the continent. Such a curriculum will respond positively to the second part of the #RhodesMustFall, #FeesMustFall movement; that is the decolonised quality education. Such a curriculum will involve rigorous discussions so that all participants can have a shared understanding of what it entails. This will also be a way of allaying fears raised by Ndlovu-Gatsheni about the current crop of academics. It must be noted that Africans do not live in isolation but co-exist in a global society that directly affects them. Curriculum transformation should, therefore, accommodate such circumstances. This study concludes by arguing that the inclusion of African lores will go a long way in resolving major problems on the continent.

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