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Raymond Suttner*

* College of Human Sciences, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

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‘Africanisation’, African identities and emancipation in contemporary South Africa

Raymond Suttner*

College of Human Sciences, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

This article problematises the concept of ‘Africanisation’ as a response to colonial conquest and apartheid rule, bearing both political and knowledge consequences. It aims to rescue ‘Africanisation’ from essentialist notions, but at the same time to show how paradigms cannot be simply applied where they derive from quite different experiences. The article introduces modes of differentiating concepts that are dynamic, as opposed to static, singular and unmediated meanings that bedevil any emancipatory project. The tendency to see a moment in the life of a concept as having a settled and finalised meaning renders the qualities of democracy, and other similar liberating concepts, as settled though their meaning is never finally realised. While colonialism marginalised and devalued local knowledges, the national liberation project sought unity/homogenisation, which tended to deny distinct identities, as is largely the case today. There remains hostility to pluralism at a social and political level and a failure to recognise autonomous identities unconnected to the state or the ruling organisation, the African National Congress (ANC). The tendency towards static notions of custom and paradigms that do not derive from the experiences of African women, in particular, has tended to erase the voices of women or prejudice the emancipation of women from patriarchal oppression. Africanisation, the article proposes, must be located through an ongoing dialogue between dynamic local knowledges and a range of other explanatory tools.

Keywords: apartheid; African; concepts; paradigms; emancipation; identities; knowledges

Introduction

The notion of Africanisation is not an abstract question and has quantitative and qualitative, substantive and concrete implications. It is controversial for many in South Africa, because it is seen, along with affirmative action and ‘playing the race card’, as one of the ways in which merit is devalued. It is regarded by some as undermining the allegedly ‘colour blind’ ethical basis that should guide a democratic order and educational system. I am dealing with a spectre that haunts many whites and attracts many acquisitive black people, who see it as a path to wealth or, from the perspective advanced here, a key route to emancipation.

The question of Africanisation arises or is propelled in South Africa in the context of an assertion of values and identities that have been suppressed and which oppressors sought to impose by displacing others that preceded or arose during phases of conquest. The colonial and apartheid orders were not simply political and military...
conquests and systems of governance, but knowledge projects, marginalising notions of science, religion, morality and a range of other elements of the local order (see Prakash 1999, chapter 1, for India). These projects also had distinct gender implications, generally entrenching patriarchal power, often beyond what had existed prior to conquest.

This topic can be considered in a number of different ways, and in its broadest historical sense, taking account of variations of all the phases of colonial overlordship and post-apartheid South Africa and their fuller impact. Such an enquiry, however, lies beyond the scope of this article. Instead, it focuses on elements and impacts of the later phases of the apartheid project on African people, and also examines, in a provisional way, how Western paradigms have been inappropriately applied in many areas of South African scholarship.

Apartheid, emancipation, conceptual usage

The later phases of apartheid were described as ‘separate development’ by its proponents. This article seeks to explain how that legacy, and other contentious ones that were present in South Africa at the onset of democracy, may be recognised and engaged with. The form of engagement includes, but is not restricted to, ‘Africanisation’ or ‘being African’ – concepts whose meaning is not obvious, nor fixed and unchanging. Essential to a concept embracing an emancipatory quality is its capacity to change and evolve. If these are to be emancipatory, they must have the capacity to grow and develop; they must have the capacity to operate as what John Hoffman (2001, p. 23) terms ‘momentum concepts’. ‘Momentum concepts’, Hoffman (p. 23) elaborates:

have an egalitarian and anti-hierarchical ‘logic’. This ‘logic’ is important since it implies that we can link different phases within a concept’s formulation in a progressive manner. … A momentum concept is one which ‘unfolds’ so that it is possible to continuously rework it in a way which realizes more and more of its egalitarian and anti-hierarchical potential.2

Static concepts, in contrast,

are explicitly exclusionary in character, ‘static’ because they do not have the anti-hierarchical character and egalitarian potential of the momentum concept. ‘Violence’, for example, must be seen as a static concept since an act of violence divides people into victors and victims. Violence has an inherently exclusive and hierarchical character. The same is true of patriarchy, domination, oppression and exploitation. (Hoffman 2001, p. 25)

While in general agreement with Hoffman over patriarchy as a concept, I would argue that it must be understood in the plural, in that it arises in a range of conditions. Sometimes, the ‘protective’ quality during apartheid was ‘benevolent patriarchy’, where men vainly attempted to defend the vulnerable and, in the process, often suffered a sense of emasculation (Suttner 2008, chapter 6). In the current situation, however, we are experiencing acts of violence against women and homosexuals that are almost exclusively perpetrated by men, and may thus be described as manifestations of violent masculinities. Patriarchy, therefore, may not be emancipatory per se, but it has a capacity to move beyond a specific definitional form or social outcome.
Equally, a case can be made for the violence of national liberation movements often having an emancipatory character. At the very least, it would be difficult to classify them as ‘static’, although, as we are currently witnessing, those same movements may, following liberation, use the same rhetoric or act in a manner that comprises a return to violence that threatens constitutionalism. In other words, they may return to being static in their manifestations. While there is considerable justification that may be offered for the African National Congress (ANC) embarking on armed struggle against extreme repression, the organisation failed after its unbanning to declare non-violence as a principle. The notion of the armed, generally male, soldier was romanticised, and this may provide an umbrella under which current violent masculinities manifest themselves (Suttner, 2010). Given that all concepts operate within an area mediated by specific historical conditions and therefore have varied forms, the distinction made by Hoffman is useful. This is the way in which notions of Africanisation need to be conceived: not as unchangeable, but as dynamic.

The apartheid political, cultural and knowledge project

The apartheid political, cultural and knowledge project was simultaneously:

- A denial of the oneness of black and white.
- A denial of the oneness of black people in general and of the African people in particular.

The former was expressed in a number of different statements over time, such as there being ‘no equality in church and state’. The latter, with its assertion of African plurality, was not derived from respect or any sense of cultural commitment, but rather functioned as a mechanism for division. It was reduced to absurdity with the claim that South Africa was a country of minorities, given these distinct African ‘nationalities’. In its later years, it became an assertion under ‘separate development’ of the distinct qualities, real or manufactured, of ethnic identities. This was done through the establishment of ‘Bantustans’ or ‘homelands’ through which attributed or actual identities were meant to be realised. These identities were conceived in static and rigid forms, which froze custom and had a specifically adverse effect on the status of women and the vibrancy of culture, both of which need freedom and flexibility in order to flourish. In customary law, for example, women enjoyed more rights to property under pre-colonial law than under that of the colonists and later white administrations (Simons 1968, pp. 187ff, 194ff, 198ff, Welsh 1971, pp. 162ff). The notion of custom advanced by colonial and apartheid administrators was akin to that of the common law, where what existed, or was supposed to have existed, from ‘time immemorial’ was custom. There was no sense of evolving custom or ‘new custom’. The powers ascribed to patriarchs as individual heads of families went far beyond and had a meaning quite different from that found in ‘traditional law’. For instance, in communities before and outside of the sway of the colonial authorities, land was held in common and insofar as a chief or ‘male head’ arose he would hold land in trust for the rest.

The static understanding of custom and culture established under colonial and apartheid rule is a mode of perceiving and conceiving social relations that has had an enduring legacy, where some (conservative male) voices have been and continue to be heard more frequently and attentively, and others, especially women, have been silent
or not had their insights counted. There are alarming signs that this process may be continuing in land distribution practices, amongst others, in the newly liberated South Africa. This is manifested in projected legislation that had been before the previous parliament extending the powers of ‘traditional leaders’. Also, the status of these individuals is enhanced by a ministry now being divided between provincial and traditional affairs. The notion of ‘traditional’ is not problematised, despite its being questionable on a range of grounds, including that many chiefs hold their positions contrary to the ‘traditional’ lineage (Claassens and Cousins 2008, chapters 1, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11).

Colonial/apartheid denial of oneness versus liberation movement assertion of unity

Against this denial of oneness and assertion of divisive identities, the national liberation movement (NLM) – and the ANC (initially known as the South African Native National Congress [SANNC]) in particular – asserted the nature and goal of one common people and one common destiny. In so doing, the ANC depicted itself as the bearer of this future nationhood. That is why one finds slogans like ‘ANC is the nation’. Similar phrases are found in Kenya, even after independence – ‘KANU is your mother and your father’ – and in Ghana – ‘CPP is Ghana, Ghana is CPP’ – and so on. On the very eve of the formation of the SANNC, Pixley ka Isaka Seme (1978 [1911], p. 72) asserted that it was necessary to end ‘tribal animosities’ and divisions, and declared:

The demon of racialism, the aberrations of the Xosa-Fingo feud, the animosity that exists between the Zulus and the Tongaas, between the Basutos and every other Native must be buried and forgotten; it has shed among us sufficient blood! We are one people. These divisions, these jealousies, are the cause of all our woes and of all our backwardness and ignorance today. (Spelling orig.)

When we scrutinise the concept of or call for Africanisation today, we find that it entails a rejection of the apartheid knowledge project, but it should not be an unqualified embrace of a notion like ‘we are one’, or similar phrases of national unity that emerged from the NLM project. Such expressions of unity were an appropriate response to divisiveness, to a system of overlordship that sought to divide, but their applicability is not unlimited in scope or time. ‘Oneness’ is a simple, but nevertheless problematic, concept that has to be examined in relation to difference and other identities.

It is important that we find a formula that embraces both the unity of all and, in particular, the African character of this country. But it must also recognise the distinct qualities and identities of different African and other people, and find a way of inter-relationship between what need to become the dominant African cultural forms (within a diversity of African cultural manifestations) and those of others who live in South Africa. In the long run, it may be that this extends also to continental identities and ‘black Atlantic identities’, which already find expression at a more intellectual level.

Colonial and apartheid knowledge projects: classifying identity and difference

All colonial projects – and in the South African case also subsequent apartheid projects – are not purely about domination over a range of aspects of the lives of the
colonised. They also include notions of knowledge and identity: ‘Who is what and belongs with whom?’ is simultaneously an identity and a knowledge question. Government ethnographers were, in fact, employed to assist in this identification process, and the entire self-conception of social anthropology in South Africa was tied to Native administration. This relates to the appointment of one of the founders of social anthropology (then seen as part of the ‘Native administration’ apparatus), A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, to the new chair at the University of Cape Town in 1921 (Myers 2008, pp.14ff). The denial of the oneness of all black people (previously known as ‘Non Whites’ and earlier as ‘Non-Europeans’), and Africans in particular, conformed to a differential, graded oppression of various black people, as well as a hard road that was traversed before there could be a measure of unity between black people in anti-apartheid struggle. The denial of black unity served the political purpose of combating attempts to incorporate all anti-apartheid forces under one banner and sought to sow divisions, with some measure of success at most times. Many of these divisions live on in the present.

The denial of the oneness of African people also corresponded to reality in certain respects. Within the identity of being African there were and are subdivisions of various kinds, people who form distinct communities and linguistic groups. It is very common still to treat all Xhosa speakers as one people, while there is no such thing. There are a range of Xhosa speaking communities, including abaThembu, amaGcaleka, amaMpondomise and amaMpondo, amongst others. Even within the groups listed here there are sub-groups that may or may not be part of these larger ones.4

Some African people practise(d) one set of rites within a broader territorial community, but then quite distinct ones within their clan. For instance, some practised male initiation through circumcision, while others did not, and there were and are a range of other distinctions, bearing considerable gender significance. The meanings of the attainment of manhood through initiation of various kinds differs amongst communities, and it is a myth to claim that women have no part in the making of a man, as is asserted by the most conservative sections of African communities today. There are very many women who take great interest in who will cut their son’s foreskin – the circumcision doctor (ingcibi in isiXhosa) – and what instrument(s) he may use. A practice has developed where mothers, particularly, and parents, in general, intervene to ensure that the son has a medical test prior to the circumcision, that a set of sterilised instruments are purchased and that these are used by the ingcibi. In such cases, instead of cutting the foreskin with an axe, he does so symbolically by hitting a table with the axe. These practices are especially evident in the era of HIV/Aids, but the presence of women in the background, though not publicly acknowledged, is not new, and many have taken boys to hospital after unsuccessful circumcisions (personal communication, N. Gasa, 21 September 2008). All of this confirms the variations within cultural practices. The more conservative claim of uniform observation is without basis, and hence shows the contested nature of culture. Unless notions of Africanisation operate in a dynamic manner they cannot taken on an emancipatory character.

What is illustrated here is that there are ‘customary regimes’ within broader customary regimes, some of which may not be shared. Also, custom and culture, and their legacies, within African communities are thus not beyond debate and ought not to be assigned primarily or exclusively to any recognised chiefs as supposed custodians of ‘traditional beliefs’. What interpretation is placed on customs and culture has important implications for the extent to which women specifically, but also all South
Africans, are, in fact, emancipated under the new democratic order. It is important that we do not allow a collapse of these notions into essentialist forms. That there should be such contestation is also a safeguard ensuring that those who fear African domination should ‘rest assured’ that there cannot be crude ‘African cultural domination’ because amongst Africans themselves there is not unanimity over the content and meanings of cultural questions, though there may be agreement on the existence of many of these.

While the apartheid system was forced to rely substantially on coercion, ideological means of ensuring subjection were also extensively deployed. J.C. Myers (2008) appears to place more weight than I do on this preventing upheaval. In understanding attempts at ideological domination, Antonio Gramsci (1971) pioneered the emphasis within Marxist thought on ruling not simply through coercion, but through incorporating elements of the subordinated classes by establishing hegemony. Louis Althusser (1984) argued that this is achieved through ideology. He claimed that ideology operates through interpellating (constituting) concrete individuals as subjects. One is interpellated by the state and in fact by a range of social institutions. Through ideology, individuals recognise their constitution as specific types of subjects as ‘obvious’. ‘The category of the subject’, Althusser (1984, p. 45) argues, ‘is the constitutive category of all ideology’.

In any social formation, one is interpellated in a number of different ways by a number of different constituting authorities or subjects into a number of subject positions – as citizens, mothers, daughters, Christians, and similar identities. Under colonial and apartheid states, interpellations by colonial and criminal law, amongst others, in the first place designated who were equal subjects under the law; in the period of Shepstonianism in Natal and under the Bantustans, they also designated specific types of ‘tribal subjects’ (Welsh 1971, Myers 2008). Unlike conventional Western states where interpellation by the state as subject carries important ideological consequences, connoting equality and citizenship for all, the South African apartheid state interpellated individuals not merely as South African subjects. They were also interpellated by the state as specific types of ‘racial subjects’ with varying rights – as ‘whites’, ‘Indians’, ‘Coloureds’ and ‘Bantu’. Africans, furthermore, were not only interpellated as Bantu, but also as specific ‘tribal subjects’ – as Xhosa, Tswana and so on (in the case of Xhosa-speakers, the process went somewhat off course, ethnologically or linguistically, with the establishment of both Ciskeian and Transkeian Bantustans for Xhosa speakers).

Here interpellation means that one is constituted as ‘South African’ for some purposes, and as ‘African’ or ‘Pedi’ or ‘Tswana’ for others. In interpellating Africans as ‘tribal subjects’, the apartheid regime drew partly on identities that were already in place and corresponded to practices and self-conceptions. Sometimes this was insufficient for their overall purpose, which was to build a foundation of support that would counter African nationalism. In such cases, they would depose existing chiefs and create new ones, invent headmen, recognise aspects of custom and modify others, in each case ingratiating themselves with the most conservative sections of the community at the expense of the more progressive, and generally supporting those who would condone apartheid policies (see Welsh 1971, Suttner 1985, Mamdani 1996, Myers 2008). All of these measures tended to strengthen patriarchy and render women invisible and voiceless. However, one cannot exclude an element of irony in the acceptance of interpellation by some designated subjects, who may have found it necessary to acquire a job or residential rights, but may not in fact have internalised it. Equally,
there are some that may have internalised, and retained, the apartheid-designated sense of self.

**The national liberation counter-model**

From the moment of its establishment in 1912, the ANC (then the SANNC) posed a counter-interpellation/construction/constitution of the African people as the South African nation of the future. To this end, it set about banishing ‘tribal animosities’ and divisions, and striving to make unity of the African people a reality. In opposition to the declaration of the white Union of South Africa in 1910, Seme (1978, p. 72) called for the establishment of a ‘native union’. African people, and men in particular as membership was initially not open to women and non-Africans, were constituted as the bearers of nationhood, or interpellated as citizens of a new union; in other words, not as distinct ethnic groups, but as a unity of all the African people. As a counter to the white Union of South Africa, imposed by Britain and allowing the continuation of colonial domination through local whites, this had revolutionary potentialities, which would come to be realised over time.

The ANC had its ups and downs and for much of its early decades did not go far in mobilisation or organisation on the basis of these proclaimed aims. It was only in the 1950s that the notion of unity started to have substance and meaning, and it extended to all oppressed as well as to progressive whites in the Congress of Democrats (COD) and the underground South African Communist Party (SACP). At the same time, within the wider unity of this alliance, African nationalism had a distinct salience.

Dispute over its relationship to other ‘racial groups’ was one of the reasons for the Africanist breakaway, leading to the formation of the Pan-Africanist Congress (Suttner and Cronin 2006, pp. 132–133, 262, Gerhart 1978, chapter 5). They expressed an objection in particular to the opening clause of the Freedom Charter adopted in 1955 that South Africa ‘belongs to all who live in it’. The coexistence of oppressors and oppressed, they asserted, could not be, even if many whites were committed to liberation.

Over the years, the ANC came to hold onto the unity of all forces opposed to apartheid, in varying degrees of organised linkage, and emphasised the distinct and primary place of the African people, who suffered the most extreme oppression under apartheid. The need for unity remained a primary emphasis right up to 1994, when the first democratic elections were held, and was exemplified in the period just prior to liberation in the ANC-allied United Democratic Front (UDF) slogan ‘UDF unites–apartheid divides’ (Suttner 2004b). The assertion of African nationalism and unity was crucial in the face of the disparagement and insults of the colonial and apartheid oppressors’ attempts to divide black people through various means, including their interpellation as tribal subjects. ‘Unity in struggle’ was the watchword for that moment, the moment of struggle.

But within that slogan and approach also lay the limitations of the NLM model, in that unity can imply erasure of other identities, and this is, in fact, one of the readings that can be made of Seme’s initial statement. In correctly reflecting on the divisive responses to conquest, his conclusion that ‘we are one’ simultaneously set limits on the range of identities and communities that comprised this oneness. Seme’s statement is not wrong per se: it is correct, at a particular moment, but not universally and timelessly applicable. One may also possibly read his stated intention to banish ‘tribal
animosities’ as including recognition of such communities where their activities were not acrimonious. The potential anti-pluralism of Seme’s statement finds explicit expression in a statement of the late leader of the Mozambican liberation movement and first president of Mozambique, Samora Machel (1985, p. 77), that they ‘killed the tribe to give birth to the nation’. The South African Freedom Charter, adopted by a Congress of the People in 1955 after a long consultative process appears, however, to place some stress on the rights of ‘all national groups’, thus implying more than oneness (Suttner and Cronin 2006, p. 263). The African people were and are one, but they were and are also not one.

In conceiving Africanisation or Africanity or Africanism, we need to understand that one can be more than one thing at the same time: that one can be ‘one’, but also that within that ‘one’ can inhabit multiple identities. The same person may be black, speak isiXhosa or one of a range of other languages. He or she may believe in Christianity, but may or may not also propitiate the ancestors in various ways. He or she may identify with a range of communities, including one that roughly corresponded to the ‘tribal’ subjectivity envisaged under apartheid. It is possible, though, that many of these may, in fact, be or have been hybrid communities, and the identification with community of origin is often displaced by a range of other adopted communities or associations linked to distinct identities. At the same time, such people may be linked not only to the ANC or other liberation movements, but also to sectoral organisations. In other words, the identities may not always be under the aegis of the ANC, which has in the past been one of the routes to self-realisation. This is not only a question of diversity of identity, but also a manifestation of pluralism that the ANC and other NLMs have not always welcomed. The ANC has not appreciated that identity is not purely a subjective state, but often relates to plurality of objective interests, which may be quite autonomous (see Suttner 2004a, 2006).

In short, the oppression of apartheid, aimed at the production of artificial, or enhancement of existing, differences for divisive purposes. These are solved at a primary level through democratisation initiated by the NLM. But the NLM’s counter interpellation of the African people as one is problematic. This is because it simultaneously entails denial of the sometimes unknown or unpredictable distinct identities that comprise this oneness and has a tendency towards erasure. This can be found in the ANC strategy and tactics document, where distinct identities are only recognised insofar as they feed into a broader national identity (ANC 2007, paragraphs 38, 101, 103).

**Africanisation, the denial of ‘race’ and nonracialism**

Amongst the potential positions on Africanism is that which argues that it is reprehensible to adopt a position based on the existence of ‘race’ (an unscientific term) as a factor in people’s being. Non-racialism is now widely proclaimed as one of the goals of the new South Africa, and many consequently find it necessary to deny the importance of ‘race’ and, in some cases, regard the reference to race and how many people of a particular race are present in institutions as being a barrier to the establishment of non-racism. Thus, Neville Alexander (cited Frederikse 1990, p. 206) says: ‘The word non-racialism can be accepted by a racially oppressed people if it means that we reject the concept of race, that we deny the existence of races and thus oppose all actions, practices, beliefs and policies based on the concept of race’. Another approach, close to Alexander’s, is an assertion of tolerance or invisibility of the other, suggesting that
race does not matter. Nelson Mandela (Frederikse 1990) is quoted as saying: ‘We have no Whites; we have no Blacks. We only have South Africans’.

But non-racialism is itself an unproblematised concept that can, if not elaborated, also tend to lead to erasure, as seen in the Mandela quotation. Not being a ‘race’ does not say what one is, apart from not being a racialist/racist. There is some similarity to the apartheid category of ‘Non-White’, which merely said that one was not what was desirable, namely, white. Here one is saying one is not what is ‘undesirable.’ Content needs to be given to the people who comprise the non-racial community. An allied form of erasure is the assertion that we are all Africans, which is true insofar as we all pledge allegiance to our country and the continent. But there is a difference between being an African who never carried a pass, and one who did. This assertion of us all being African does not require Africanisation or work on the concept, because it is already there, merely by virtue of our all being geographically present in Africa.

‘Africanisation’ and the African legacy/ies

These approaches often fail to consider the realities under which we live and have lived. If it is correct to suggest that the apartheid project demeaned African cultures or artificially reconstructed or manufactured them with undemocratic and oppressive results, it is also true that the answer does not lie in the idea that colour is of no consequence (signifying the supposed implication of non-racialism), nor does it mean that it is correct to deny difference between African people. Any Africanisation project must recognise the historical legacy and assert the emancipation of African people from the political, intellectual, cultural and spiritual thraldom of apartheid. It must also allow for distinct and developing forms of emancipation within this assertion. Their ‘tolerance’ and encouragement is not dependent on feeding into the liberation movement’s notion of the national, but may be quite independent in their existence. Appreciating this capacity to be relatively autonomous is essential in building a nation that is both democratic and emancipatory.

This assertion of multiple identities is not simply a call for revival of marginalised knowledge and belief systems, though that should be undertaken. It is not a romanticised and static project. Instead, one is engaging with a set of beliefs and practices that were always in flux and whose meanings are not self-evident. They need careful interpretation and development as past and ongoing features of the lives of many people. These beliefs and practices have not arisen from some ‘imaginary’, consensual, pre-colonial African society, carried forward unchanged to the present (Hountondji 1996, pp. 55ff). If that were the case, there would have been no wars in pre-colonial societies, or if there were they would have been inexplicable. In pre-colonial African society, as in all others, there was contestation: values attached to these societies are debated to this day (Hountondji 1996, chapter 2). There is no single meaning of ‘our culture’, which is sometimes used to practise gender violence. For instance, in contemporary South Africa it has become commonplace for women wearing jeans or mini-skirts to be attacked and stripped naked in taxi ranks and similar places. This is allegedly based on their offending notions of ‘culture’.

There are, amongst African people, and amongst elements of that people, various meanings attached to practices and even ways of existence deriving from proverbs, like that attached to ubuntu (roughly translated as ‘humanness’). Ubuntu does not mean the same thing to Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who evoked it in steering attempts at achieving closure through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, as it does to
armed response or financial services companies, who adopt the term in their company names or advertising (a glance at telephone directories or along the streets in Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal reveals ‘Ubuntu armed response’, ‘Ubuntu financial services’, ‘Ubuntu catering services’, etc). Moreover, in the interpretation of these values and proverbs, we tend to hear certain conservative male (and now business oriented) voices more often than others.

Any curriculum development in a liberated and emancipatory South Africa should operate with an assumption of contestation, rather than essentialist notions of all Africans thinking in the same way, always and at all times. Essentialism is depicting such African thinking as always-already there and obvious, just waiting to be found and discovered as having a univocal and clear meaning. That there are, in fact, differences and contested interpretations now and in the past means these should be presented, because it is only when we confront a range of meanings that the most emancipatory potentialities can be advanced.

Paradigms and legacies as a qualitative element in academia

The major issue confronted here is how the African element is manifested qualitatively in educational and other systems that enhance or retard the development of South Africa’s emancipatory and democratic potential. It would be more accurate to phrase the question within a wider framework. One needs to ask whether certain forms of knowledge remain marginalised, ‘subjugated’ (Foucault 1980, p. 83) or invisible, and how they can be accessed, and, if accessed, how and whether they are then deployed in various spheres of human activity. In a wider sense, we must ask whether the paradigms we use in our attempts at understanding social processes (for this contribution exclusively concerns the human or social sciences) are adequate for uncovering what these are in South Africa, or whether the paradigms deployed lead to the failure to hear certain voices, or to certain categories of people/relationships being mischaracterised.

The legacy element is manifested most prominently in recent efforts, involving scholars, business and others, to recover or raise the importance of ‘Indigenous Knowledge Systems’ (IKS) and ubuntu. It is important that this endeavour be encouraged, but with certain caveats. In the first place, IKS has become a business industry and it is hard to distinguish what is manufactured in urban shops from what is, in fact, local knowledge, and what emerges from what period. Secondly, the terms ‘traditional’ or ‘indigenous’ may not be adequate to describe what it is that we are uncovering and, especially in the case of ‘indigenous’, have an exotic flavour attached to them. IKS appears to connote uniqueness and timelessness when there may, in fact, be very many instances of people following similar paths for solving problems in other parts of the world, and at different moments in time. The notion of IKS tends to elevate the particular to a status that erases what may also be part of the universal. A mechanistic disjuncture between the universal and the particular may be at the root of this problematic stance (personal communication, John Hoffman, 21 September 2008).

Following Hountondji (1997) and others, I prefer the use of the term ‘endogenous’ to ‘traditional’ or ‘indigenous’, in order to connote local endogenous knowledges, which are understood to be in interaction with other knowledges. There are no knowledges that stand in isolation from others. Many cases in agriculture testify to the endogenous becoming modified, enhanced or augmented by the modern, as in cases
where seed that may have been stored originally in leaves are now contained in polystyrene. Notions of purity or of immemorial usage are misleading abstractions that fly in the face of experience. Hountondji (1997, pp. 17ff) explains why he uses the term ‘endogenous’: it ‘evokes the origin of the kind of knowledge in question by identifying it as an internal product drawn from a given cultural background, as opposed to another category of knowledge which would be imported from elsewhere’. What today appears endogenous, Hountondji (1997, pp. 17ff) elaborates, ‘may have been imported at a distant time in the past, prior to its later assimilation and its perfect integration in the society, to the extent of obliterating its foreign origins’:

That a cultural borrowing is assimilated to the point of being at one with the collective heritage thereafter, meaning that such borrowing is fully mastered and integrated into the initial culture itself. Endogeny therefore is not necessarily static, it can be dynamic … Maybe one is rather a witness to a never ending movement of interiorisation and appropriation of values derived from elsewhere.

Just as the endogenous does not refer to absolute interiority, so it cannot be taken as a synonym of indigenous. In fact the indigenous is what appears to the foreign observer-explorer or missionary-as a purely local curiosity that has no effectiveness outside its particular context.

The term ‘indigenous’, Hountondji (1997, pp. 18–19) argues, always has a derogatory connotation that sets it against ‘real knowledge’, and feeds into notions of African inferiority:

It refers to a specific, historical experience, precisely one of integration of autochthonous cultures into a world-wide ‘market’ in which these perforce are pushed down to inferior positions … Viewed from the outside, and perceived as an object, as a thing, the autochthonous person sees him or herself endowed with a new function, that of a ‘primitive’, a privileged witness of humanity’s imaginary beginnings.

While it is essential to rectify the colonial and apartheid knowledge projects’ marginalisation of local knowledge systems, this is a complex task and is not advanced by imagined timeless, essentialist notions of what has been bequeathed from time immemorial. ‘Retrieval’ must also entail recognition of knowledges that have always been and continue to be in motion and subject to both internal and external influences.

**Western paradigms applied to South African social relations**

Earlier, this article rejected essentialist notions of ‘African’. But in our Western modelled academy there are also inappropriate paradigms that fail to relate to actual social realities or to hear, in many cases, the majority of voices in South Africa. What are our concerns in the social sciences generally? As Partha Mukherji (2004, p. 16; emphasis orig.) remarks: ‘One of the most epistemologically relevant questions in the social sciences is: the social sciences that originated in the West, are indigenous to the West, are they necessarily universal for the rest?’ What needs to be examined is what paradigms are prevalent in examining problems in academia and interrogated in all fields. The paradigms of the apartheid era are easier to recognise than those from the West that may, in many cases, also be unsuited to explaining our social relations. There is a tendency for many academics in the social sciences to derive, consciously or unconsciously, their theoretical and paradigmatic models from the West and apply
these as yardsticks for understanding meanings in the South African situation, a type of indirect rule of Western notions. In applying the yardstick of utility, it should also be noted that the West itself is becoming increasingly heterogeneous, so that its own paradigms are increasingly difficult to apply to its own population as a whole.

In the South African academy, such paradigmatic problems can be observed in research related to gender relations. Here, the mode of analysis often corresponds to social relations amongst white women and, to some extent, Coloured people, who most closely resemble the Western family patterns. But in the case of African women, and particularly those who engage in struggle, the analytic paradigms often obscure rather than reveal. For instance, movements articulated through ‘motherism’ are generally depicted as falling in line with the patriarchal consignment of women to the kitchen in Western society and as definitely falling outside the definition of feminism. Thus, Julia Wells (1991) has described one such entry of mothers into public resistance as definitely not feminist (for a contestation of this, see Gasa 2007, pp. 129–151).

On the other hand, if one returns to a central tenet of feminism, which is to give voice to all women by continually increasing the range of experiences included, is it not correct to use the term ‘feminism’ in the plural and to understand that it can embrace a number of forms of relationship, many of which may be ways of realising women’s empowerment? These may be manifested in a range of ways, and in specific situations require amplification of categories that are read in relation to men being constructed as ‘boys’ under South African colonialism/apartheid, or, to turn to another context, as ‘effeminate’ in colonial Bengal and differently in other parts of India (see Suttner 2008, chapter 6).

In the same way, in the area of political science, an overwhelming proportion of the world’s practitioners are based in the United States (US), where they enjoy greater access to funding, thus potentially conditioning the character of research projects. There is a tendency to take norms from the discipline as practised there and treat them as standards in measuring democracy and similar issues. For example, it is said in considering the ‘consolidation of democracy’ that it requires ‘circulation or likely circulation of elites’ within the foreseeable future (Jung and Shapiro 1995, pp. 268ff). In other words, it is proposed that in instances where the ruling party is so strong that it is unlikely to suffer electoral defeat in the foreseeable future this presents a danger to or may preclude defining a state as a consolidated democracy. Such reasoning has been applied to South Africa, and the literature that does so has not considered why existing opposition parties are unlikely to defeat the ANC, even at its present moment of crisis (Suttner 2004a, 2006).

This dogma, for it is not an explanatory device, but merely a statement or declaration of what criteria need to be met by political forces to qualify as consolidated, is usually accompanied by a literature criticising what is referred to as the ‘dominant party state’ (Southall 2005, but see Suttner 2006). This approach claims that where a political party is very strong and, as in the consolidation argument, unlikely to be electorally defeated, it is a danger to democratic debate, and leads to corruption and practices like patronage. These qualities are by no means peculiar to ‘dominant parties’, but are found in many organisations in all parts of the world. In reality, this is a very conservative argument, presented as a contribution towards enriching democracy. It depicts power as existing purely through the ballot box, and not in a number of different sites.

What Southall and others do not appreciate is that electoral dominance in itself does not predetermine the impact that a particular party will have, in government and
on the society as a whole. That impact is mediated by a variety of factors quite unre-
lated to electoral support. A mass party that wins overwhelming support may still lack
economic power. Consequently, despite its popularity and apparently unassailable
political position, it does not therefore follow that it has a free hand. It may have
a freer hand in relation to political opponents in parliament than it has in society at large.
This may also apply to less conservative forces, where supporters of a popular party
in elections may still oppose it over certain social issues. Dominance is therefore
always conditional and mediated by factors outside of the site where electoral domi-
nance is primarily manifested – in parliament and the state. As soon as the electorally
dominant party seeks to transmit that dominance outside parliament, it encounters a
range of variables that may limit or enhance the power it commands.

Against this conception of democracy, essentially restricted to elections, it is
argued that democracy is a concept potentially unfolding in its meaning. It can contin-
uously develop into more and more emancipatory forms with more and more popular
participation, as Anthony Arblaster (2002) argues and as has been seen in the 1980s
in South Africa (see Hoffman 2001, Suttner 2004b). Equally, its dynamism can be
reversed, as is the case in the attacks on freedom of political organisation under the
presidency of Jacob Zuma.

In the field of law, similarly, there has been a wholesale ‘buy in’ to Western liberal
conceptions of equality before the law and its contractual implications. The man
begging at the robots and the head of Barlow Rand Corporation are ‘equal before the
law’ and therefore have an equal right to seek entry into the poshest hotel. Within
the law of contract, X litigating against Y meet as equal parties and no account need
be taken of their difference in means or capacity to sustain a legal action. Thus, in De
Beers v Minister of Mines, in 1956, Judge Kuper remarked:

Counsel said that justice to all parties required that Sir Ernest should be called. On two
occasions he told the court that the fact that Sir Ernest Oppenheimer is a very wealthy
man should not influence the court against calling him as a witness. First of all, there is
no evidence that Sir Ernest is a wealthy man: even if he is I think that the suggestion that
this might influence the court should not have been made … It hardly requires to be said
that the financial standing or status of any particular person is completely and entirely
irrelevant when it comes to the question of the rights of any citizen in this country.
(emphasis added)

What is especially interesting in this statement is the explicit disjuncture between what
is known as ‘evidence’ by the court and that known to the rest of the world.

Similar ill-fitting Western paradigms can be illustrated for urban development,
with models of Paris, London and New York adapted to the South (Kihato 2008).
These are for present purposes necessarily limited examples of the malfunctioning of
Western-derived paradigms within South Africa. They cannot be universalised – even
in their own countries, as attempted by their proponents. It is for scholars to provoke
a dialogue between Western and Southern scholarship without denying either, or
rendering either absolute.

African cultures in an emancipated South Africa

Within any notion of Africanisation, the conception of culture must relate to previous
understanding of South Africa as a European country, a European outpost in Africa
where black people were at one point described as ‘Non-Europeans’. The European
dominant culture continues to be reflected in much of our architecture, with the Durban Supreme Court and that of Calcutta/Kolkata both built by the British and looking almost the same. At the University of the Witwatersrand at the end of the last century, email used Latin names, e.g., brown@gaius.wits.ac.za. The academic parades at most South African universities look very much like occasions that come out of the United Kingdom, and definitely not Africa; they are instead an imitation of what it is ‘really meant to be’. Should we not rather be thinking of something that derives from our own past and contemporary experiences? Some universities are beginning to make such adaptations in some of their ceremonies.

This is not a prelude to rejecting all that is European, but an assertion that we need to have a distinct, dynamic African flavour to our cities, our predominant music, television and other media. This is not the case now, where globalisation has, in fact, increased the dominance of homogenising US culture. It is important that we find a way of inserting African cultural expression as *the primary identity within a range of other identities* that comprise South Africa. This African identity *is itself not and has never been one identity*, but is multiple in its origins and, in its urbanised, more recent forms, also hybrid. The presence of that African majority in the centre of cultural expression is crucial. Since it is not itself homogeneous, African culture should not be understood as a threat to any other forms of cultural expression.

This does not imply that we all become Africans and speak isiZulu or seTswana as our mother tongues. It means that the primary character of this country should have an African flavour. All other cultures should enjoy equal respect, and it is out of a creative, non-chauvinistic interrelationship between them that we can build the new South African identities that will bear both distinct African qualities and stand in relation to other cultural formations with their own diversities, in that they will include the cultural expressions of those who are African in the broadest sense.

**Africanisation as part of an emancipatory project**

This article is not debating Africanisation or ‘being African’ in isolation, but as part of a process of emancipation. There is more than one way of remedying the marginalisation of Africans found in educational and other legacies of the past. This does not constitute a denial of all that exists or a validation of all that supposedly existed prior to colonial conquest. It requires a fresh examination of the extent to which scholarship and its environment, culture and social context match one another and lead us to hear presently erased voices in our society. Our work is not obvious. It is connected to other emancipatory questions, which include the democratisation of the educational project and the scrutiny of dominant paradigms that are used in teaching and research. These are derived in many cases from academic communities that are part of powerful states, but not necessarily suited to our conditions. There are a range of other manifestations of power that are, in my view, obstacles to emancipating people and ourselves. We need to search in a continuous process for the answers we require.

Finally, those of us located within educational institutions need to look at ourselves and our institutional structures and ask whether or not these are emancipatory, or whether they are, as is often the case, obstacles to emancipatory research and teaching. According to the conceptual categories used, a bureaucratic relationship is, by definition, static and not emancipatory. Whether or not this definition has been transcended may lead to very different answers from those at the top, who make or fail to make the decisions, and those at the bottom, who experience results or barriers.
in their path. If this has some validity, the challenge for educational management is to transcend their bureaucratic relationship, insofar as it is disabling in many cases, into one that is enabling and becomes part of an emancipatory route, one element of which is Africanisation.

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Notes

1. Meaning, here, that section of the black population (formerly known collectively as ‘non-whites’) who used to carry passes.
2. For a similar formulation, specifically in regard to democracy (see Arblaster 2002, pp. 4ff).
3. The Bantustans or ‘homelands’, some of which were made constitutionally independent, were established on the basis of purported ethnic uniformity and all Africans were assigned a link to one or other ‘homeland’ and denied South African citizenship. They were all supposed to realise themselves over time through the then ‘independent’ four ‘states’ of Transkei, Ciskei, Bophuthatswana and Venda. There would not be universal suffrage within the overall state of South Africa.
4. Personal communication, N. Gasa, 21 September 2008; Hammond-Tooke (1993, pp.39–40) confirms this and indicates subdivisions in other linguistic groups.
5. During the nineteenth century British conquerors applied ‘native policies’ ranging from total rejection of customary laws and practices to that of Shepstone in Natal (also practised in Northern Nigeria). Shepstone fostered customary law, albeit modified where it suited the colonial administration.

Notes on contributor

Raymond Suttner is currently a Research Professor at the University of South Africa. He is preparing a book, KwaZuma (Zumaland) and beyond, to be published by Jacana. His most recent book is The ANC Underground (2008, Jacana).

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