

Dennis Masaka *Editor*

# Knowledge Production and the Search for Epistemic Liberation in Africa

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# Chapter 9

## Africanising Institutional Culture: What Is Possible and Plausible



Thaddeus Metz

### Introduction

One central facet of the ideal of transformation in South African higher education institutions (HEIs), at least for many self-described adherents to that idea, is Africanisation. Africanisation, in part, involves admitting African and other black students into academic programmes and hiring non-white staff as academics and managers. However, I do not investigate such practices, since they have received more critical analysis, and are by and large less contested, than the other major part of Africanisation that I explore. It concerns not which people are included in HEIs, but which norms are accepted. In this chapter, I expound and evaluate arguments for the view that HEIs in South Africa and societies with similar backgrounds have been and still are under a moral obligation to Africanise their institutional culture.

There is as yet in the literature no comprehensive discussion of whether, why and how to Africanise norms in higher education, that is, no thorough account of the different forms it could take, the competing rationales for them, and their strengths and weaknesses. Such a critical and philosophical analysis, in the light of a wide array of written works, is what I aim to provide in this chapter. I end up distinguishing stronger and weaker versions of Africanisation with regard to institutional culture, and maintain that there is good reason to think that a moderate version should have been adopted by South African HEIs and should still be.

I begin by describing what those who explicitly advocate ‘Africanisation’ with regard to academic norms have by and large meant by that term (section “[What Africanisation Is, or Rather Could Have Been](#)”), focusing principally on writings by those based in South Africa, including Catherine Odora Hoppers, Malegapuru William Makgoba, Gessler Muxe Nkondo, Mogobe B. Ramose, Siphon Sepe and

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Lesiba Joe Teffo (from the first generation of post-apartheid black academics). Next, I analytically distinguish and critically evaluate five fundamental rationales that these and other thinkers have proffered for such Africanisation (section “[Exploring the Rationales for Africanisation](#)”). In catchwords, these defences of Africanisation appeal to: relativism, democracy, redress, civilisation and identity. I point out that the sort of Africanisation that might be appropriate for South Africa and other post-independence African countries differs radically, depending on which of the above rationales is accepted. For example, relativism entails that anything Western or more generally non-local is out of place here, whereas the logic of compensatory justice entails that Africanisation should proceed only until such time as reparation is effected, after which it would no longer be justified. I also provide a critical discussion of the major rationales, investigating which ones are most plausible, and concluding that some arguments for a moderate sort of Africanisation merit serious consideration and probably acceptance. Specifically, considerations of redress, civilisation and identity together make a strong philosophical case for much more Africanisation of institutional culture than there has been up to now in South Africa, and they probably have implications for related epistemological and pedagogical struggles elsewhere in the world, particularly in the Global South.<sup>1</sup> I conclude by summarising the findings and by raising some practical implications of the most promising rationales for making academic norms substantially African (section “[Conclusion: How to Africanise](#)”), noting that the issue of how best to deal with prima facie impediments to Africanisation, such as academic freedom, merit thorough discussion in another forum.

## What Africanisation Is, or Rather Could Have Been

In this section, I explain in some detail what I mean by ‘Africanisation’, as it, much like its companion term ‘transformation’, has been used in a variety of ways in South Africa. One major reason for thoroughly exploring the sense of the term is to obtain clarity about what precisely is at stake in debates about Africanising institutional culture, but another is to dispatch along the way objections to it that are based on an implausible understanding of what it involves.

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<sup>1</sup>For discussion of how higher education should avoid, and respond to, oppression of aboriginal peoples in New Zealand and the Americas, see, e.g., Andreotti et al. (2011); de Oliveira Andreotti (2012). In this chapter, I focus on issues of Africanisation in particular, paying close attention to what self-described ‘Africanists’ say about it. Such is plausibly required to give the concept of Africanisation its due, particularly given how large the literature on it is and how distinct the experiences and perspectives of sub-Saharans are likely to be.

## *Two Misconstruals of 'Africanisation'*

There are more than a few who would immediately reject Africanisation of institutional culture as an ideal, not on grounds of liberalism, the usual suspect, but rather because it allegedly suggests essentialism. For some, to use labels such as 'African', 'sub-Saharan' and the like implies a fixed and distinct nature (see, for example, Parker 2003; Horsthemke and Enslin 2005). According to this perspective, when one calls something 'African', one is presuming that it is unique to, and exhaustive of, that part of the world, whereas it invariably not only can be found outside it, but also will not be found everywhere in it. And beyond the descriptive error, proponents of this line of thinking usually have a normative concern in the background, that in calling something 'African' one is cramping the ability of those who live in Africa to choose their own ways of life.

I have routinely encountered these concerns from social scientists in southern Africa, but I submit that my colleagues are the ones who are misusing language, not those who speak of things 'African'. When English-speakers use geographical terms to characterise a property, they usually do not mean to posit something fixed and distinct. The combination of markets, science and Constitutionalism is, throughout the world, routinely called 'Western', although one will find it in Japan and Australasia, and will fail to find it in the Amazon jungle. Baseball is 'American', though the Cubans are well known for playing it, and many Americans prefer to play and watch football, basketball or even ice hockey. Maple trees and syrup are 'Canadian', but you will find plenty in Vermont and none, I presume, in the northernmost parts of Canada near the Arctic.

These and myriad other examples suggest that geographical terms are aptly used when they pick out a feature that is *salient* in the given region, that is common there in a way it tends not to be elsewhere. Hence to call something 'African' or 'sub-Saharan' implies neither that it is to be found only below the Sahara desert, nor that it is everywhere in that locale. Again, these terms signify merely that something is particularly frequent or noticeable there, not necessarily something that is single or static (cf. Suttner 2010: 523–28). Or at least that is the way I elect to use them.

Hence, to speak of 'Africanisation' does not commit me to looking for features that make such a transformation utterly distinct from Western, Chinese or any other cultural processes. Instead, it means pointing out features characteristic of indigenous black peoples below the Sahara desert and of contemporary ways of life that are or could be informed by their worldviews and practices. Africanisation might not be appropriate or justified, but not, I maintain, because it is essentially essentialist, even if a few of its self-described adherents appear to be (such as, it appears, Teffo 2000).

Here is another reason for rejecting Africanisation that can be dismissed for being grounded on a misconstrual of what it involves. Some might suggest that Africanisation is not to be taken seriously because it would require taking on *all* salient facets of sub-Saharan education or culture more generally, which would undercut any plausible understanding of a university's mission in a constitutional



democracy. For example, it does appear that much of traditional African education was gendered, meaning that the content of what one could learn was determined by one's biological sex (Adeyinka and Ndwapi 2002: 19; Adeyemi and Adeyinka 2003: 432). Since a sexist approach to education has no place in contemporary South African society, Africanisation is to be rejected straightaway, so this sort of objection goes.<sup>2</sup>

However, virtually no self-described proponent of 'Africanisation' believes that it would require patently unjust or otherwise undesirable features of sub-Saharan ways of life to be taken on board. Instead, implicit in the discussion is usually the presumption that only the (particularly) attractive features of African norms should be adopted.

There are of course some Africanists who have romantic understandings of what pre-colonial life was like and contend that anything undesirable was an importation from other cultures and so is not really African. The bad breath of ideology wafts from such people's mouths. However, one need not buy into the 'Myth of Merrie Africa' in order to make *prima facie* sense of Africanisation; one can grant that there have been both good and bad salient features of indigenous African ways of life, and then maintain that what is meant by 'Africanisation' is a process of transforming universities so that more of the good ones are exhibited.

### *Africanising People v Africanising Place*

I noted above that by 'Africanisation' I am not fundamentally interested in the racial and ethnic composition of students and staff. As is well known, Africanisation, and transformation more broadly, had for about two decades largely been reduced to the admissions, hirings and promotions of black people. One plausible explanation of why this reduction occurred had been government's drive for public accountability and university councils' and managers' interest in demonstrating their performance (Lange 2013). It is easy to measure the percentage of Africans in a classroom or workplace, and hence to demand that quotas are filled and to demonstrate that they have been. It is, in contrast, much more difficult to quantify, and hence publicise in sound bites or tick off in a brief performance review meeting, the Africanisation of institutional culture that I explore in this chapter. From now on, by 'Africanisation' I mean only the latter consideration, regarding the way things could be done in an HEI, and not who does them.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>For similar objections, but different sorts of responses to them, see Makgoba (1998: 51); Seepe (1998: 63–4).

<sup>3</sup>Hence by 'Africanisation' I mean precisely the opposite of what Prah (2004) does. By the way, I of course recognise that if some kind of Africanisation of norms were appropriate, then promoting it would probably require some substantial presence of African people. However, it also (nearly) goes without saying that merely hiring African people would be unlikely to ensure Africanisation with regard to norms. Both points are by now banalities in Africanist analyses of higher education.

## *Content*

In spelling out what it would mean to Africanise a university's institutional culture, in the following I distinguish between content, extent and implementation. I first indicate different functionings in a university that could be Africanised, then discuss the degree to which they could be, and finally the manner in which they could be. After distinguishing these three facets of Africanisation, I round out the section by articulating stronger and weaker versions of it.

With respect to content, there are five central dimensions by which a university, which I take to be a representative HEI, could Africanise its functionings: curriculum, research, language, aesthetics and governance. I use the phrase 'institutional culture' to refer to all five elements.<sup>4</sup>

With respect to curriculum, are students being taught characteristically African perspectives and approaches as well as texts written by Africans? Is a music department teaching indigenous forms? Is a philosophy department instructing sub-Saharan thinkers? Is a sociology department addressing African societies? Is a history department exploring unknowns about the past below the Sahara?

One might suspect that such questions are appropriate only for the humanities and social sciences, but it is worth considering what Africanisation could realistically mean in the contexts of the hard sciences and maths (on this, consider Seepe 2000). One prima facie attractive 'African' approach to maths might be not to do it in the abstract and in an isolated classroom, but rather in the context of, say, designing something that would benefit a village or township.<sup>5</sup>

Local readers will know that such pedagogical approaches had not been frequent, even if there are now more of them since the 2015/16 student protests. The well-known 'racism report', commissioned by South Africa's Minister of Education and composed by Crain Soudien and several leading figures in higher education policy, briefly addresses the Africanisation of curricula and is bleak about progress that had been made on this score (2008: 91–4, 117). In an overview of the report disseminated to the public, Soudien and his cohorts remark that 'the transformation of what is taught and learnt in institutions constitutes one of the most difficult challenges this sector is facing' (2009). The report's authors find, as did many other black scholars ten years prior (for just one example, see Jansen 1998: 109, 110–1), much instruction to be decontextualised as well as not directly engaged with African perspectives.

Anecdotally, while it is clear to me that departments such as history, sociology and development studies routinely focused on sub-Saharan concerns, I doubt that many other disciplines systematically did until recently. Certainly in my field of

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<sup>4</sup>For a thoughtful sociological analysis of the way the phrase 'institutional culture' gets used in South Africa, see Higgins (2007).

<sup>5</sup>I lack the space to defend the 'Africanness' of such an approach, but refer the reader to Adeyinka and Ndwapi (2002) and Adeyemi and Adeyinka (2003), who discuss the salient communal and utilitarian dimensions of traditional African education.

philosophy, African ideas and sources had been eclipsed by the presentation of Anglo-American and Continental perspectives in most major departments. And, for all I can tell, it was not unique in that respect. To what extent have lecturers in psychology seriously explored collective conceptions of the self and relational perceptions of the world, more prominent in Africa than in the West? How often have lecturers in political theory engaged with sub-Saharan conceptions of democracy (on which see below)? What percentage of classtime have lecturers in journalism devoted to addressing obligations that an *ubuntu* ethic might entail for reporters or a publishing firm? Having been a part of South African academe for more than 20 years, I submit that rough answers to such questions are clear.<sup>6</sup> Note that Africanisation need not imply that such perspectives are correct, should be presented as such or should be the only ones critically discussed; in the first instance it simply calls for not ignoring them, which they largely had been prior to the FeesMustFall movements.

Turning to research, the issue is of course to what extent African theoretical perspectives are studied, used and advanced and African issues are addressed. Questions paralleling those about the curriculum can be posed about research. One may reasonably surmise that Africanised scholarship had fared worse than that of teaching; after all, if instructors were generally not extending themselves to learn about and teach African approaches and issues, then they surely were doing so even less when it comes to what they publish. There have been many conferences, centres and chairs established since the transition to democracy devoted to issues of race, identity, justice and the like, which Soudien overviews (2011: 23–7); however, based on his familiarity with the research landscape in South African universities, he concludes, ‘South African contributions, I suggest, are dominated by ideas of modernism and modernity. They have difficulty in working with knowledge forms and knowledge claims which fall outside the particular modernist imagination’ (Soudien 2011: 17; see also Suttner 2010: 525–6).

I submit that even modernist approaches could have been much more systematically applied to African contexts in revealing ways. For instance, one finds no thorough attempt to empirically ascertain what kernels of truth there might be in traditional medicine. Scientists in South Africa have a terrific opportunity to sift through indigenous peoples’ knowledge of herbs and plants in search of those that are demonstrably efficacious (a point made by Vilakazi 1998: 73). Of course some of this work is being done, but not in earnest, and often enough it is being done by Big Pharma. For another respect in which traditional medicine begs for empirical study, consider what economists might learn from the fact that typical traditional healers do not demand payment from patients unless the latter are happy with the service they have been provided (Leonard 2009).

A third possible locus of Africanisation in an HEI such as a university is its mediums of communication, especially the languages that are spoken and written. The

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<sup>6</sup>Which is not to say that systematic empirical enquiry into what is being taught and how would not be worthwhile.

more that students learn in an indigenous sub-Saharan language, and the more that university affairs are conducted in it, the more African the university's institutional culture, in one major respect. It is well known that an overwhelming majority of instruction at universities has been conducted in English or, until recently, Afrikaans. Writing in 2001, the Council on Higher Education noted,

Of the 21 universities, 16 use English as the language of tuition. In the other five institutions, English-medium tuition is steadily and often rapidly increasing alongside, and perhaps at the expense of, Afrikaans-medium tuition . . . Of the universities that returned the questionnaire on which the survey was based, hardly any can be said to be promoting the use of any African language as a Language of Tuition (2001: 4).<sup>7</sup>

Since then, the use of English has increased substantially, including at the University of Johannesburg (formerly the Rand Afrikaans University) and, to somewhat lesser degrees, at the Universities of Pretoria and of Stellenbosch. And since then nothing notable has happened with regard to use of African languages, save for the University of KwaZulu-Natal's policy of requiring all undergraduates to have learned some Zulu by the time they graduate and some very sporadic efforts at Rhodes University and the University of Limpopo (on which see Beukes 2015).

A fourth important dimension of Africanising institutional culture could concern aesthetic issues, by which I roughly mean those designed to touch the senses in ways that are expected to please others, to prompt reflection on their part or to express oneself (and often all three). Which kinds of music are played at university events? Which cultures inform the university's symbols it displays in its advertising or its academic gowns? What sort of entertainment is there in a university's residences? Where have the rituals at a graduation ceremony come from? What kinds of food are served? What kinds of clothes may be expected to be worn? In a fairly notorious newspaper op-ed (Makgoba 2005), the long-time Vice-Chancellor at the University of KwaZulu-Natal discussed these facets in blunt terms:

It should therefore become common sense that the white male soon learns to speak, write and spell in an African language; that he, like Johnny Clegg, learns to dance and sing like Ladysmith Black Mambazo. He should learn kwaito, dance like Lebo, dress like Madiba, enjoy eating 'smiley and walkies' and attend 'lekgotla' and socialise at our taverns.

To the extent that non-Africans participated in these ways of life—or indeed even Africans themselves did!—in a university setting, there would be a greater dimension of Africanisation of institutional culture.

While one occasionally encounters African colours and shapes in a university's symbols and indigenous songs or at least rhythms from university choirs, that is about all that readily comes to mind. The manners of dress at both formal and informal events, the types of food and drink largely sold in student centres and offered at events, the kinds of background music played at graduations and award ceremonies, and the architecture in which one is housed on campus have been little different from what I encountered when at a variety of academic institutions in the United States.

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<sup>7</sup>See also Ministry of Education (2002: 7).

A fifth facet of academic life that admits of Africanisation is the way that decisions are made and enforced. Who decides how a given department, faculty and university as a whole is run, how are the decisions made, and how are refusals to carry them out handled? Are there salient decision-making processes in the sub-Saharan tradition that are attractive and should inform university practice? What sort of boundaries does a university have with respect to its neighbourhood, and how are they secured?

Consider, for example, that African political philosophers have argued that pre-colonial sub-Saharan societies tended to make decisions consequent to some kind of consensus, either among all affected adults or a group of elders, and that the search for unanimity is worth undertaking in contemporary political settings (Wiredu 1996: 172–90; Ramose 1999: 135–52; Teffo 2004). More familiar, because of the influence of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, is a characteristically sub-Saharan approach to conflict resolution, in which the aim is to reconcile offenders (such as, say, those who have plagiarised) and victims (and those who identify with them), and not in the first instance to deter prospective offenders from misbehaving or to seek retribution in the form of an 'eye for an eye'.

Might an Africanised management be one that consults widely or at least with a group of elected senior academics or university representatives more generally, rather than decides unilaterally? Perhaps the idea of an Institutional Forum started out with such an aim, but the evidence is that it has not been realised (on which see Soudien et al. 2008: 108–9). Could an Africanised Senate be one that seeks unanimous agreement, or at least some kind of supermajority on key issues? Should a university's approach to student infraction typically involve a kind of sub-Saharan restorative justice, with productive burdens imposed, as opposed to penalties such as deregistration, fines or expulsion? Unlike other facets of Africanising institutional culture, I am not aware of the extent to which any university in South Africa has tried out these approaches or any others grounded on salient African norms.

As is often remarked, the phrase 'institutional culture' is vague. I submit that it is well understood as picking out all five of the elements of curriculum, research, language, aesthetics and governance. For the sake of this chapter, a university's institutional culture counts as more Africanised, the more these five elements are imbued with (desirable) features salient in the sub-Saharan tradition.

### *Extent*

So far I have spelled out Africanising institutional culture as it concerns the content of what is or could be done at a university. Another issue is how much it should take place. According to some, radical views, there ought only to be Africanisation in South Africa's universities. Relatively few theorists of Africanisation have favoured

that sort of approach.<sup>8</sup> Usually the suggestion is that Africanisation should proceed alongside other cultural approaches in a dialogue of mutual enrichment. However, there remains the issue of whether African norms should be the dominant ones, and, if so, to what extent.

### *Implementation*

More controversial is the issue of how the Africanisation of institutional culture ought to be promoted. Here, one can distinguish between, on the one hand, the normative force that university leaders and members generally ascribe to Africanisation, and, on the other, the coercive force that should back it up.

In terms of normative force, managers, staff and students might think of Africanisation as: *permissible*, something that *may* morally be done but that need not be; *praiseworthy*, something that *should* morally be done and that, while not wrong not to do, would be ideal to do; or *required*, something that *must* morally be done and that would be wrong not to do. Most self-described adherents to Africanisation would favour the spread of the latter two approaches. Indeed, more than a few favour the view that Africanisation is an ethical necessity and would be delighted to see universities express the same.

Now, just because something is a moral requirement (or believed to be) does not necessarily mean it should be an enforceable requirement. That is, even if one supposes, for the sake of argument at this point, that academics and administrative staff have an ethical obligation to Africanise institutional culture, more argument would be needed to demonstrate that they should be forced to live up to that obligation. It might be, after all, that academics and other staff have a ‘right to do wrong’, as it is known in Anglo-American political philosophy; even if they would be wrong not to Africanise voluntarily, it could be that senior managers would *also* be wrong, and perhaps even wrong to a greater degree, to *make* them Africanise by withdrawing privileges, issuing threats and imposing penalties in response to failure to do so.

Hence, a separate issue with regard to the implementation of Africanisation is which mechanisms should be used to foster it. Here, it is useful to distinguish between policies that would merely *permit* Africanisation, that is, would not interfere with its realisation by members of a university; those that would *encourage* it, say, by seeking to come to an agreement about its promotion or by offering incentives; and those that would *require* it on pain of some kind of sanction. Resolving this issue raises tricky matters regarding institutional autonomy and academic freedom, which I only briefly discuss in the conclusion of this chapter.

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<sup>8</sup>But see Lebakeng et al. (2006: 77), who do advocate ‘jettisoning’ Western perspectives and Murove and Mazibuko who compare Eurocentric standpoints to HIV, a virus that must be eradicated (2008: 104–5), and to a ghost that must be exorcised (2008: 108). Cf. van Wyk and Higgs (2004: 201).

### ***Strong, Moderate and Weak Versions of Africanisation***

In the light of the above analysis, it is useful to think of the Africanisation of institutional culture along a spectrum of possible manifestations. At one extreme would be a strong or robust form according to which academic norms at South African HEIs should be only African, they should be African along all the dimensions of curriculum, research, language, aesthetics and governance, they should be considered morally required, and ministers and managers should back them up with force. The prospect of this sort tends to terrify white folks (especially 'liberals').

At the other extreme would be a weak form of Africanisation according to which it would be deemed permissible and hence permitted, but would not be encouraged by the powers that be. Africanisation with regard to curriculum, research, language, aesthetics and governance would be left to the haphazard and voluntary inclinations of particular individuals, managers and institutions. This pretty much described South Africa until FeesMustFall, which had gravely disappointed many black folks (and even liberals!)

In between these two poles would be a moderate form of Africanisation. Here, academic and administrative staff would deem it morally ideal or required to Africanise on their own, with line managers facilitating negotiations about, and providing praise, incentives and inspiration for, innovative and promising realisations of it on their part. Universities would reflect carefully and systematically on how they might Africanise along all the dimensions of curriculum, research, language, aesthetics and governance, while minimising costs to other important values, including the need to pay attention to cultural norms springing from, say, Europe and Asia.

The moderate form has some intuitive appeal to me and I presume to most readers. However, my major aim in this chapter is to critically explore what *good arguments* there are for Africanising institutional culture and for which sort. In the end, I conclude that the most promising rationales are ones that entail a moderate form of Africanisation, one that would nonetheless mean substantial change for South African HEIs.

### **Exploring the Rationales for Africanisation**

Based on my familiarity with largely South African discussions of Africanisation in higher education, I distinguish five logically distinct reasons that have been given in favour of it and that are relevant to discussion of institutional culture. Recall from the introduction that I capture them under the following headings: relativism, democracy, redress, civilisation and identity. My aim in this section is to specify these different rationales, bring out their implications and explore their plausibility or lack thereof. The five rationales progress in a developmental order, from what I consider to be the least promising to the most.

## *Relativism*

Those who defend Africanisation on the ground that it is a source of ‘valid knowledges’ and similar phrasings often veer into relativist conceptions of truth and justification according to which a proposition is true or a policy is justified if and only if it is socially accepted. Relativism, or constructivism, at the core is the view that what makes something valid is that it is believed to be by a given society. And since beliefs and practices differ from society to society, there is nothing universally valid, or at least nothing that is interesting or controversial. Instead, knowledge and culture generally is appropriate relative to the context in which it originated and continues to be accepted, making African claims true in African societies, so the argument goes. Such a position is suggested by the following:

People need to accept that there is no one unique truth which is fixed and found, but rather a diversity of valid, and even conflicting, versions of a world in the making (Venter 1997: 62).

Africanisation . . . holds that different foundations exist for the construction of pyramids of knowledge. It holds further that communication is possible between the various pyramids. It disclaims the view that any pyramid of knowledge is by its very nature eminently superior to all the others (Ramose 1998: vi).

(T)he assumptions which constructed Western thought, literature and traditions are not universal but are derived from special and discreet Western experiences prescribed by special historical levels of economic and industrial development. Implicit in this perspective is that standards are not universal but contextual (Lebakeng et al. 2006: 74).

In addition, the widely used phrase ‘indigenous *knowledge* systems’ (my emphasis) seems to imply that what is local is always already true and justified, as does being suspicious about ‘hierarchies of knowledge’ (e.g., Odora Hoppers 2001: 81) and positing ‘equally legitimate locations of human imagination’ (Odora Hoppers 2000: 9).<sup>9</sup>

As is widely appreciated by epistemologists and other philosophers, but not yet sufficiently recognised by others, most of those who advance relativist conceptions of knowledge contradict themselves in doing so. The above authors are advancing controversial views that they know their readers might not already accept. They therefore are supposing that their thesis that there are equally valid competing perspectives is not *itself* merely relatively true and instead is a claim that is universally or objectively true, true regardless of whether a particular interlocutor or community recognises it or not.<sup>10</sup> Is it not a ‘fixed and found truth’ that there are a ‘diversity of valid, and even conflicting, versions of a world in the making’? Is it not to argue from an ‘eminently superior’ standpoint that ‘disclaims the view that any pyramid

<sup>9</sup>For additional apparent flirtations with relativism, see Higgs (2006); Nabudere (2006: 20); Murove and Mazibuko (2008: 110).

<sup>10</sup>In the South African context, this inconsistency has been noted by Horsthemke (2004: 584) and by Horsthemke and Enslin (2008: 214–5).



of knowledge is by its very nature eminently superior to all the others'? Is it not to appeal to a universal standard when making the claim that 'standards are not universal but contextual'? If the answers to these questions are 'yes', as they implicitly are, then the content of the doctrine of relativism (or whatever doctrine is being expressed) is implied to be false in the very process of advancing it. For most epistemologists, this sort of contradiction or self-refutation is the kiss of death.<sup>11</sup>

Even if one were willing to bite the bullet and maintain that relativist claims about knowledge can be justified merely relativistically, there would be the additional serious problem of specifying the relevant community's beliefs relative to which propositions are true. As Africanists themselves repeatedly point out, a large majority of the academic community in South Africa does not hold Africanist tenets. The logic of relativism therefore entails that any proposition in favour of Africanisation is false in relation to that community!

Third, and finally, suppose for the sake of argument that Afro-relativists were able to find a way to show that the academic community is not the relevant one that determines which beliefs are true, and that it is instead the broader society that counts. Even so, such a relativist approach to knowledge would give majorities a 'dictatorship' about what counts as legitimate knowledge or appropriate culture more generally. Relativism logically implies that *minorities are necessarily incorrect* in a given context. So, even if from a global point of view there were no way to choose between Western and African epistemologies and cultures, when in an African context the Western or otherwise non-local would have to be considered false and something to be excluded from a university's institutional culture. This direct implication of relativism is not often appreciated by those who advance it, and does not easily square with routine judgements that *some* Western perspectives, say, pertaining to physics and chemistry should be taught in South African institutions. If one believes that it is possible for majorities to be mistaken and for locals to learn something from foreigners, that is, if one welcomes fallibilism about knowledge claims, then one must reject relativism, on pain of incoherence.

These three objections lead me to conclude that some other basis for Africanising institutional culture should be sought out. Below I argue that there *are* some epistemic considerations that provide good reason to Africanise a typical South African university. However, those factors involve neither the claim that contextuality determines validity, nor that one can always already know that propositions and practices arising out of a sub-Saharan context are true, justified, valid or the like to a degree equal to those of any other context.

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<sup>11</sup> But for a thoughtful intellectual from South Africa willing to tolerate this sort of contradiction, see Cilliers (2005). Note, by the way, that if the answers to the above questions are 'no', then there is no point in having published these works and no reason for someone who does not already accept their views to do so, for they are, *ex hypothesi*, true merely relative to a given, local context. Hence, another sort of contradiction would be involved in having published them.

## *Democracy*

Whereas a relativist approach to culture is roughly the view that what a majority believes about it makes it true and hence to be promoted, a democratic approach is, in contrast, the view that the culture to be promoted is what a majority prefers. Even if majorities do not construct validity as per the relativist, they could still be entitled to determine which objective and universal truths about what exists and how to act are to be transmitted and sought out. Along these lines, one finds the following suggestion:

The largest experience in South Africa is the African experience, i.e., the experience of the African people, who form the overwhelming majority of the population of the society. Therefore, it is right and proper that this African experience should be the source of ideas and concepts . . . (Vilakazi 1998: 79).<sup>12</sup>

The appeal to democratic values in support of Africanising South African universities has not been systematically spelled out, so far as I can tell from the literature. On the one hand, advocates of this rationale could have in mind certain formal, representative procedures. Perhaps they would say that since a majority of the population has voted for the African National Congress in presidential elections, and since the President has chosen a Minister of Higher Education and Training who prefers Africanisation, Africanisation is justified. On the other hand, they might have a more informal, direct sense of how the majority should determine university norms. Maybe what a majority of South Africans want (or would say they want if asked) with respect to academic institutions is what should determine their nature, apart from the views of those whom they have elected. Either way, collective self-governance arguably demands infusing South African universities with African norms.

Upon reflection, this argument is readily seen to be a poor justification for Africanisation, in the sense of failing to give enough support to what Africanists themselves typically want when it comes to institutional culture.<sup>13</sup> Consider that appeal to democratic will supports Africanisation only so long as the majority's preferences (or those of whom they have elected) favour Africanisation. Majorities, however, can change their minds. For one, it is not obvious that most of those in South Africa in fact favour Africanisation, or would if they had to choose between it, on the one hand, and socio-economic development and jobs for their children, on the other. From what I can tell, the poor and African majority above all sees tertiary education as a ticket to freedom from poverty, and would be delighted if their children learned English well enough to participate in the global economy and bring home the bacon.

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<sup>12</sup>For closely related views, see Makgoba (1998: 46, 51, 2005); Seepe (1998: 64, 65, 68); Dowling and Seepe (2003: 44–5); Makgoba and Seepe (2004: 30, 41); Prah (2004: 103).

<sup>13</sup>For additional criticisms of an appeal to majority will to ground knowledge production, see Metz (2009a: 523, 528, 529–33).

Of course, many friends of Africanisation maintain that development can truly take place only in conjunction with mining sub-Saharan perspectives. Here, they often point to the fact that what has made, say, Anglo-American universities strong is that they have drawn on the cultures in their territories. Perhaps something similar would be true of South African universities; maybe they will foster socio-economic improvement only when their institutional cultures are informed by African cultures.

But maybe not. It might be that the sort of knowledge produced by Western universities is a function of a certain individualist culture exhibiting a distinct kind of rationalism, viz., one that is competitive, unconventional and literate and that prizes instrumental efficiency and analytic experimentation, which has not been nearly as present in indigenous sub-Saharan settings.<sup>14</sup>

In any event, the deep point is that an appeal to democratic will holds Africanisation hostage to the contingencies of what majorities want or choose. Suppose that a majority of South Africans did not prefer Africanisation. Imagine, say, that colonisation cut so deep that all they wanted were Anglo-Americanisation *en route* to economic growth. Surely, Africanists would be inclined to think that the majority *should change its mind*. That judgement implicitly shows (again, as it did in the context of relativism above) that Africanists are ultimately committed to there being a mind-independent reason in favour of Africanisation, one that majorities should come to appreciate, even if they do not already.

The next three rationales for Africanisation that I explore below are more objective in this respect. Instead of appealing to what majorities believe or prefer to try to ground Africanisation, the following arguments invoke considerations that majorities ought to take into account, supposing they do not yet.

## **Redress**

One influential argument for Africanisation appeals to ideals of liberation, emancipation, independence, freedom and similar concepts. The idea is that Africanisation is a proper response not so much to contemporary South African society's beliefs or preferences, but rather more to its history of apartheid, colonialism and related forms of oppression of Africans and black peoples generally. Such oppression was effected not only materially, in terms of, say, the dispossession of land, and politically, with respect to lack of opportunities to vote, hold office and otherwise participate in governance, but also culturally. 'The colonial and apartheid orders were not simply political and military conquests and systems of governance, but knowledge projects' (Suttner 2010: 515–16). That is, characteristic African worldviews and ways of life were denigrated and excluded from consideration in many South African universities, part of a process of 'spiritual genocide' (Vilakazi 1998: 76),

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<sup>14</sup>On which see sociological discussion of 'rationalisation' in the work of Max Weber and the 'uncoupling of the system from the lifeworld' in that of Jürgen Habermas.

‘cultural violence’ (Odora Hoppers 2000: 5), ‘symbolic castration’ (Odora Hoppers 2001: 74) and ‘epistemicide’ (Ramose 2004: 156; Lebakeng et al. 2006: 70).<sup>15</sup>

The present rationale for Africanisation is that promoting it in the context of a university’s institutional culture is necessary to counteract epistemic injustice. Africanisation could serve this function in two distinct ways. First, Africanisation might compensate for harm that has already been done. Africanisation could serve a reparative measure, correcting for epistemological and related oppression done in the twentieth century. Second, though, it might serve as a defensive measure, analogous to the way that an innocent person would fight back against an aggressor. Supposing that teachers and researchers in South African HEIs are continuing to bad mouth African cultures, or, more often, conversationally imply that African cultures are inherently inferior, Africanisation would be a way of protecting Africans from racism, arrogance and related harms.

It is worth considering whether Africanisation in South African universities would truly serve the function of paying back those wronged during the apartheid era or before then. On the face of it, only descendants of those wronged, and not those who been wronged in the past, would be the ones to receive the recognition of African perspectives. In addition, it would be a relatively small handful of descendants getting something, namely, those lucky few able to attend an Africanised university. Some other form of epistemic compensation, effected outside of the academy and its expensive books and journals, and directed toward the African public much more generally, instead appears appropriate when it comes to those who were directly wronged by, say, not having been allowed to attend university at all during apartheid.

Suppose, for the sake of argument, however, that the university is at least one apt setting in which to adopt and explore sub-Saharan ways of life for purposes of compensation for historical epistemic injustice. Or suppose that a concern to prevent racism in the present, as opposed to compensate those wrongfully harmed in the past, is the relevant basis for Africanisation in South African HEIs. Even so, the logic of the present argument cannot support the kind of Africanisation of institutional culture that most Africanists believe is appropriate.

Conceiving of Africanisation strictly in defensive and restitutive terms entails that it would no longer be justified if and when there were no longer such needs. Suppose that Africanisation proceeded for two or three decades or however long it would take to effect compensation, and also imagine that after that time there were also no longer any systematic attacks of the sort requiring a prophylactic. Then, Africanisation would stop being justified, by the present rationale. However, most adherents to Africanisation believe that it should be continued indefinitely, or at least for a much longer time than would likely be needed to end imperial dispositions on the part of South African academics and to make up for damage done. Hence, an additional rationale for Africanisation that would support longer-term

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<sup>15</sup> See also Makgoba (1998: 46–7, 51–2, 58); Nkondo (1998: 33–4); Seepe (1998: 64); Vilakazi (1998: 76); Goduka (2000: 80); Odora Hoppers (2000); Teffo (2000: 106); Lebakeng (2004).

approaches is needed, and is what the last two arguments under discussion promise to provide.

## *Civilisation*

A fourth major argument for Africanising the institutional cultures of South African universities appeals to what has been associated with talk of an ‘African renaissance’. The basic idea is that sub-Saharan ways of life should be mined with the aims of revitalising African civilisation and thereby making a contribution to humanity’s progress.

What do indigenous peoples know about the uses of certain plants and other aspects of the environment? What beliefs about the workings of nature do they have that are true and justified? How do they characteristically perceive reality, and how might such perceptions inform more theoretical pursuits? What useful skills do they have to build upon and share? What kinds of local painting, sculpture, dance, music, literature and the like would those in other parts of the world appreciate, and what new styles and genres might grow out of sub-Saharan soil? What values have traditional Africans tended to live by or extol that are insufficiently acknowledged elsewhere? What myths, stories and proverbs might be revealing of the human condition or exhibit wisdom and so merit spread on this continent and others? In short, ‘Africanisation seeks to provide a basis for originality and uniqueness that can contribute meaningfully to global knowledge and civilisation’ (Makgoba 1998: 48).<sup>16</sup>

Unlike a relativist approach to culture, the present argument for Africanisation does not *a priori* suppose that Africans have equal amounts of knowledge to share when it comes to any given domain such as, say, mathematics or the workings of nature at a small-scale level. Instead, the current rationale urges those in universities to work to empirically establish what sub-Saharan culture has in the domains of the good (values), the true (enquiry) and the beautiful (the arts) that would be of interest to those currently living below the Sahara desert and to those living beyond it. In principle, such a search *could* come up empty handed in a particular area.

That might sound pessimistic, but it is a direct implication of the claim commonly made by Africanists themselves that those in the South African academic community, including many of the Africans among it, lack knowledge about African perspectives! After all, if we are ignorant of them, then we are in no position to pronounce on their merit or lack thereof. That is something to investigate over time.

However, since it is reasonable to suppose that any long-standing and widespread tradition has a substantial amount of insight and interesting expression, it is well worth an academic’s time and other resources to explore the African one. That is the compelling argument for multiculturalism, and academics in South Africa have

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<sup>16</sup> See also Ramose (1998: iv); Vilakazi (1998: 69–80); Goduka (2000: 80); Odora Hoppers (2000: 6–7); Teffo (2000).

strong reason to mine the sub-Saharan intellectual tradition in particular, since they have the most ease of access to it and since, in comparison to many other civilisations, this one is grossly under-explored.

Note how the logic of the argument from civilisation also differs from that of the argument from redress. Even if academics were no longer actively suppressing African perspectives, and even if compensation for past suppression had been completely effected, the present rationale could continue to justify Africanisation as a way to enrich local culture and to develop Africa's opportunity to contribute to the civilising process of the human race. To use some philosophical jargon, whereas the argument from redress is 'non-ideal', contending that Africanisation is justified merely in response to wrongdoing, the present rationale is 'ideal', maintaining that even in the (hypothetical) absence of any wrongdoing, Africanisation would still be justified as a way to promote something of value. In the latter context, one often encounters mention of Africa having a gift that it has yet to present to the world, a view expressed by the South African intellectual Steve Biko (1971: 51).

The civilisational argument is strong, and in my view does provide some good reason to Africanise. However, it also has limitations with regard to scope, by which I mean that it fails on its own to justify the range of Africanisation that is typically sought out. Specifically, the present argument provides strong reason for academics to conduct research into sub-Saharan perspectives, to disseminate their findings and to teach them in the classroom. It naturally explains why curricula content and research agendas should be substantially Africanised. However, it is weak when it comes to the other three potential dimensions of Africanising institutional culture.

First, in terms of language, while it is of course true that coming to grips with a particular African culture would be best facilitated by an intimate knowledge of its language, it does not follow that this language would need to be spoken on campus from day to day. I accept that teaching in an African language might well help to convey subtleties and more generally enrich the subject matter, but that presumes that South African students themselves have an intimate awareness of African languages, which is often not the case. Furthermore, to best understand Africa, it is not necessarily true that a given African language would include all of the most useful mental tools. It could be that routinely appealing to the words, and the concepts associated with them, that are found in English would (sometimes? often?) be an ideal way to come to grips with a given sub-Saharan object. Consider, for example, scientific analysis of a plant's medicinal properties that have been appreciated by herbal healers, or an analytic treatment of a moral principle associated with an indigenous proverb.<sup>17</sup> Finally, even if using an African language were alone ideal when it comes to teaching and research, there would still, on grounds of civilisation, apparently be little reason, say, to greet people in the vernacular or to strive for the point at which one could realistically conduct a committee meeting in an indigenous language.

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<sup>17</sup>To be a bit cheeky, I note that Africanists have invariably published in English. Is part of that because they have found English to be particularly useful when discussing the case for Africanisation?

Second, when it comes to governance, the present considerations do not appear to recommend Africanisation. Insofar as characteristically sub-Saharan modes of decision-making and responding to infraction should be approached by academics *on grounds of enhancing and disseminating African civilisation*, they should merely be objects of intellectual engagement, not ones of immediate practice. One might reply that a university could be an experimental site where African approaches are tested out. Perhaps. But they could just as well be tested out in other environments, where academics could study the results more objectively.

Third, with respect to aesthetics, there appears to be little reason for a university to take on African artistic themes if the ‘principle to be adopted is this: the unique African pattern of development into modernity should base itself, first and foremost, on the utilization of the resources provided by her civilization’ (Vilakazi 1998: 71). Would it not be puffery to suggest that when a university adopts, say, a coat of arms inspired by local indigenous themes (abjuring any Latin phrases) it is thereby ‘developing into modernity’ or showing that Africa can ‘make a meaningful contribution to universal human progress’ (Ramose 1998: iv)? Some readers would be willing to say, ‘It in fact would be doing so, even if in a small way’. However, below I provide what I think is a more compelling reason for a South African university to feature African food, music, symbols, art and the like, one that is not so grand as helping to develop and spread African civilisation.

## *Identity*

The fifth and last major rationale for Africanisation that has been salient in the literature can be summed up by saying that Africanisation is necessary to fulfil ‘the right to be an African’, in the South African philosopher Mogobe Ramose’s pithy phrase (1998: vii).<sup>18</sup> This phrasing might seem to imply essentialism about what counts as ‘African’, but it need not. As per above, what is meant by ‘African’ and cognate terms is reasonably understood in terms of properties that are recurrently (not exhaustively, not exclusively) encountered below the Sahara desert.

The ability to take on and express an African identity includes three central elements. First, it involves self-understanding on the part of those reared in sub-Saharan cultures and environments. This means not merely correcting incorrect beliefs about Africa, but also imparting true ones that are not yet held because of a lack of information. Now, to understand who one is means obtaining a firm grasp of one’s society, which has shaped one and will continue to do so. One must therefore become familiar with the values, norms, cultures and institutions of the community in which one lives. In addition, understanding one’s society means knowing how it arose, for

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<sup>18</sup> For similar considerations, see Makgoba (1998: 49, 52); Vilakazi (1998: 85–7); Goduka (2000: 80); Odora Hoppers (2000: 7); Seepe (2000: 134); Teffo (2000); Makgoba and Seepe (2004: 23–7).

to know who is one means knowing how one has arrived at the present and also, in the light of that, what possibilities there are for the future.

These considerations in themselves provide good reason to Africanise the curriculum, and to do so with up to date and accurate research. In one of the first major books on Africanising the university to appear, Joseph Ki-Zerbo remarks that ‘Africanization of the curriculum is no more than conformity with the injunction, “know thyself”’ (1973: 26). This consideration would apply not merely to those students fortunate enough to attend classes, but also, ideally, to people more generally, supposing academics took the time to disseminate their findings in ways accessible to the public.

There is some overlap, here, with the previous, civilisational argument, but there are important differences. The emphasis on cultivating identity is inward, directed toward Africans themselves, whereas a key part of the argument from civilisation involves an outward orientation of contributing to the world’s order of higher achievements. In addition, a prescription for higher education institutions to enable people to become Africans does not involve merely the discovery and transmission of knowledge. Ki-Zerbo points out that Africanisation of the curriculum would serve a function beyond a cognitive one, namely, it would help when it comes to the emotional side of developing an African identity. He says that it ‘is the first prerequisite for overcoming complexes and attaining self-development’ (1973: 26). I presume that by ‘complexes’ Ki-Zerbo means negative emotions such as shame and self-hatred for being an African, as well as an absence of positive emotions such as pride and self-esteem with respect to that. To truly exhibit an African identity requires feeling good about what is good about oneself and hence about one’s society, history and future, as well as feeling confident to move forward to achieve one’s goals.

There is probably a third core element of displaying an African identity beyond the cognitive and the emotive, namely, the active. To be an African means not just exhibiting certain states of mind, but also making certain decisions consequent to them. In this context, one sometimes finds the word ‘authentic’ invoked (for example, Teffo 2000), with the suggestion that for Africans to truly be themselves means making choices based on characteristically sub-Saharan values and norms and in the accurate awareness of local history and society. In the absence of such choices, the personality lacks integrity or wholeness, and is instead incoherent and fragmented. Values and norms must be acted upon in order for one to become a real (African) person.

If South African universities had a duty to enable residents to choose to be Africans, then a much larger scope of Africanisation would be defended relative to what the previous two arguments were able to underwrite. Recall that the redress argument entails that no Africanisation would be called for upon the end of racism and the achievement of compensation for epistemic injustice. However, it is plausible to suggest that public institutions such as universities in South Africa would continue to have strong reason to enable people to become Africans, indeed, so long as they continue to be set in an African environment. In addition, remember that the civilisation argument could not easily justify the Africanisation of language,



aesthetics and governance at a university. However, considerations of identity easily do so; the more characteristically African ways of life that a university adopts, the more opportunity for students and staff and those influenced by them to exhibit an African identity.

Notice that the present argument is ‘ideal’ in the above sense that it does not essentially involve the claim that Africanisation is apt in response to wrongdoing. Instead, the heart of the claim is that, given a largely African context, public institutions have some substantial obligation to enable people to become Africans.

However, there are a variety of elements that are not African in the South African context. It is not only Africans who have a claim on South African universities to help them realise themselves; those from other cultural backgrounds living here do, too (cf. Suttner 2010: 518). And so while it would make sense for South African institutions to Africanise, the logic of the present argument does not entail that they should do that alone. They should also assist people to become Afrikaners, people of Indian descent and people of mixed heritage, if they should indeed enable people to become Africans.

## **Conclusion: How to Africanise**

It is time to sum up what has been established, and to make some brief suggestions about the way forward. In the expository section above, I distinguished five dimensions along which Africanisation of institutional culture could take place, namely, curriculum, research, language, aesthetics and governance. I also pointed out that a South African HEI could exclusively Africanise or do so alongside other enculturation policies. And I further noted that the moral force ascribed to Africanisation could range from permissible, praiseworthy and required, and that, with respect to the use of coercion, managers could permit, encourage or mandate it. What has the evaluative section shown with regard to these different possible forms of Africanisation?

Recall that I found the arguments from relativism and democracy to be weak; majorities do not have deep epistemic or moral authority, at least when it comes to the knowledge that a university ought to seek out and the culture more generally it ought to adopt. Much more convincing, I contended, were the arguments from redress, civilisation and identity. It is plausible to think that the proper functions of a publicly funded university include: preventing racism and helping to make up for ‘epistemicide’, mining (South) African cultural heritage with an eye to revitalising and sharing African civilisation, and providing the conditions that would enable people living in South Africa to adopt an African identity. Even if one doubts that these are ends that would justify the creation of a university in the first place, they are at least ‘attendant’ final ends that a university should adopt, upon having been created for other good reasons (cf. Metz 2009b: 181).

Supposing these are indeed proper aims for a South African HEI, it follows that Africanisation should proceed along all five dimensions of institutional culture;

there is strong reason to Africanise the curriculum, research, language, aesthetics and governance. Of course, to say that there is strong reason does not imply that it is the only reason or even that it is the strongest reason; further argument would be needed to establish something like that. However, at this stage it is reasonable to conclude that a university in South Africa ought to seek to Africanise as much as it can while paying due regard to other important and competing values.

With regard to the extent to which enculturation ought to be African, the answer is clearly that it should not solely be. The arguments in favour of Africanisation do not justify such a strong form of it, at least given the current diversity of South African society. The redress and civilisation arguments, however, do entail that, at least for a number of decades, Africanisation should receive the lion's share of attention.

Finally, with regard to implementation, one should conclude that Africanisation of institutional culture is a moral requirement, at least given the redress argument and probably the identity argument. I find it a bit harder to say that universities are *morally required* to develop African civilisation, although I naturally believe that it would be desirable for them to do so.

Now, if Africanisation is indeed a moral requirement, may deans, DVCs and ministers require it? That difficult question is left unanswered by the analysis in this chapter. To conclude, as I have, that academics and administrators ought to Africanise does not settle the issue of whether they should be forced to do so if they do not on their own. Africanists often suggest that the reasons non-Africans will not Africanise is that they are racist and arrogant, but that is not the most common reason in my experience of white colleagues in South Africa. Insecurity and fear are more salient. In any event, the difficult question about the extent to which academic freedom and institutional autonomy are consistent with Africanisation<sup>19</sup> and about how to make trade-offs among them where they are not<sup>20</sup> must wait for another occasion.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> See Metz (2011: 50–5) for some prima facie reason to be hopeful about their compatibility.

<sup>20</sup> For those who clearly favour substantially sacrificing other, 'liberal' values for the sake of Africanisation, see Murove and Mazibuko (2008).

<sup>21</sup> An earlier version of this chapter initially appeared in *Being at Home: Race, Institutional Culture and Transformation at South African Higher Education Institutions*, edited by S. Matthews and P. Tabensky. Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2015, 242–72. It is reprinted here with the kind permission of the UKZN Press. Although quite a bit more literature has appeared in the wake of the 2015/16 student protests, I submit that the main arguments given for Africanisation (or for what is now often called 'decolonisation') will fit within the framework (of relativism, democracy, redress, civilisation, and identity) discussed here.

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