



## AN AFROCENTRIC ANATOMY OF MPOFU'S SOCIAL MEDIA ROAR: ITS ROOTS AND FUNCTION

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### Abstract

Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Instagram, etc have received the attention of the scholars in Media and Communication Studies, Political Science, Public Administration and other cognate academic disciplines. From the academic literature produced thus far, it is clear that social media is not uniformly understood even by those who research, write and publish from a common epistemic vantage point, which is largely dominated by Westernised consciousness. As such, this desktop paper employs Afrocentricity as an alternative and contextual lens to dissect Shepherd Mpofu's recent Facebook roar. The latter is complimented by a few rants featured on other platforms including but not limited to WhatsApp and Twitter. The main argument of this paper is that due to their less regulated nature, Facebook and other social media platforms have become useful tools for nursing the tortured consciousness of Mpofu and et al whose egos have been injured by what appears to be an invalidation of their past intellectual contributions on Gukurahundi.

**Keywords:** Facebook, social media, roar, Afrocentricity, South Africa, Gukurahundi.

## **Introduction**

In his seminal work, *The African Renaissance Project of Thabo Mbeki: Its South African Roots and Targets*, Sehlare Makgetlaneng reminds us of Mbeki's caution during the year 1979 that "... one should judge a lion by its claws rather than its roar" (2022: 4). This metaphoric expression is valid today in making sense of the political and socio-economic issues, processes and developments in the society as it was during the turbulent 1970s in South Africa (Shai & Molapo 2017). Closely related to this expression is another common adage which goes like, "do not judge a book by its cover". The cauldron of the above-mentioned expressions brings us to the aim of this paper. The aim of this paper is to dissect Shepherd Mpofu's recent (as published in May 2023) Facebook roar (also read as "combined rants") through an Afrocentric lens (Asante 2003). In particular, the author concentrates on the origins and function of Mpofu's roar on the politics of scholarship in South Africa. The reader may wonder as to why it is necessary to write this paper, especially because it deals with issues that are apparently doing rounds on social media (i.e. Facebook and WhatsApp). The debate between the author and Mpofu is an important one and it has started in an academic platform (Shai & Vunza 2021). Unfortunately, Mpofu has since taken this academic debate to social media. The apparent reason for his apparent decision has been addressed in detail in another forthcoming paper. On social media, what was supposed to be a rejoinder has taken a form of a roar. In literal speak, a roar is a prolonged and deep outcry retorted by a lion. Such an outcry can be scary to the would be preys of the lion family. When the outcry is made, the would be preys normally stay alert in preparation to run for cover in fear of their lives.

In the case of Mpofu, it is difficult to tell the origins and function of his roar. If we are to avoid the misunderstanding of Mpofu's roar, it is important for it to be critically and honestly studied. To achieve this, it is necessary to extensively cite him so that a collection of his rants can be presented and used as a useful framework for their anatomy in South Africa's knowledge

industry. The author is careful not to represent the rants identified and addressed elsewhere. In other words, the current paper is aimed at filling in the gaps in the author's previous works on this subject. The author has become alive to such gaps because his few recent publications on this subject have been deliberately misread and misunderstood due to intellectual arrogance and journalistic buffoon tendencies which have been portrayed by my supposed interlocutor (Author 2023). The latter observation is informed by the fact that Mpofo (2023, May 15) has had the audacity to recently write a subject-less email message to the author and make the following intimidating call: "Stop embarrassing yourself by publishing poorly thought out essays". The author finds this call not worthy of an email response. Mpofo does not have moral or epistemic *locus standi* to dictate what the current author may publish or may not publish, hence his posture as a self-appointed intellectual policeman can only exist at the level of ideation. For someone with an appetite for rants and trends on Facebook to go private in denying and contesting the work of his self-made opponent may be a reflection that he had met his intellectual Waterloo (Royal Welch Fusiliers Museum 2023).

To enhance the readability of this paper it is structurally arranged as follows: The first section takes the form of this introduction, which provides a general orientation of the research. The 2<sup>nd</sup> second section is the theoretical and methodological framing. The 3<sup>rd</sup> section is entitled "“I am of Unisa”, “I am of Wits”, “I am of Turf”", which analyses the political instrumentalization of universities to settle petty scores with no value to knowledge and human capital development. This is followed by section four which addresses the Polemics of knowledge construction in South Africa. "Rethinking Gukurahundi studies' status in academia" captures the essence of section five. Emerging from this, the paper is concluded in the 5<sup>th</sup> section by summing up key arguments derived from the findings of this research.

## **Theoretical and methodological framing**

This paper is underpinned by Afrocentric theory as articulated by Asante (2003). It also draws from the works of other Afrocentric advocates such as Mazama (2003) and Modupe (2003), just to mention a few. The choice of Afrocentricity as a theoretical microscope for this paper was informed by the fact that it permits for the real expression of the leading voice of the author, who is an African; research and write from his lived and insider experience as African academic in no less than four Black universities in Africa and South Africa in particular. Equally important, the author's supposed interlocutor is an African of Zimbabwean origin. The bone of contention is the politics of scholarship in South Africa, which can best be understood when located within a broader African continental context. These are some of the factors that make the current paper Afrocentric in content and texture. Equally important, the research of this paper has benefitted from the broader framework of Health Sciences, anatomy in particular.

In this paper, Afrocentric anatomy denotes the study of body structure and relationships among structures through dissection which is based on African experience and value system (Bailey 2017). Looking at the position of Mpofu as an Associate Professor against the recurrence of his Facebook rants, he might be forgiven for not really knowing what he is exactly on. Therefore, a synthesis of his rants with Afrocentric anatomy may be logically correct. If his Facebook rants are anything to go by, his behaviour is reminiscent of an injured lion that wants to roar.

This paper adopts an auto-ethnographic approach in line with the Afrocentric tradition (Eloff, 2016). As a lover of stories, the author partly uses them as qualitative materials in this paper. In this regard, this paper is based on interdisciplinary discourse analysis in its broadest form. The findings emerging from this discourse are critically and descriptively analyzed. Then, the analysed data is presented in themes and sub-themes as it has been briefly touched on the introduction and as it shall also be seen hereunder.

## **“I am of Unisa”, “I am of Wits”, “I am of Turf”**

Regardless of their richness in vitriol, let me put it up front that I am unconditionally welcoming Mpofo's views on my academic work. I appreciate that he has decided to express his views so strongly instead of keeping these to himself. Without a doubt, he is entitled to these views. Because I am not his Facebook friend, I am not able to directly respond to his views as they relate to my work. It is also not in my nature to engage on “dog eat dog” debate on social media or tabloids. A lot is at stake. The only thing I intend to do is to provide information that the reader might not be aware of. South Africa's ministerial advisory body on policy issues in Higher Education, the Council on Higher Education (CHE) operates on the basis that there is one higher education system in the country (Saidi 2003, May 5). This is because it does not want to perpetuate previous fragmentation of higher education into this or that type of universities. Yet such an avoided characterisation at times speaks to the stubborn practical realities of some universities. For Saidi (2003, May 5), CHE and South Africa at large cannot move from the past by going back to the past. Contrary to this and typical of the beneficiaries of “divide and rule” tactics, Mpofo forgets that regardless of our institutional affiliation, we research, write and publish on our personal capacity (Chen 2013). Therefore, it is wrong to establish a false link between my individual intellectual contributions and my alma mater – University of Limpopo. In doing a pseudo-rejoinder to our paper on Gukurahundi and blanket criticism to any of my academic works he could access, Mpofo hides and implicitly denies his current institutional affiliation, the University of South Africa (Unisa) where he is gainfully employed as an Associate Professor in Media and Communication Studies (University of South Africa 2003). Even the signature on his private Gmail email account only links him to his alma mater and in the process the current employer, the University of South Africa is erased (Mpofo 2023). I cannot imagine of any reason for this hiding and denial except the fact that Unisa's Professoriate has recently come under serious spotlight due to some new questionable criteria for academic

recruitment and promotion which is not in line with international best practices (Mosia 2023).

Contextually, Mpofu conveniently identifies himself by the University of Witwatersrand (Wits), an institution of higher learning wherein he obtained his Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in Media Studies. In doing this, he equally parcels me into the Turfloop based University of Limpopo (UL). I do not have a problem in being associated with a great University of Limpopo as my alma mater or employer. In fact, I consider myself lucky to be a part of such a university with so much liberation heritage for having served as a site of the struggle against brutal and inhuman system of apartheid. To add, I am also a product of the undiluted Black experience and consciousness. My main concern is when Wits is appropriated into a contestation with UL because of the epistemic difference between two individuals. Wits was established during the year 1922 as an English speaking university. On the other hand, UL was established in the year 2005 with its forerunner- University of the North birthed in the year 1969 (Vuma 2022). Therefore, the current standing of both Wits and UL is a by-product of particular age, history and evolution.

I do not have a problem with those who feel that Wits would nationally fit in the mode of Ivy League in the United States of America (USA). The reality is that UL is not in a competition with Wits. In fact, UL is running its own race, shaped and informed by its unique political and socio-economic circumstances. Each of these universities have a strength in one or two disciplines. Related to this, More (2021) submits that he does not know of any university which exceedingly excels in all disciplines or aspects of academia. Also having graduated a PhD at Wits does not mean that those who graduated elsewhere in South Africa are less intellectual or inferior. The question of intellectual prowess of a particular scholar has little to do with the university where he graduated his PhD. Even if such may have a bearing, it cannot be generalised. Excellence in scholarship has more to do with the commitment and mobilisation of the intellectual efforts of individual academics. Thus, in the so called Bush Universities you would also find rare

gems in certain disciplines. They do not even need to relocate to gain the necessary recognition. Hence, their skills and expertise are more need in such previously disadvantaged universities (More 2021; Twala 2023). These are the realities which are consciously hidden and denied by Mpfu. If it is unconscious on his part to ignore them, he may be forgiven because for him and Ndebele henchmen, having studied in a university based in the Gauteng province of South Africa is probably an achievement. The foregoing observation should be understood within the context that under Zimbabwe African National Union - Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) rule, Bulawayo's (a Zimbabwean city dominated by Ndebele speaking people) development was arrested and marginalised. Because of this, it has been a dream of most Ndebele of Zimbabwe origin to settle in the developed Johannesburg for studying and/or employment. For a visitor like Mpfu to re-affirm the fracturing of universities in South Africa's higher education system is unfortunate and exposes his lack of full appreciation for having learned so much from one of South Africa's universities, a very privilege denied to many South Africans.

### **Polemics of knowledge construction in South Africa**

Mpfu draws from Hanna Arendt to argue that our article on Gukurahundi and others are poorly conceptualised and written. He does this because he considers himself to be the greatest, and anybody who disagrees with him theoretically or epistemologically is reduced to an academic "initiate" or "novice". While he claims to be open to debate about his research, Mpfu's rants reveal a total opposite as they are rich in vulgar (spiced with condescending attitude towards Black South Africans) and poor in intellectual rigour. Mpfu further rants that "I think if you are an aspiring academic writer it's important to be exposed to poor writing so that you can be aware of blind spots". This point is debatable. The question of whether a writing is good or poor is dependent on a number of factors including the epistemic location of the writer and/or observer. For Mpfu; I and my colleague cannot research or write; and typical of most foreign nationals'

entitlement in South Africa, he is so emboldened to tell us where to get off in terms of our standing in our disciplines as if he is a know it all academic. While current trends in research trends towards interdisciplinarity, I need to confirm that research tends to be disciplinary based (ASSAf 2021). As such, I should do a justice to this intellectual project by giving a disclaimer that I am not well grounded in research for the Arts i.e. Languages and Communication. Because of this I am at pains to explain seriousness of any scholar who research and engage on the so called “political of laughter”, one of Mpofo’s research niche (Mpofo 2021). What is the policy implications of such types of research? These are some of the works that may have value for the Arts. For someone coming from applied Social Sciences, it is difficult to fathom how does such even assists us to find lasting solutions to some of the pernicious political and socio-economic problems (i.e. unemployment, poverty, inequality) in the society.

In fact, what Mpofo has mastered is the art of shifting goal posts and/or willy-nilly changing rules in the middle of the game. For example, he self-servingly posits that “My name deserves to be on better journals than these Turkish rags”. He takes the debate further by publicly warning “Avoid Adonis and Abbey Journals”. When engaged privately and in confidence by one of my colleagues, whom he regards as a friend, he munches the conversation and post on Twitter with the highlight of her name and our university. I do not want to speak about the betrayal of trust by an Associate Professor (Mpofo) who acts unprofessionally by publicly posting a private conversation with someone who ought to be his confidante. I also do not want to talk about Mpofo’s newly found condescending attitude against the University of Limpopo, his former employer. This is the very university that contributed to his academic growth by giving him (foreign national) a rare tertiary teaching opportunity when it was not fashionable to do so considering the higher levels of unemployment among the locals plus the fact that Media and Communication is not a critical scarce skill in South Africa (Shai & Mothibi 2015). Before Mpofo fictitiously imagines the power relations between me

and the colleague referred to above and others not mentioned here, let me place it on record. Ethically, I will never reveal the real names or identifiable personal traits of my personal informants unless permission has been granted. The latter is difficult to obtain because Mpofo has mastered the art of violently roaring towards the young Black South African academics who dare raise their heads on topical and sensitive issues involving South Africa based foreign nationals.

My concern is Mpofo's pompous attitude, overwhelming self-confidence and self-hate. He rubbishes journals in the Global South nation-states such as Turkey and Nigeria as rags, which do not deserve to feature his supposedly "holy" name. Ironically, he previously published in Adonis and Abbey's *Journal of African Films & Diaspora Studies* (JAFDIS). Suddenly, African-owned Adonis and Abbey's journals are bad. His claim is just petty and unfounded, hence Adibe (2023, May 26) identifies the major highlights of Adonis and Abbey including but not limited to the following: "In its 2022 global ranking of journals released this May 2023, one of our journals, *JAFDIS* became a Q2 journal. Q1 journals are the top 25% of journals in their category; Q2 are top 26-50% in their category...". Contrary to the above, Mpofo reduces the circle of good or reputable publishers of journals to Taylor and Francis, Sage, Intellect and Elsevier. All of these are rooted in the Western world and surely, with Mpofo and others' obsession with whiteness and Global North's validation, it is clear that we are far from achieving real mental decolonization. It may not be a stretch too far to believe that since there are bad journals in Turkey and Nigeria, there are also good journals. In fact, now and then, some of the same Western monopolies in scholarly publishing attempt to buy the ownership of the good journals whose owners are in the Global South owned. They do this so that Africa and the Global South may continue to be at the periphery in terms of knowledge creation, management, dissemination and promotion (Phakeng 2015). The emerging prejudices of the journals from this part of the world does not have a scientific basis. The only problem is that they have featured voices which

are not in sync with Mpfu's narrative on Gukurahundi. This is nothing more than bitterness (which is like cancer) on the part of Mpfu and if he does not quickly adapt or deal with it, it will eat more upon him as the host. Off the cuff, if you were to ask me to sample the academic works which should not have been published. I will enlist Mpfu's (2017; 2019) journal publications on Gukurahundi because they are bereft of theory. This is critical in my discipline. But I will not do so because I am no expert in Media Studies, which appears to rely much on simple critical analysis or discourse analysis which tends to regurgitate existing knowledge(s), if Mpfu's publications are anything to go by.

### **Rethinking Gukurahundi studies' status in academia**

It is an irrefutable fact that the narratives around Gukurahundi are diverse and often driven by political and ethnic imperatives. The narratives can be summarised into main four: state sponsored genocide, anti-dissident operation, political power struggle and denial and silence (Ndlovu 2019). With all this competing narratives, Mpfu simply wants to box me and my colleague to the narrative of state sponsored genocide, which for many years has become an agenda of Mpfu and the entire army of bitter and directionless "gukurahundists".

Flowing from the above, Mpfu contends that he struggles "when weak scholars want to engage me on things they have no clue about. Also simple logical reasoning and argumentation is at large making a mockery of titles people like ... hold as so called "professors". This remains a sweeping statement which cannot be qualified. We may not be Zimbabwean Ndebeles. But that does not mean that we do not know and we cannot formulate well-informed views or positions on Gukurahundi. Anybody who attempts to exclude us from this discourse due to our ethnic belonging or nationality is an enemy of the pursuit of truth, or simply put "science". In fact, such people have a propensity to aggressively push gate-keeping for the purpose of

preserving their narrow and short term personal goals at the expense of the broad and long term agenda of the scholarly community (Sebola 2018).

Unfortunately, and as Tinyiko Maluleke correctly argues, academia is different from sports. In academia no one can declare his/her greatness, more especially because each day is a learning day and we incrementally up our knowledge. I do not wish to defend myself from Mpofu's roar. The simple point to be made is that Mpofu does not have an authoritative voice to pass judgement on my scholarship. He does not have expertise in Political Science and/or International Relations. The foregoing observation should be understood within the context of the centrality of peer review in academia (Sebola 2021). But his academic over-reach is not new in South Africa. In fact, it is an emerging tendency that cannot be delinked to the wanton de-professionalisation of Political Science in South Africa. It is not uncommon for any newspaper reader who can speak good English to falsely claim credentials as a political expert or analyst in South Africa without any consequences. At the end, our nation is fed with shallow and at times, embarrassing political commentary by those who exploit the fame or populism that comes with posturing as a political expert even though they may not be trained or well-grounded in the discipline of Political Science.

Arendt is one of the 20th century influential political historians of German origin who later relocated to the United States of America (USA). Her provocation on research, writing and publishing is a by-product of Euro-American consciousness. For her emotionally discharged, general and provocative thoughts to be parcelled out and imposed to make sense of the state of scholarship in South Africa is tantamount to the commission of gross substantive errors (Azibo 2011). Safe for Mpofu's obsession with whiteness as espoused through abusive relationship with Wits and over-reliance on Euro-American consciousness, I have a difficulty in locating an excuse for his failure to draw from consciousness in the Global South to make sense of my thoughts. Mpofu claims that he knows me. But he goes on to mis-label me as a Professor of Cultural and Political Studies. This amounts to

conflation of my administrative appointment and academic designation. Administratively, I happen to serve as a Head of the multi-disciplinary Department of Cultural and Political Studies. Among others, this department consists of units in Political Science and International Politics, History and Folklore Studies, Philosophy and etc. Academically, I am a Political Scientist by training with a concentration on International Relations and African Politics. This is common knowledge among my peers as confirmed through my National Research Foundation (NRF) evaluation and rating. These are raw facts that are available in the public domain. But Mpfu still has the courage to write that I have not really struck him as an expert on any given niche.

The author of *Kwame Nkrumah and the Pan-African Ideal: Debates and Contestations* has in the recent past successfully applied to the NRF for the recognition of African Affairs as a field of specialisation (Makgetlaneng 2021; Makgetlaneng 2022). Our work largely belongs to this specialisation, even though its interdisciplinary nature also forces it to interweave with other fields of specialisation such as Decolonial Studies, Post-colonial studies and etc. The bigger challenge with Mpfu's conceptualisation of a research niche or field of specialisation is the fact that it is a manifestation of Eurocentric construct (Mokgoatšana 1999). The latter's existentialism is based on the fracturing of knowledge domain, a very act which does not find expression in the African thought system and pattern (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018). To add to Mpfu's tortured consciousness is the fact that he laments our commission of surface editorial error in the spelling of Gukurahundi. He forgets that Gukurahundi is found in Shona, a language that is completely foreign to us (his self-made adversaries). I am making this point because his roar is also presented as a call for three former colleagues, their friends and sympathisers to join him in his desperate attempt to undermine my scholarship. It is also interesting to note that Mpfu goes on to violate or corrupt my name by misspelling it. Whether this is intentional or not is beyond the comprehension of this paper. It is enough to highlight that mine is Sepedi, a language which is

also foreign to Mporu and the very fact that may cause his forgiveness in this regard. I do not have any reason whatsoever to hate or quarrel with Mporu led coalition of the intellectually wounded or brutalised. This is because mine and them has never been personal, even though they appear to prefer that level. Ours has always been about theoretical and epistemological differences which are normal and should never be used to force a false reconciliation between us.

## **Conclusion**

In the final analysis, it could be concluded that institutions of higher learning in South Africa selects people for various assignments based on expertise, and not institutional affiliation. For example, I have been part of projects in statutory institutions, scholarly associations and many universities in South Africa and beyond. I was not approached to be part of such projects on the basis of the affiliation to my alma mater. Like many others and regardless of my alma mater's ugly past as the victim of inhuman and brutal systems of colonialism, imperialism and coloniality, I was selected to be part of these projects simply because I have a traceable track record of research and publication in a particular research niche, which is only un-identifiable to Mporu, the self-proclaimed "greatest of all time [GOAT]". Assuming that my supposed interlocutor and his cheer fans will at some point come to their true senses, the subject of this paper remains an intellectual mine for the furthering of the contestation of ideas about nation healing and building, scholarship and politics in Africa and the Global South. This paper will certainly lay a fertile ground for the realisation of such a painful but necessary conversation between scholars and practitioners.

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