

Old Times, New Perspectives: Afrocentric teaching of the South African War at the University of Limpopo, By Lebogang Legodi



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Abstract

During and after the student protests across South African campuses in 2015 and 2016, there were several calls for the 'decolonisation' and 'Africanisation' of university curricula and syllabi. This was not a new development on some, particularly historically black campuses, but this was the first time that the issue was given such public prominence in the media. What followed these events and their coverage was a scholarly response. At one HBU, the University of Limpopo, the teaching of history has attempted to respond to this call for transformation. This paper focuses on the ongoing attempts to teach history from an Afrocentric perspective by assessing the way in which the South African War (also known as the Anglo-Boer War) is taught. The paper concludes that much more needs to be done to give students the substantial benefits of learning Afrocentric historiography.

Following the rise and spread of the #FeesMustFall student movement across campuses in South Africa in 2015 and 2016, the call for Africanisation of university curricula was among the objectives of the manifesto launched by students to university councils and governments (Langa, Ndelu, Edwin, & Vilakazi, 2017). Although the call for free, quality, decolonised education is not new, especially in Historically Black Universities (HBU) such as the University of Limpopo (UL) and Tshwane University of Technology (TUT), it has received much attention in both public and scholarly circles after protests from students in Historically White Universities (HWU) such as the University of the Witwatersrand (WITS) and the University of Cape Town (UCT) consequent to mainstream media coverage of the protests.

At the University of Limpopo, with its motto “Finding solutions for Africa”, the History lecturers in the Department of Cultural and Political Studies profess to adopt a lens of Afrocentricity in the study and teaching of the South African War in a course called ‘South African History since the eighteenth century (HHIA 022)’. The Afrocentric paradigm as articulated by Molefe Asante is meant to provide an alternative standpoint that is Africa-centered. According to Archie Mafeje (in Adesina 2008), Afrocentricity advocates for centeredness and grounding of African people and is against the ‘universal’ application of knowledge from the West. Afrocentricity seeks to locate Africans as subjects and agents in work which renders Africa as the subject of investigation (Mazama, 2003).

The South African War, which is also known as the Anglo-Boer War, had the participation of all groups residing in South Africa at the time. However, because of the dominant traditions of historiography in colonial and apartheid South Africa, knowledge production about the war was shaped and influenced by those in power, hence the war was regarded a “white man’s war”. Following academic historians such as Warwick (1984) and Nasson (1991), it is evident that research done and historiographies produced immediately after the war up until the 1970s were written under the misconception that the war was a “white man’s war” with only the participation of the

British and Boers, hence it was called the Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902 among the British, and the Second War of Independence in 1899-1902 among Afrikaner nationalists. Other, later contributions by historians such as Nkuna (1999), Giliomee and Mbenga (2007), Delius (2007) and Mbenga (2014) expanded the extant body of literature adding to the growing historiography on the South African (this is discussed in detail below).

At the University of Limpopo, the currently prescribed and recommended textbooks for studying and teaching history acknowledge the role played by blacks in the war and also regards the war as a South African War instead of the Anglo-Boer war. Although some of the historians (see Smith 1996 & Shillington 2012) fail to include the participation of blacks in the war from its outbreak, creating a false impression that black people's involvement in the war was only either on the side of the Boers or British later (in the middle of the war) and that they did not have any other reason to participate in the conflict after the expiration of Paul Kruger's ultimatum to the British in 11 October 1899.

A wide range of literature covering the South African War includes the role of Africans in combat and non-combat roles. Academic work on the South African war from the last 30 years which elucidate the roles black South Africans played in the conflict include contributions by historians such as Smith (1996), Stapleton (2010), Giliomee and Mbenga (2007), Nkuna (1999) and Delius (2007), *inter alia*. When assessing these writers on the South African War (1899-1902), most of the contributions are generated from the Euro-American worldview which is heavily influenced by Euro-American cultural value systems grounded in the experiences of Europeans and Americans. This Euro-American worldview further reproduces itself through the over-use of conventional theories such as realism, Marxism and liberalism, with Marxist historiography and liberal historiography dominating contemporary African historiography.

Smith (1996) seems to believe that the war resulted from a conflict between the Boers and the British over the Zuid Afrikaanse Republic (ZAR) (including its then newly discovered mineral resources) which later became the Transvaal province of the apartheid Republic of South Africa. The root causes of the war include the European settlement, expansion and conquest, all the latter mentioned affected the whole population and the future of South Africa (Smith, 1996:10-11). Smith provides a liberal approach in his analyses of the South African war. The participation of black people was largely unaccounted for in his work.

On the other hand, Stapleton (2010) provides a Marxist historian's account of the South African War. In his chapter titled 'The Gold Wars (1886-1910)', he states how the war broke out because of the discovery of gold in 1886. Stapleton's contribution on the South African War does not provide black people's other reasons such as regaining their lost land to the Boers but only state their participation in the war when they sided either with the Boers or the British. Stapleton does not go on to include the prime factors that led Africans to participate in the war like he did with the British and Boers with the discovery of gold in 1886 and this justifies the myth that the war was between the two groups of white settlers and colonists, with blacks participating either on the Boer or British side.

Shillington (2012), like Stapleton, acknowledges gold mining on the Witwatersrand as one of the factors that led to the South African War. Moreover, his work includes the discovery of gold, the Jameson Raid and the domination of *uitlanders* (migrants from Europe newly arrived at the diamond- and gold fields at the end of the nineteenth century) in the British-dominated mining industry. Shillington also includes the participation of black people in the war, outlining how they were victims of and active participants in the war. However, he does not elaborate on the factors that led black people to participate in the war and why the term Anglo-Boer War is misleading.

On the other hand, Nkuna (1999) focuses on black South Africans (excluding Coloureds and Indians) in the war. Nkuna, however, still regards the British and the Boers as the main combatants in the war despite the works of earlier historians correcting this misconception. Nkuna argues that the Zulu, Xhosa, Bakgatla, Shangaan, Sotho, Swazi and Basotho joined in the middle of the “White Man’s War”. She further adds that some blacks’ participation in the war was for their own benefit, even if they participated on either the side of the British or the Boers.

Mbenga (in Delius 2007) states how the South African War affected everyone who lived in South Africa at the time. His chapter only focuses on black people in the then eastern Transvaal (today’s Mpumalanga). He asserts that blacks participated in the war against Boers for achieving their own agendas and objectives. He adds that another reason why black people participated in the war was the need to abolish poverty as there was unemployment due to the closing of gold mines and the 1900 general crop failure which most Africans relied on for employment in the agricultural sector of the time (Delius, 2007:207).

In their account of the war Gilliomee and Mbenga (2007) include the participation of the Barolong people siding with the British following decades of conflict over land with the Boers. They write about the participation of the Barolong in the event as a special case study rather than infusing their participation in the overall war, an additional or side feature of the main conflict between the Boers and the British. Gilliomee and Mbenga (2007:210) state that “Britain’s objective was not gold but the imposition of its supreme will over Boer republicanism and the securing of a South Africa loyal to the crown”. This portrayal is invested in Euro-American cultural value systems and experiences that heavily influence Gilliomee and Mbenga.

Given the extant historical writing that underpins that the South African War is a mis-termed war in South Africa influenced by the dominant historiographical traditions since the time the war took place, the University of Limpopo still uses the concept 'Anglo-Boer War' instead of 'the South African War'. Following the interviews with the lecturers' one respondent states that when studying and teaching the war, he uses the two terms interchangeably and also acknowledges the participation of Africans in the war.

Drawing from the study guide, the teaching of South African history from an Afrocentric perspective does not exclude the historiographies and theories that were used before to interpret historical writing in South Africa. Lecturers do recommend texts from earlier historiographical traditions (colonial and Afrikaner traditions, specifically) as well as more recent revisions of those (liberal and Marxist traditions) for students to broaden their knowledge on South African history and the South African War in particular. The latter is evident as prescribed textbooks from different historiographies on the South African War are part of the curriculum.

Although the module recommends materials to assist student to trace and understand the historiography of writing in South Africa, the study guides do not prescribe recent work by historians that contributes on why the war should be regarded as the South African War as well as the reasons for black participation in the war from its outbreak rather than only accounting for black involvement *in media res*. Although Africa and Africans, when compared to the scholars from the rest of the world, do not produce as much to research, partly because of financial and material inequalities which lead to resource deficits, the works that are available should be used and capitalised to study and teach history in universities. Factors such as stocking of university libraries and budgets for faculties was not included in this study however.

This study has critiqued the curriculum used at the University of Limpopo to study and teach the South African War in the History discipline. This work is based on a review of the curricula and syllabi, as well as semi-structured interviews with staff facilitating the particular module on the South African War. While the University of Limpopo aspires to deliver Afrocentric education to empower Africans studying in Africa, and the particular division in which History is taught professes to subscribe to an alternative lens in the study and teaching of the South African War, more needs to be done to realise this vision. Some of this work will require material support for the institution which could see more resources in its library to underpin the staff's desire to Africanise the curricula, while some of it would require curriculum development to allow for the aspiration to Africa-centred education to be more fully realised. The adoption of an Afrocentric paradigm provides a stepping stone to accounting for and understanding the historiographical contributions on black participation in the war, which would help students to understand themselves and their antecedents as agents in the events of the past rather than merely onlookers and victims of the actions of others.

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