Seven Days in May: An Afrocentric Diagnosis of Shepherd Mpofu’s Facebook Roar

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Abstract

As a relatively new media, social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp and Instagram have received the attention of scholars emanating from Political Science, Public Administration, Media and Communication Studies, inter alia. Given that it is difficult to gaze the measure of adequacy, it suffices to mention that much of the scholarly works on this subject are disciplinary inward looking and Western centred- which exposes them to deficiency in capturing the African reality in its totality. As such, this interdisciplinary paper examines a sample of Mpofu’s Facebook roar during May 2023 on the basis of an Afrocentric lens and auto-ethnographic approach. The key argument of this paper is that Mpofu’s roar does not have a sound academic basis. But it is a revelation of underlying scholarly limits (enter profanity) which are common to all but worse for those with troubled consciousness.

Keywords: scholarly schizophrenia, Afrocentricity, Facebook, roar, diagnosis

1. Introduction

According to the Bible’s book of Genesis (Chapter, 2: 1), God constructed the world in six days and rested on the 7th day. Similarly, we also learn from the Bible’s book of Exodus (Chapter, 25: 37) that God directed the following to the King of Israelites, Mosis: “Then make the seven lamps for the lamp stand, and set them so they reflect their light forward”. For this reason and depending on how one reads the calendar, the 7th day of the week (Sunday) or just the number “7” carries a lot of personal and spiritual significance especially for the Judaic and Christian believers. In Modern scholarship of South Africa, the 7th day carries a memorable and mysterious value in the context of understanding the relationship between local academics and expatriate academics (Khunou, Phaswana, Khoza-Shangase & Canham, 2019). The essence of the precarious relationship between local and expatriate academics in South Africa can be derived from Shepherd Mpofu’s Facebook roar. It is instructive for the reader to note that in literal speak, a roar is a prolonged and deep outcry retorted by a lion (or other such big wild animal). 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 most instances when the cry or sound is made by a less harmful animal, it symbolises a plea for assistance.

What follows from the above is that on the 1st May 2023, the current author (2023) has published an academic paper about Facebook rants (also read as roar) in an international journal. The key argument in such a paper was that Facebook rants are emblematic of the extent to which social media can serve as a threat to scientific knowledge creation, development and promotion in South Africa. This point is aptly captured Ngeaweni (2023, online) who argues that “Facebook is the place for anyone with a story to tell but whose shoddy work has been rejected by publishers and newspapers. Now anyone with data and a device can publish their screeds”. In this context, since the publication of my above-mentioned article until the 7th day of May 2023, Mpofu has been on a Facebook rage questioning, insulting and casting aspersions on the scholarship of the current author. While Mpofu claims excellence in sarcasm at his Facebook handle, his Facebook posts during the 1st week of May 2023 were extreme, or rather scholarly schizophrenic (enter profanity) to say the least (Kirchherr, 2022). It is said that wrong and wrong do not make right. As such, I should state beforehand that this paper does not have an underlying motive of outsmarting Mpofu in the trade of vitriol. The reference to scholarly schizophrenia is a manifestation of the author’s invocation of profanity, which is generally important in life (including academia) as it keeps us wide awake or standing with our feet against the undesirable (Kirchherr, 2022). This is not new to scientific writing. It was previously tried and tested by scholars such as Kirchherr (2022) and Tourish (2020) when they contextualised alarming terms (“bullshit” scholarship and “nonsense” scholarship) in Sustainability and Management Studies, respectively.

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It is worth noting that Mpofu is an Associate Professor in Media and Communication Studies at the oldest and long distance institution of higher learning in the country (South Africa), University of South Africa (UNISA, 2023). Before he joined UNISA, I previously worked with him at a University in Limpopo, Faculty of Humanities but in different schools and departments. Since I was in the Union leadership and University Management in my capacity as a Head of Department, Mpofu would now and then, use me as a sound board for clarity on issues pertaining to academic promotion and remuneration. He enjoyed these benefits due to our proximity, whose foundation was the fact that we had a mutual friend. While there (University in Limpopo) he clearly had professional challenges which brought into serious question his preparedness to become a Professor, or let alone an Associate Professor. I do not wish to dwell much on this, lest I be accused from deviating from contentious issues of our debate by becoming unnecessarily personal. The English adage correctly counsels: “do not wrestle with the pig in a mud”, unless you are ready to be dirty. I am clearly not ready for such. It is partly because of this reason that I have refused the temptation to join the debate on Facebook and other social media platforms. True to the decorum befitting a Professor, I am using the current paper to (re)direct and (re) appropriate this discourse to the academic landscape.

In this argumentative paper, the author examines a sample of Mpofu’s rants through an Afrocentric lens (Asante, 2003). It is important for these rants to be consistently and systematically studied for the purpose of explaining and understanding what they truly represent. The importance of this paper cannot be emphasised as it gives a genuine voice to Black South Africans, who are normally black-mailed, short-changed and ultimately, silenced in topical but sensitive discourses of this nature (Khunou, Phaswana, Khoza-Shangase & Canham, 2019). The silencing of Black South African academics in this regard come to fruition through the cauldron of threats, blackmailing and gatekeeping as some of the key features of the deep collusion among the direct and indirect multiple marginalisation of the locals in the land of their birth. Structurally and for the purpose of enhancing readability, this paper is made up of five key sections which are sequentially titled as follows: Introduction, Theoretical and Methodological construction, What is in my Name?, Molemogi o phala mohlalefi (reconnoitre is better than a wise person) and conclusion.

2. Theoretical and Methodological Construction

Theoretically, this paper is underpinned by Afrocentricity as articulated by Asante (2003). It also draws from the works of other Afrocentric pioneers such as Mazama (2003) and Modupe (2003), inter alia. The application of Afrocentricity as a theoretical lens 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 South Africa’s higher education system (Milam, 1992; Azibo, 2011; Eloff, 2016). 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 (Asante, 2003). These are some of the factors that make the current paper Afrocentric in content and posture. Equally important, the research of this paper has also benefitted from insights in theology, African-centred psychopathology and periodisation (Mahonen, 2021; Shai & Zondi, 2020; Vuma, 2022). The place of theological, psychological and periodical insights in this paper is that of a re-enforcer of Afrocentricity as its theoretical framework. The foregoing submission should be understood within the context that Afrocentricity allows for the plurality of voices towards epistemic freedom (Asante, 2003; Mazama, 2003).

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, an examination of his roar with an alternative and contextual Afrocentric lens may be logically correct. If his Facebook rants are anything to go by, he appears to be intellectually frustrated, jealous and very petty against those who are not in his ethnic or national circle; thus behaving like a rented gun in his treatment of other scholars’ intellectual contributions. Far ahead of his time, Pixley Ka Isaka Seme (as quoted Jacob Zuma, 2014, online) foresaw the dangers of national chauvinism when he bemoaned that "The demon of tribalism and ethnicity 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."

It is instructive for the reader to recall the intrinsic relationship between theoretical framework and research design. Hence, the choice of theory is critical and intentional as it ultimately informs the choice and use of relevant research methods. In line with the Afrocentric tradition, this paper adopts an auto-ethnographic approach (Eloff, 2016). As a lover of African culture and heritage, 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 analysed. Then, the analysed data is presented in sub-themes as it shall be seen hereunder.

3. What Is in My Name?

Naming is a sacred undertaking for us as Africans. For this reason, when a child is born in a family, a designated elder gives him/her a name as a form of identity. Such an identity carries a lot of spiritual, personal, familial and/or circumstantial value for the bearer of the name, his/her family and clan plus his/her future standing in the society. In his
nants, Mpofu stubbornly and arrogantly infantilises my surname by wrongly addressing me as “shai”. There is no surname or name on earth which begins in a small letter. But scholars such as Mpofu have funny excuses to insult my surname, which is the pride of my family and clan. In the same token, he corrupts with contempt my first name and wrongly addresses me as “Kgotatso”. The current author is alive to the reality of the forceful imposition of Christian and colonial names to the Africans by the apartheid government. For his identify to be corrupted in public and academic circles by Mpofu really serves as a painful reminder of the extent to which apartheid and colonialism has tempered with our (Black South Africans) collective memory. In relation to this, Ramoupi and Worger (2015, p. 9) would correctly argue that this feels I am “recolonised” and my “African identity and African name apartheidised again!” This is because I go by my real identity, Kgotatso Shai. Kgotatso is a Sepedi name which means Comfort, someone who consoles during grief and/or any difficulties. Shai as a sur/name is derived from Hebrew and it means a “gift”. Any deliberate distortion of my identity amounts to an extreme form of epistemic injustice. Hence, it does not only refuse and deny me of my real name or identity, it also hides and erases my ownership of anything rightfully belonging (inclusive of intellectual contributions) to me. It also robs my family, clan, community and country of a well-deserved association with my complete intellectual and other legacies. The foregoing analysis should be understood within the context that identity represents one’s destiny, his/her envisaged personality and desires of his/her heart.

When we greet in Zulu we say “sawubona”, simply meaning “I recognise you”. Clearly, Mpofu does not see me and therefore, it logically follows that he does not recognise me. I do not want to blame his family for not teaching him as a visitor in South Africa to respect his host. I think he is emboldened by a white university, where he obtained his Doctor of Philosophy (PhD). It is at this university where he seems to have earned the status and privilege of becoming an honorary white, a deceived identity which tortured his consciousness to a point where he does not even see us (Black South Africans) as worthy interlocutors. It is for this reason that he is quick to repeatedly rubbish my rejoinder as “not peer reviewed”, “pathetic scholarship” and “terrible”. One would expect that Mpofu would desist from making reckless and prophetic observations, whose combination does not have a place in academia. There is no gainsaying that Mpofu does not have a monopoly of intelligence. If out of jealousy, pettiness or condescending attitude (Khunou, Phaswana, Khoza-Shangase & Canham, 2019), he does not see value in my scholarship; he clearly forgets that there are some who embrace such in private and public spaces. If fact, there is a feeling among some that the subject of the relation between local and expatriate academics needs to be deeply delved in without a fear or favour. Whether my contribution is pathetic/ terrible or not is immaterial. The fact is that it has reminded its target audience that “there is a conversation to be had here”. For South African scholars (especially those of Black ancestry), being silent about toxicity in South Africa’s higher education system would not spare them the wrath of the Mpofus of this world. Perhaps, the bigger and timely question is that when Mpofu and his henchmen are done with the current author, who would be their next soft target for academic terrorism?

Even if he (Mpofu) can demonise my writing as “bad”, he cannot fool all members of the scholarly community. They can read between the lines and make their own judgement. Only time will tell to reveal the right standing of my writing, which clearly improves day in and out through practice. The demonisation and criminalisation of my scholarship is one of the most un-sustainable ways of academic survival. He can stand on the roof-top and insult. But this is too late, this entitlement of some expatriate academics including him and their condescending behaviour against the locals has been exposed through my writing (as an activist scholar), which is not only academic but it has an intentional advocacy role (Author, 2021). As a scholar, Mpofu should know better that our writing ought to be based on testable evidence instead of prophesies and superstitions. Thus, his claim that my rejoinder was “not peer reviewed” remains an embarrassing wild guess which cannot be proven beyond a reasonable doubt.

Molemogi o phala mohlalefi

Molemogi o phala mohlalefi is a Sepedi metaphoric expression which denotes that reconnoitre is better than a wise person. This is because a wise person is normally not amenable to advise, forgetting that every day and encounter is a learning curve. The above expression gives some of the pointers which are critical for understanding the broader context of what ought to be a robust debate between the author of this paper and his supposed interlocutor. Out of frustration to defend an argument about Gukurahundi, which is apparently challenged by a no-body or novice on Zimbabwean political history; Mpofu has resorted to following and reading some of my works on Media and Politics and International Relations. In particular, he also read my PhD thesis obviously with no intention to learn but to look for non-existent weaknesses which he can use to insult me and anybody who has contributed to my academic growth and development as a Black South African (Author, 2016). Typical of his arrogance, he engaged on selective reading of some parts especially chapter one and three. On chapter one, he laments “This is where trouble started. How did the supervisors let this through as PhD research qns?”

Except for convergence on Afrocentric theoretical framework, it is worth noting that my PhD thesis does not have any sound bearing on my intellectual contributions on Gukurahundi. Because my interlocutor cannot tender a sustainable argument which thoroughly and comprehensively engages our bone of contention, which is the conceptualisation and contextualisation of Gukurahundi in Zimbabwe; he is now all over my being/person without a clear academic focus. This
is at the centre of the lack of rigour in his pseudo rejoinder. Hence, rigour demands thorough and comprehensive thinking. Returning to his qualms about my PhD thesis, it is safe to highlight that his criticism is even on peripheral issues. The substance of the thesis on United States of America’s (USA) post-Cold War foreign policy towards Africa is not his forte. The problematisation of my thesis’s research questions shows Mpofu’s lack of the full appreciation of the post-graduate supervision at my alma mater and perhaps, elsewhere in South Africa (Thani & Wessels, 2023).

For the purposes of completeness, the blame of the supervision team on the quality of my PhD thesis is self-defeating and reflective of the condescending attitude against innocent Black South Africans whose only sin is to successfully mentor another (young) Black South African (Khunou, Phaswana, Khoza-Shangase & Canham, 2019). A thesis can be understood as an independent study which result in the production of a long scholarly treatise in fulfilment of the requirements for a PhD. It is generally accepted as a testament for the candidate’s ability to become an independent or established researcher. As such, a candidate plays a critical role on his/her PhD journey than any other actor. But to reduce everything wrong or weak about a particular thesis to supervisors amount to short circuiting. Before a thesis is produced, the first thing to be developed is a research proposal. With the limited assistance of the supervisors, the proposal is developed and owned by the candidate. The role of the supervisors is to critically read it, provide feedback for the proposal’s quality enhancement. With the concurrence of the candidate, the proposal is processed for evaluation at different levels ranging from the department, school, faculty and central. It is only when the research and ethics committees at all relevant levels grant approval that the study can be operationalised.

Post operationalisation of the study, a complete thesis which satisfies both the candidate and supervisors is sent out for external assessment following a delicate nomination and approval of assessors who are experts in a particular field (Thani & Wessels, 2023). In some cases, a student’s thesis can be subjected for external assessment without the approval of the supervisor. This normally happens in conflictual instances which may result in the breakdown of collegiality in student-supervisor relationship. The research questions that Mpofu rubbishes were part of the proposal which passed all internal evaluation processes at the university and ultimately, were part of thesis which was passed by expert external assessors. Clearly, Mpofu is the only person who has qualms with this research questions, yet he is not an expert on International Politics or let alone, Research Methodology. For someone who is an Associate Professor, such narcissism should be a cause of concern for everyone whose fate and future is tied to South Africa’s higher education system (Asante, 2020). Mpofu simply rants. He does not specifically inform his/her cheer-followers on what is essentially wrong with the research questions which are logically derived from the research objectives of my study. The problem with my supposed interlocutor is an appetite for selective reading, which causes him to make sense of some research issues out of context. Besides the fact that Mpofu’s speciality (Media Studies) disqualifies him as an authoritative voice on International Politics, the situation is made worse by the reality that at the time of writing this paper he had never successfully supervised to completion a PhD in his field or any.

To answer Mpofu’s question above, the internal and external approval of the research questions of my thesis was based on academic merit, not love or hate affair. Related to this, Mpofu again rants “The faculty is made what”? Sadly, Mpofu simply poses questions about facts that are not clear to him instead of providing alternatives. Here, I can only suspect that the problem is his narrow conception of a faculty as an academic staff compliment or as a group of related academic departments. It is instructive for the reader to bear in mind that in the context of my thesis, the term “faculty” was never applied as an administrative unit (Asante, 2007). It was used as a mental division of knowledge. Last time I checked, Mpofu did not have serious linguistic or scholarly challenges. But his Facebook roar may serve as a stark reminder of Freud Sigmund’s counsel that we are all mad, what differs is the degree of madness. Our late grandfather and well-known mango farmer at Mabins A in Limpopo (Aron Morema) aptly captured this in our home language Sepedi: “re gafa ka moka”. In addressing this point, Lepuru (2022, p. 8) counsels that “Epistemic revolution as the basis of national liberation requires a certain kind of madness”. This observation carries a lot of lessons for those who want to turn negativities in a roar into useful tools of teaching, learning and research.

4. Conclusion

Based on the discussions above, it is clear that this paper is an interesting read and it captures very novel and yet underexplored affliction of academic bullying (also read as terrorism) in the academic landscape - a very toxicity that can be deep as and when it rears its ugly head on social media circles. This paper is laden with vast beneficence to the intellectual community and society at large as it is poised to guard against the pollution of global knowledge by self-proclaimed revered, or self-proclaimed veritable scholars. Furthermore, this paper represents a relatively fair confrontation of the academic tragedy in Africa and South Africa in particular, where academic narcissism is relentlessly occupying the higher education corridors unabated. That being said, this paper takes a commendable paradigm shift of safeguarding young and promising scholars from the ignorance of the ageing Professoriate, some of whom think that the excellence of scholarship is in the ethnicity, nationality and age of a scholar.
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