



A Search for Post-apartheid Collective Identities: Ethnic Student Organisations at a South African University

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Abstract

Scholarship on higher education decries the levels of student activism in post-apartheid South Africa. It argues that student organisation is sporadic, fragmented and unrepresentative of broad student layers. Because of its emphasis on political identities as well as the failure to define activism broader than protests, this assessment fails to recognise the myriad of organisations such as cultural and religious bodies in South African universities today. By ignoring these forms of organisation, the literature that emphasises the decline in student activism after the demise of apartheid not only ignores initiatives where students are organising around their ‘new’ identities, but also fails to appreciate how historically these ‘hold-over’ organisations connected one wave of protest to the other. Using the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) as a research site, this article focuses on ethnic identities as a significant feature around which a section of the student population is organising. The paper looks at how the disappearance of legal apartheid, the new political environment as well as the failure of traditional political student movements to organise around their constituency’s multiple identities, have provided space and impetus for new forms of organisation.

Résumé

La recherche académique sur l’enseignement supérieur sous-estime les niveaux d’activisme étudiant dans l’Afrique du Sud d’après l’apartheid. Elle prétend que l’organisation des étudiants est sporadique, fragmentée et peu représentative des larges couches étudiantes. Du fait de l’accent mis sur les identités politiques aussi bien qu’à cause de l’échec à définir l’activisme de façon plus large que ses manifestations sous forme de protestations, cette estimation ne parvient pas à reconnaître

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l'importance de la myriade d'organisations culturelles et religieuses qui existent dans les universités sud-africaines. En ignorant ces formes d'organisation, la littérature qui insiste sur le déclin de l'activisme étudiant après la fin de l'apartheid ne se borne pas à ignorer les initiatives dans lesquelles les étudiants s'organisent autour de leurs 'nouvelles' identités, elle ne parvient pas à apprécier comment, sur le plan historique, ces organisations 'persistantes' ont pu connecter une vague de protestations à une autre. Utilisant l'Université de Witswaterstrand (Wits) comme site de recherche, cet article se concentre sur l'identité ethnique en tant que caractéristique signifiante autour de laquelle une section de la population étudiante s'organise. L'article s'intéresse à la façon dont la disparition de l'apartheid légal, le nouvel environnement politique aussi bien que l'échec des mouvements politiques étudiants traditionnels à s'organiser autour des multiples identités de leur base, ont fourni un espace et une impulsion à des formes d'organisation nouvelles.

Introduction

In 2007, there were ninety-one student organisations and clubs at Wits. These organisations fell into the following categories: representative student bodies such as faculty councils; political organisations such as the South African Student Congress (SASCO), the African National Congress Youth League (ANCYL) and Young Communist League (YCL); religious groups; sports bodies; hobby clubs; career-oriented societies; solidarity movements and interest-based groups. Among this array of organisations are seven cultural societies: the Bapedi Students Society (BSS), the Basotho Student Association (BASA), Ekhaya Cultural Union of Students (ECUS), Maitazwitoma Student Society, Khomanani Society, Thari e Ntsho and the Zulu Students Cultural Society (ZSCS). What is distinctive about these seven organisations is that all of them were established after 2000. Secondly, the membership of each of the cultural organisations is characterised by a concentration of a single language group, although all their constitutions provide for open membership. In 2007, 87.2 per cent in BSS spoke Sepedi as their first language, 91.0 per cent in BASA had Sesotho as their first language, 85.2 per cent in ECUS had IsiXhosa as their home language, 95.0 per cent in Khomanani were first language Shangaan/Tsonga speakers, 95.0 per cent in Maitazwitoma were registered as Tshivenda first speakers, 83.9 per cent in Thari spoke Setswana as their first language and 89.2 per cent in ZSCS were IsiZulu first language speakers. Thirdly, women's membership in the majority of the associations was lower than the 42 per cent which is the average percentage of women students at Wits. Women's membership in the cultural groups varies between 33 per cent and 50 per cent - BSS (37.2 per cent), BASA (38.0 per cent), ECUS (42.3 per cent), Maitazwitoma (39.0 per cent), Khomanani (50.0 per cent), Thari (33.0 per cent) and ZSCS (35.1 per cent). Fourthly, since inception the seven cultural organisations have

forged relations with similar student movements at other South African universities. Fifthly, none of the organisations had students from other countries in the region as members. The fact that the majority of members of Thari shared the Tswana language with students from Botswana was not strong enough to pull them into one organisation. The students from Botswana have a separate organisation. Similarly, the students from Lesotho have a separate organisation from the Basotho Student Association (BASA).

The emergence of these cultural organisations has been met with derision and ambiguity within the university and broader activist circles. A senior administrator at the university's student affairs department described the existence of the cultural organisations as 'ridiculous' and raised doubts about the groups' contribution to integration at the university. Taking a slightly different note, a former leader of the South African Students Congress (SASCO) and president of the Student Representative Council (SRC) in 2004 and 2005 feels that the student political organisations have been equivocal in their attitude towards the ethnic-based student organisations (Shivambu, interview, 24 October 2007). Shivambu was criticised by SASCO for his involvement in one cultural organisation. He recalls that in 2004 a decision was taken by the SRC to disband all the cultural student organisations and form one unified cultural body. He also remembers how despite the doubts about the political wisdom of organising along ethnic lines, SASCO never took a stance against the existence of the cultural student organisations. As a student political organisation, SASCO saw the cultural groups as important to garner support in SRC elections (Shivambu, interview, 24 October 2007).

Considering the history of student organisation during apartheid, the contemptuous and indeterminate responses are understandable. Although they followed different ideological strands, black student organisations jettisoned ethnic identities and frowned at any mobilisation along ethnic lines. In fact, it is the South African Students' Organisation (SASO) that pioneered within the nationalist movement the definition of 'black people as those who are by law or tradition, politically, economically and socially discriminated against' (Badat 1999:377). In terms of this definition, the emphasis among African, coloured and Indian students was on 'blackness', disenfranchisement and discrimination as opposed to ethnic identities. A survey of identities among students at five ethnically-defined universities conducted in the 1980s found that national and continental identities superseded ethnic loyalty and identification (Töttemeyer 1984). Until 1993 when black student groups agreed for the first time to participate in SRC elections, organisations among students at Wits mirrored the main fissures in South African society, with black and white students belonging to separate student groupings. African, Coloured and Indian students

organised outside of the SRC under the umbrella of the Black Student Society (Shear 1996).

The form of student organisation that existed at Wits before the 1994 democratisation was not different to what happened on other campuses. Student organisations at higher education institutions took an overtly political character, participating in militant campaigns against 'on-and-off' campus segregation, appalling conditions at university residences, financial and political exclusions. Another characteristic of the pre-1994 form of student organisation was alignment to political and national liberation movements. In a biography of Thabo Mbeki, Gevisser (2007:97-98) refers to rivalry that existed at the University of Fort Hare between the ANC Youth League and Society of Young African that was aligned to the Non-European Unity Movement. In a study of the most influential student organisation in the 1980s and 1990s, Badat (1999) reveals how there was a struggle within the Azanian Student Organisation (AZASO) – the organisation that replaced the banned SASO in 1979 – to jettison the movement's black-consciousness orientation in favour of the ANC's political approach. In the five decades of student organisation that precedes democratisation in South Africa, there is no evidence of ethnic-based student movements.

Using data obtained from semi-structured individual interviews with office-bearers of the cultural organisations, a focus group with two committee members from each of the associations, an interview with a senior administrator at the university's student affairs department, an interview with the head of residences, a student development practitioner with the Student Leadership and Development Unit (SLDU) and information from the university's Academic Information System Unit (AISU), this paper firstly tells the story of Wits cultural student organisations, when they were established and what they do. Secondly, it attempts to answer the question of whether the emergence of these organisations marks the ethnicisation of student politics in post-apartheid South Africa. Thirdly, the paper locates the emergence of this form of student organisation within the context of a contest over space and place within the university and broadly within South Africa after the demise of apartheid. While acknowledging that ethnic-based student organisations have emerged in other African countries after the latter gained political independence, this paper eschews postcolonial meta-narratives where trajectories of different countries are stitched according to a single pattern. The main argument is that the emergence of ethnically-based student organisations at South African universities is part of a broader search for post-apartheid collective identities. The paper concludes with a call for a move away from equating student activism with protest. Student activism is broader than overt political involvement in movements organised along ideo-

logical lines and encompasses political student organisations and a range of voluntary anti-establishment groups. The appeal is for a concrete look at how students are currently organising around new identities.

The genesis and *raison d'être* of ethnic student organisations at Wits

The first cultural organisation to be established is Ekhaya Cultural Union of Students (ECUS). It was established in 2001 and has a twofold objective. Firstly, ECUS aims to 'create a home away from home' for its members. Secondly, the association has an objective to 'promote culture among our diverse Xhosas and to uphold Xhosa values' (ECUS 2001). At the time that ECUS was established the main political student movement SASCO had been banned by the SRC after allegations that the organisation was involved in an after-party ruckus that saw members raiding the canteen for liquor. According to Shivambu (interview 24 October 2007), 'ECUS was the most vibrant organisation on campus in 2002'. The rest of the associations grew between 2002 and 2006: Khomanani Society in 2003; Basotho Student Association (BASA), Bapedi Student Society (BSS) and Zulu Students Cultural Society (ZSCS) in 2005; and Thari e Ntsho and Maitazwitoma Students Society in 2006.

Paid-up membership of the cultural organisations varies from 40 to 185: BSS (172), BASA (100), ECUS (142), Maitazwitoma (159), Khomanani (40), Thari (118) and ZSSC (185). All the constitutions of these organisations state that membership is open to all students; something that informants emphasised in the interviews. In some cases membership was open to ex-members who have graduated. Those interviewed were at pains to emphasise that they encouraged their members to join other organisations on campus:

Being members of other cultural organisations allows us to learn other peoples' cultures. Many people grow up in KZN, without ever speaking any other language except Zulu. So if they join other societies, they learn the culture and language of other people (Dladla, interview, 2 November 2007).

But research shows a picture contrary to the one of openness that the interviewees profess. The data from AISU derived from subscriptions to clubs debited from student accounts reveals little of this cross-pollination. Only three students were members of both Maitazwitoma and BSS and only one jointly belonged to Maitazwitoma and BASA. Not a single member of Khomanani belonged to any other cultural organisation. In 2007, overlap in membership happened on a small scale between organisations whose membership majority comes from the same language family such as IsiZulu and IsiXhosa or Sesotho and Sepedi. Another feature of the cultural student organisations is that the ma-

majority of members come from areas outside of Johannesburg which is where Wits is situated: BSS (135 out of 172) BASA (68 out of 100), ECUS (111 out of 142), Maitazwitoma (128 out of 159), Khomanani (34 out of 40), Thari (102 out of 118) and ZSCS (139 out of 185). There is a correlation between where cultural groups draw the majority of their members and areas where there is a preponderance of certain language groups. For an example, 57.0 per cent of ECUS members come from the Eastern Cape, 63.8 per cent of ZSCS are from KwaZulu-Natal and 76.7 per cent of Maitazwitoma are from Limpopo's town of Polokwane and its surrounds.

Another important finding is that few of the members of the cultural organisation were paid-up members of student political bodies. Although a majority of members of cultural organisations belonged to other religious, academic and sports bodies; only 29 of the 916 belonged to political student organisations. AISU data shows that in 2007, 29 members drawn from the seven cultural organisations were also members of the Young Communist League branch on campus. Not a single member of the cultural groups belonged to the South African Students Congress (SASCO) or the ANC Youth League.

Although there is unevenness in the activity of the cultural groups, some common features are identifiable in their operations. In 2007, most groups organised seminars where they invited speakers to address members. The input at these gatherings ranged from topics such as the importance of language, histories of different ethnic groups in South Africa to themes on cultural practices such as *lobola*¹, marriage and rites of passage. All seven cultural societies have dance groups affiliated to them. The dance groups perform during orientation week and when the student bodies have their activities. The highlight of the cultural groups' calendar is Heritage Day which is celebrated in South Africa on 24 September. When asked on the significance of the day, the chairperson of BASA said:

On that day we have the time to participate in a cultural day. The Xhosas bring their dance and we bring our dance and the Zulus bring theirs. We also bring our own food and we taste what each other group eats. On that day we are united. (Lepese, Interview, 1 November 2007)

But some of the groups have gone beyond superficial multiculturalism. Both Khomanani and BSS assist members who have academic difficulties. In 2007, Khomanani ran a study skills workshop. Interestingly the person who the association chose to run the programme was a Shangaan lecturer from the university's politics department. BSS on the other hand runs a tutorial programme for students throughout the year. Students who are struggling academically approach the organisation for assistance and it is the task of the office-bearers to find

tutors. In appointing tutors, preference is given to BSS members. Whereas all the groups identify community outreach as part of their constitutional objectives only Khomanani and BSS had such programmes in 2007. Khomanani collected clothes and toys which it gave to two Soweto orphanages. The initial idea was to deliver the collections to orphanages in Limpopo but transport costs made this difficult (Koza, interview, 5 November 2007).

For three consecutive years, BSS has run career exhibitions in different parts of Limpopo. In May 2007, the association took a busload of members to Ka-Matlala where they gave career advice to 150 matriculants from 18 surrounding rural schools. The Wits students gave advice about study opportunities that exist around Gauteng:

When we came to Wits, we did not know about issues of finance and how to choose courses etc. It's a big challenge if you are from rural areas. The career exhibition is not only focusing on opportunities at Wits – but other tertiary institutions around Joburg. We take to the exhibitions brochures from University of Johannesburg and Wits Technikon. (Maubane, interview, 8 November 2007)

We make sure that we go to Limpopo every year to assist those in need. It is the ultimate thing that BSS does. We look at schools that are disadvantaged – far from town. We are aware that the Limpopo government has career exhibitions in the province's main towns. We choose schools in remote areas. We want people from these areas to know that there is Wits, University of Johannesburg, University of Pretoria and not just Turfloop. (Mphahlele, interview, 8 November 2007)

Although it's a cultural society in essence, in BSS we also deal with academic issues. The idea is that we are here to study but the other objective is that others from our areas must also come and study. (Moremi, interview, 8 November 2007)

The examples of BSS and Khomanani outreach work illustrate the connection between the cultural associations and their hometown and provinces. In addition to having alumni as members, some of the cultural organisations have forged links with institutions outside of the university. Thari e Ntsho receives financial support from the Bafokeng royal house. In 2007, the organisation received R10,000 from the royal house which was used to acquire *makgabe* – the attire that women wear when performing dance and in the society's other festivities. BSS works with the Limpopo provincial government's Department of Education in its organising of career exhibitions in the province. The association has also worked with Thobela FM – the radio station that broadcasts in

Sepedi – to stage a concert on campus. On the other hand, the ZSCS has a constitutional provision to act as ‘a link between KwaZulu-Natal government and our members through creating opportunities for financial assistance to needy students’ (ZSCS 2005:2). The association has links with Ukhozi FM; a radio station that broadcasts IsiZulu.

Most if not all of the cultural groups have links with similar bodies on other campuses. The informants from Khomanani confessed that the existence of a Shangaan student association at the Vaal University of Technology is what inspired them to establish their cultural student organisation at Wits. In 2007, Khomanani held a consultative meeting with representatives from other Shangaan student associations at the University of Limpopo. Represented at the meeting were groups from Wits, the University of Limpopo, Tshwane University of Technology, Vaal University of Technology and the University of Cape Town. The ZSCS has links with Zulu student associations at the University of Pretoria, Tshwane University of Technology and Vaal University of Technology. BASA has linked up with Basotho student organisations at the University of Johannesburg and at the University of the Free State. In the focus group when asked about the future of the cultural organisations, there was unanimity on the need for national organisations that brought the different organisations together (Focus group, 17 November 2007).

Contesting place and space on campus

The fact that a section of the student mass at Wits is organising around issues of language and culture is not accidental. As Harvey (1990) argues, one of the responses to modernism’s internationalism is the creation of place-bound identities as a form of individuation. In unfamiliar and uncertain places, individuals use spaces such as communities, ethnic groups or bodies as insurance against displacement and to make meaning of their new conditions. To do this, they invoke tradition and use nostalgia. No situation better demonstrates this creation of place-bound identities than that of migrants. In their search for stability and security migrants use reified culture and an imaginary past to define themselves. For the majority of students that are members of the seven cultural organisations, being at Wits means a change of place physically, economically and culturally. As the research shows, the majority of members are not from Johannesburg or areas around the university. This displacement introduces a longing for home among them. When asked why it is important for him to belong to a cultural student organisation, an officer bearer of BSS stated categorically; ‘My roots are in Limpopo. I can’t come here and abandon my roots. Being at a university is a 5-year or 6-year contract of another life. After suc-

ceeding it expires and you go back where you belong' (Maubane, interview, 8 November 2007).

Over the last fifteen years the demographics of the Wits' student population have significantly changed. Despite the institution's 'open' admission policy, until 1998, the majority of the university students were white (Nkoli 2003:19). But in the last ten years, the composition of the university significantly changed. Approximately 65 per cent of 16,393 students registered for undergraduate studies in 2007 were black. Using the university's classification the remaining 8 827 were white, coloured and Indian. Of all the undergraduate qualifications awarded in 2006, 61 per cent went to black students (Nongxa 2007). Another significant development in the composition of Wits' student population is the steady increase in the number of international students registered with the institution. An officer in the University's International Office confirmed that in 2007, Wits had about 2,000 students who came from countries outside South Africa. This is an increase from 2001 when there were 1,652 international students on study permits – 636 from SADC, 353 from the rest of Africa and 663 from the rest of the world (Van Zyl, Steyn and Orr 2003). A study that the university commissioned established that staff and students at Wits spoke no less than 76 home languages (University of Witwatersrand 2003:1). For a significant number of students, this cosmopolitanism of the university creates the sense of being in transit and some disorientation.

In explaining the emergence of cultural student organisations at Wits, a student development practitioner from the university's Student Leadership and Development Unit (SLDU) said:

Some of these kids went to multiracial schools, girls-only and boys-only white schools. In these schools you hardly speak your vernacular. If you come to Wits – a very cosmopolitan institution – you are bound to bump onto a Nigerian guy, Chinese or Ghanaian guy. In such a situation if you bump [into] a person who speak[s] your language you'll be attracted to that person. People yearn to speak their own languages. So when people hear their own language spoken, they are attracted to that corner. It's good because it means you can associate, because of the common ground that is language' (Nyuswa, interview, 5 November 2007).

Like other tertiary institutions in South Africa, Wits has had to confront challenges posed by South Africa's transition to democracy. Facing universities in South Africa since 1990 were not only domestic pressures, but also changes at an international level. Van Zyl, Steyn and Orr (2003:1-2) identify the following as the world that confronted Wits in the 1990s – internationalisation of knowledge, the challenge posed by the digital revolution, the rise in market-driven

research and reduction of public funds meant for tertiary institutions. The consequences of these trends were changes to criteria for recruitment of staff and students, increased pressure to embrace diverse cultures and other knowledge systems, the challenge to the location of universities posed by technological changes and a shift to cost-management programmes.

Since the early 1990s, Wits has adopted various plans and policies aimed at transforming the university. Prodded by the publication of the government's *Education White Paper 3 – A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education* and *Higher Education Act 101 of 1997*, Wits adopted in 1999 a plan called *Shaping the Future: Strategic Plan*. The aim of the plan was to re-orientate the university and restructure its organisation. The strategic plan proposed four key areas of intervention – reforming governance structures; restructuring of faculties and departments; curriculum changes; staff and student representativity; and outsourcing of support services. In terms of governance *Shaping the Future* had proposals to realign structures such as the university council and senate in line with state policy on representativity. The plan also proposed the establishment of institutional forum made up of university management, government, senate, council, staff representatives and students. At an operational level the plan proposed a reduction of faculties and re-arrangement of departments under umbrella schools. In relation to curriculum the focus was on interdisciplinarity and relevance of what is taught at the institution (Nkoli 2003).

But Wits' transformation policies have been highly contested, as far back as the early 1990s. In a collection of case studies on initiatives to transform South African universities after apartheid, Wits' transformation is described as the most tumultuous (King 2001:73). The efforts to change have often led to open conflicts. In August 1993 and on the eve of South Africa's first democratic elections, Wits was hit with what has been described as 'possibly the most destructive week' in the history of the university (Shear 1996:xxii). The students went on a litter campaign where they trashed the university and destroyed property. In this pandemonium, the university administration called in the police who broke up the protests and arrested a number of students. At the centre of the protests were calls for the democratisation of the university's governing structures and exclusion of students on financial and academic grounds. Similar protest occurred in 1994 and 1995.

But the most publicised conflict is the one that took place in 1995. A year after the first democratic elections, the University of the Witwatersrand was in the news when the first black deputy vice-chancellor resigned after allegations and counter-allegations of racism (Makgoba 1997). After ten years of plans to reposition the institution, the university adopted a strategy entitled: *A Univer-*

sity to call our own: Wits from 2005 to 2010. The plan was adopted in 2005 and spells out the institution's vision to be a leading institution in knowledge production. As part of this vision, Wits has set itself the goal of being in the 'Top 100 universities' category by 2022. What this means for student enrolment is a restriction in the number of undergraduate students and a focus on post-graduate studies. Since the promulgation of the Employment Equity Act of 1998, the university has developed three employment equity plans with measures and targets aimed at eliminating unfair discrimination and achieving a diverse workforce reflective of the country's demographics. Prompted by the Ministry of Education's *Language Policy for Higher Education* which enjoined institutions to decide on languages of instruction, measures to promote multilingualism and steps to be taken to develop those language that have not been used in academic studies before, Wits adopted a language policy in 2003. According to the policy, over time Wits will see English and Sesotho becoming the institution's languages of instruction (University of Witwatersrand 2003).

Regardless of these policies the majority of student interviewees found Wits an alienating space and place. They pointed to language, food at residences and general institutional culture, as some of the causes for them not to feel that they belong to Wits.

By having these organisations we are saying to this institution which is very white, we may all speak English but among us there are still Sothos, Tswanas and Xhosas (Focus group, 17 November 2007).

If you don't stick to your culture and you come to this life of Johannesburg whereby everything is English, then you have a problem. Where are you gonna go? How are you going to cope? (Maubane, interview, 8 November 2007).

The major influence around especially Gauteng is westernised and people seem to deviate from who they really are. They choose other people's identities whereas those other people are practicing their own identities (Moremi, interview, 8 November 2007).

Some students pretend. They are trying to fit into something that does not exist. They are the ones who are against us when at res² we ask for traditional food. They say *pap*³ bloats them and makes them lazy. In their American accents they say they prefer chicken mayo. It's fake' (Mphahlele, interview, 8 November 2007).

We joined this organisation because everywhere it's English – on TV it's English, at Wits it's English. You read the board, it's English. We want it in our own language' (Koza, interview, 5 November 2007).

At Wits we are forced to abandon our cultures. This is an English-dominated institution. Although we are a cultural organisation, we need to have our constitution in English. Even when we go to student development officers, we have to speak English. The administration at this university is a challenge to us. When we speak in our language in meetings we still have to record our minutes in English' (Morake, interview, 30 October 2007).

For most of us who come from rural areas, the first association that we get attracted to are those that operate along ethnic lines. If you come to Wits, not knowing anyone and you hear someone speaking Tsonga, the most natural reaction is: Oh! You also speak Tsonga. I also do (Shivambu: interview, 24 October 2007).

None of the students interviewed knew about the university's language policy. They also could not point to any evidence of elevation of Sesotho. According to the language policy, in the first phase of implementation that runs until 2010, the university commits itself to development of material and resources for the teaching of Sesotho at all levels of education. The university also commits itself to supporting staff who register to study Sesotho (University of Witwatersrand 2003).

The sense of alienation that the informants expressed was in the past echoed in numerous studies. Using the distinction between racism and everyday racism, Wood (2001:97) found that there was a feeling of alienation among black students at Wits. She discovered that in their everyday experiences and at micro-levels, black students experienced discrimination and alienation. Wood (2001:99-103) found that there was very little personal interaction between white and black students outside the lecture room, few white students lived on university residences leading to *de facto* segregation and practices of cultural intolerance. Another finding of the study was that white lecturers through references that were alien to black student experiences maintained an unwelcoming climate for the majority of black students.

Since Wood's study, some of the conditions at Wits have remained unchanged. The situation where residences are largely populated by black students has not changed. An official in the Office of Residence Life stated that since 2003 white students only constitute an average of 5 per cent of those in university residences. Although the university has met its employment equity targets, the majority of lecturers remain white. White academic staff makes up 71.6 per cent of all academic and only 48.4 per cent of those on the institution's payroll as academics are women. In their study of student activism in post-apartheid South Africa, Koen, Cele, and Libhaber (2006:411) identify racial integration, racism

and language policy as one of the triggers to student protests in the 1990s. Black students in historically-white institutions demanded representation on SRCs, something they were previously refused. There have also been conflicts around institutional cultures of different universities. Afrikaans-speaking students have taken up what they consider as marginalisation of their language, while black students pushed for a move from Afrikaans to English as a language of instruction.

At Wits, perceived or experienced alienation appears to be fostering ethnic identities as a solidaristic response. This response is not different to ethnic-based organisations among migrant workers that help newly-settled members from rural areas adjust in urban areas. Known as ‘hometown associations’, ‘tribal unions’ or ‘homeboys clubs’, these organisations provided information necessary for survival in towns. They provided security and other resources that eased the transition from the countryside to the city (Adelula 2005).

Experimentation and university life

It would be parochial to attribute the development of ethnic-based student organisations to alienation and not focus on the specificities of a university as a place and space. In his description of the modern university, Peters (2004:70-71) identifies the production of a legitimising culture as the key role of the university. This is done through an emphasis on the Kantian idea of Reason; free and rational discussion; and production of a reasoning citizen. Although Peters (2004) concedes that this role has been fractured by massification and the bureaucratic notions of excellence, he contends that the university’s role of knowledge production, albeit in a utilitarian manner still remains. It is this role of a university as a ‘space and place of ideas’ that has allowed institutions of higher learning to be hotbeds of student activism and organisation. At university, students experiment with ideas and test new forms of organisation. The scope that the university allows for students to do this did not escape some of the interviewees:

Not all of us were born in Lesotho or Free State. Some students are from Soweto and other places. So they are curious about the life of a herd boy, what is Basotho music, initiation and so on. In BASA we teach them (Lepese, interview, 1 November 2007).

At university is where you make or break your life. So while you’re here you need to find your base because when you are out of this place, you move into a company with its own culture – with its norms and values. If you did not have a chance to learn your language or culture because you were at a multiracial school, being at Wits gives you that opportunity. If you don’t use it, then you will be what they call a coconut for life (Nyuswa, interview, 5 November 2007).

In the focus group reference was made to how the cultural groups provide an opportunity for re-learning to students who grew up in areas that were dominated by cultures to which they did not belong; 'You have guys who are told that they are Sotho but speak Zulu because earlier on, their parents migrated to KwaZulu-Natal. So what happens is that such students will join a cultural group for Basotho to learn who they are' (Focus group, 17 November 2007).

Writing on the debate on whether the country's sub-national provinces were 'becoming instruments for the promotion of ethnicity', Fessha (2007) argues that in post-apartheid South Africa not only there has been a decline in ethnic parties, but no strong exclusive provincial identities have emerged. Unless the specificity of the university is factored into the analysis of the cultural student organisations, it will be difficult to explain why ethnic organisations have not emerged in other spheres of public life.

The search for post-apartheid collective identities

Clearly, the search for ethnic identities among students at Wits or any other university in South Africa is related to what happens outside of these institutions. Similar to the way society shapes the university, what happens in society also structures the process of identity formation. Nyuswa (interview, 5 November 2007), who worked in student affairs at Durban University of Technology and Vaal University of Technology before joining Wits in 2007, described the emergence of the cultural organisations as a post-apartheid phenomenon: 'Before 1994, everybody was doing sport, everyone was into religion and everyone was into politics. After 1994 people said, "Hang on, what about culture?" Democracy actually opened up a lot of things for many people.'

According to Nyuswa the fragmentation of old identities did not only manifest itself in the birth of ethnic-based cultural groups. Religious student groups also went through a similar process.

After 1994, people started to say: hang on, although I am a Christian but I'm also Catholic or Zion Christian Church or Lutheran. I can start my denomination's student group here on campus. I don't have to belong to a broad Student Christian Movement (SCM). When they were doing that someone said by the way I'm Zulu. Everybody wants to belong somewhere (Nyuswa, interview 5 November 2007).

The phenomenon of fragmenting old identities is not new or unique to students. So is the practice of students organising along ethnic lines. In a study of the Nigerian student movement Beckman (2006) points to how ethno-regional student organisations in that country operated parallel to other student movements organised on national and ideological lines in a non-competitive manner. Stud-

ies of Zimbabwean student movements show how different groups appealed to students' ethnic identities in elections for the student representative council. (Gaidzanwa 1993 and Zeilig 2006) In a history of the Senegalese student movement, Bathily, Diouf and Mbodj (1995:398) describe how in the 1970s the Senegalese student movement fragmented as 'a number of "associations" emerged on the basis of disciplines, institutions and nationalities'. A similar picture emerges in a case study of student organisation at Sierra Leone's Fourah Bay College. Rashid (2000) describes how ethnicity played a part in the contests for representation on the college's SRC.

The above examples of ethnicity within African student movements after independence can seduce one into a postcolonial narrative where ethnicity rears its head in post-liberation situations. Following this route will not be different from what Chabal (1996) describes as a 'retraditionalisation of Africa' paradigm, which he regards as a view that identifies the re-emergence of ethnic-based organisations or discourses as one of the features of the African crisis. These organisations and ethnic discourses are seen as a sign of reversion of 'old traditions'. The argument in this paper is that both approaches are unhelpful. The examples of resurgent ethnicities within African student movements are best understood through the historical specificities of each case. As Beckman (2006) shows, in the case of Nigeria, the emergence of competing ethnic student organisations was related to political acrimonies between the south-western dominated federal government and other regional minorities. At an education policy level this acrimony expressed itself in staffing and admission stances that different universities took. As part of the struggle against the centre, regional politicians and university administrators came up with policies aimed at ensuring that staff as well as the institutions' student population reflected territorial and ethnic constituencies. According to Gaidzanwa (1993) the ethnic divisions that erupted during SRC elections at the University of Zimbabwe coincided with division between the two major liberation movements – Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) and Zimbabwe's African People Union (ZAPU). Zeilig (2006:107) also links the ethnic cleavages within the SRC to tensions that arose as a result of the Zimbabwean army's incursion into Matabeleland – the provincial home for the majority of the country's Ndebele people.

Kaufert (1977) adopts the same context-bound approach in his study on situational identity and ethnicity among Ghanaian university students. What Kaufert found was that spatial isolation and life in a culturally diverse setup intensified kin identity and familial ties. He also established how the students shifted between kin, hometown, ethnic and regional identities, depending on situation they found themselves in. Similarly, Bathily, Diouf and Mbodj (1995)

locate the emergence of a student movement organising along lines of 'nationalities' in Senegal, in the University of Dakar's shift from being a West African regional institution to a national tertiary institution. How then can one use a context-bound approach to understand the emergence of ethnic student organisations at South African universities?

Under apartheid, ethnicity was a political and ideological weapon in the hands of the state and in its quest for hegemony. The state promoted ethnic loyalties in its pursuit of the policy of separate development. According to the policy, different ethnic groups were accorded their 'homelands' within the South African polity. These groups also had different institutions of higher learning, different localities, separate schools and ethnic-based radio stations. It is no wonder that there was widespread rejection of this categorisation, as Töttemeyer (1984) demonstrated through his survey among university students. Using Castells' (2000:7) distinction between strong and weak identities, the ethnic loyalties that the apartheid state fostered, provided insufficient glue to bind university students. According to Castells, weak identities are built artificially, while strong ones develop over a longer duration and are based on shared experience.

The post-apartheid political dispensation is remarkably different from the apartheid order. The new constitution created a unitary state, abolished the homelands and made all citizens equal before the law. Within this framework, the institutional design of the new order created space for management of cultural diversity and difference based ethnicity, religion, language and region. A chapter in the constitution is dedicated to traditional leadership and customary law. The constitution also recognises eleven officials and calls on the state to elevate and advance the use of indigenous languages. According to the constitution, the official languages enjoy parity and must be equitably treated. Underpinning these constitutional provisions is a bill of rights that grants individuals the right to participate in the cultural life of their choice, the right to practice their religion, and the right to use their language. Recognising cultural, religious and linguistic communities, the bill of rights states that members of such associations have the right to form, join and belong to cultural, religious and linguistic associations of their choice.

The new constitution also creates a range of institutions aimed at managing diversity. Section 6 of the document calls for legislation to establish a Pan South African Language Board (Pan SALB) whose task is to promote the language rights enshrined in the constitution. As part of a number of institutions aimed at supporting democracy, the constitution established the Commission for the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Cultural, Religious and Linguistic Communities. Although the demarcation was not meant to coincide with racial and ethnic divisions in the country, 'ethnicity and provincial boundaries do largely

coincide in three provinces – KwaZulu-Natal , the Eastern Cape and the North West – in each of which more than two-thirds of residents speak a single language’ (Simeon and Murray 2004:284).

These provisions and institutional designs have led to alarm bells being raised in some quarters. Alexander (2002:89) criticises the post-apartheid state’s policy that sees its policy of multilingualism as not contradictory to national unity. He equates some of the provisions in the constitution to ‘the constitutionalisation of ethnic politics in the post-apartheid dispensation’ and calls them the most explosive element of the post-apartheid order. Alexander argues that the sections in the constitution such as the one that gives the right of self-determination to linguistic and cultural communities will reinforce centrifugal tendencies leading to ethnic mobilisation as warring factions pursue separatist agendas. Although there is dispute on whether the new dispensation has led to increased levels of ethnic consciousness and ethnic mobilisation in South Africa, it is undisputed that the multilingualism policy only exists on paper and that ethnic identities remain salient. There is also evidence that certain language groups that felt marginalised have seized the opportunities available for enforcement of their language rights. Also, recent research shows the persistence, if not a rise, in sub-national identities. In an analysis of data obtained from the 2003 South African Social Attitudes Survey, Grossberg, Struwig and Pillay (2006:66) found that only 8 per cent of respondents saw being South African as their first choice of identity. Out of the sample, 29 per cent saw family as the first choice of identity. Race and ethnicity followed with 22 percent of respondents. Those that saw occupation as primary in their self-identification constituted 17 per cent, while 10 percent cent saw gender as first choice of identity. Only 6 per cent saw regional identities as primary.

In a study of the workings of the Pan South African Language Board, Perry (n.d.) argues that although South Africa’s constitution proclaims a policy of eleven languages there has been little implementation of this policy. According to him English has become a *de facto* language of power and that South Africa is characteristic of a linguistic elite closure i.e. the enshrinement of a minority language as the *de facto* or *de jure* official language of the state. In relation to the use of institutions such as Pan SALB, Perry found that the majority of the 215 complaints lodged with the board between February 1998 and September 2000 were individual rights assertions. Perry gives examples where language groups, although a minority, have gone to the statutory body to claim group rights. One case was that of the Northern Amandebele National Organisation which filed a complaint in March 1999 to have its members’ language developed and elevated in status. The second case was that of the VaTsonga TV Committee which complained in October 2002 to Pan SALB that by not having tel-

evision programming in Xitsonga and Tshivenda, the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) was violating the language rights of Tsonga and Vhavenda people. In 2000, the committee wrote to President Mbeki raising the same issue.

What is interesting about the second case is that the issue of the SABC violating the language of Tsonga/Shangaan people was identified by one of the informants as one of the stimuli that led to the formation of the Khomanani Society.

There was a strong perception that Shangaans were marginalised. This perception was not only on campus and about university life. Points were raised about the absence of Shangaan on television (Shivambu, interview, 5 November 2007).

It would be foolhardy to imagine that the discourse and policies of multiculturalism of the post-apartheid state would have no resonance among students. When asked what the significance of the cultural organisations is, a number of informants said that it was about celebrating South Africa's cultural diversity. Many of the students expressed the importance of pride in one's culture. There was also missionary zealotry to convert those straying away from culture.

A Zulu born up here and a Zulu from KZN are really different. So it's important for the Zulus from Joburg, to know what the real Zulu culture is. You want the people to know how to behave and how to follow the culture. I want to know where I come from. I want to find my roots, my principles and who I am (Dladla, interview, 2 November 2007).

In this vein Morake (interviewed, 30 October 2007) proclaimed that 'Tswanas from Soweto are very different from the ones from North West. Unlike in Soweto where there are many cultures, in North West villages you only find Tswanas. We have a responsibility to teach culture to the Sowetans.' Great concern was expressed that some students say that they are Tswana but cannot speak the language. In response to the accusation that the organisations promoted tribalism, many informants picked up on themes of multiculturalism that spokespersons of the state regularly make.

We can't have a policy that says there are Zulus, Tswanas and Xhosas only on Heritage Day in September. These groups are there everyday and they need to come out (Morake, interview, 30 October 2007).

These groups also help to break from stereotypes. The fact that we grew up with the idea that Zulus like to fight, gets challenged when you see that not all Zulus are like that (Lepese, interview, 1 November 2007).

When some people get to the university, they forget about where they come and they change. Belonging to a cultural organisation means we don't want to forget about where we come from. We want to show that we are proud of our culture and heritage. There is also an education part to the organisation. For an example there are Xhosas from Johannesburg who don't know about customs. We teach to be proud of their Xhosa-ness (Kala, interview, 27 October 2007).

Vendas and Tsongas were afraid to speak their languages here on campus. It's only now that they are not afraid to speak their language in front of others. Now they are free. Now if we here Shangaan music, we don't say that this music is what-what or despise it (Lepese, interview, 1 November 2007).

There are still Shangaans here at Wits who are hiding. We wanna make sure that they become part of Khomanani to carry the culture forward. Being educated and believing in your culture is not something dirty. Most people associate culture with illiteracy. They don't value their heritage. They think that by being Western you are superior. Our feeling is that you can do both – be educated and believe in your own culture (Koza, interview, 5 November 2007).

By calling these identities post-apartheid identities does not mean to imply that their genesis can be found in the period after democratisation or that to deny the continuities between the period before 1994 and after. The 'post' indicates how identities that were submerged in the period before democratisation have become pronounced after the demise of apartheid. The post-apartheid characterisation of the identities is also an attempt to capture the fact that no trans-border identities have emerged. The cultural organisations are about national identities.

Ethnicisation of student politics?

In a stinging critique of theories that view ethnic groups not as social constructs, Eller and Coughlan (1993) identified three concepts that are the cornerstones of primordialism. These are what they term apriority, ineffability and affectivity. By apriority, Eller and Coughlan refer to the idea that ethnic identities are ascriptive and that their basis, such as language and culture, precede any social interaction. The second way in which primordialism defines ethnic groups is to attach to them coercive and overpowering sentiments. What this means is that practices such as custom, language and culture bind group members and have an ineffable character. Thirdly, primordialism sees bonds with ethnic groups as af-

fective rather than rational and instrumental. This affectivity stems from shared ancestry.

There is no doubt that the overwhelming majority of those interviewed have a primordial definition of culture. This leads to a view where ethnicities are seen as immutable groups. In the focus group discussions, participants spoke as if there was something called a pure Tswana, Zulu or Xhosa defined by different languages, customs, dress, food and social behaviour:

I don't think that the cultural societies are promoting tribalism or apartheid. What the cultural student societies reflect is what is real. In South Africa we have Tswanas, Zulus, Xhosas and things like that. These groups need to be exposed. The cultural societies are about our pride of being Tswanas, Pedis, Zulus and Xhosas (Focus group, 17 November 2007).

This is not tribalism. We are very different. Even with languages, we speak different languages. We are not mixed things. There is nothing wrong in identifying who you are. We don't resent other cultures. We just want to uplift our culture (Focus group, 17 November 2007).

If someone asks you: who are you? You can't say that you are an African - a general African. There is no such thing as a general African. If someone says I'm African, then it becomes difficult (Focus group, 17 November 2007).

The belief in distinctness of different ethnic groups was strongly expressed when the participants were asked why they rejected the SRC proposal of an umbrella cultural group:

If people from the Eastern Cape, Limpopo and KZN join one cultural organisation we will all serve different interests depending where one comes from. If we had one cultural organisation where will we take the career exhibition? Everyone will want it to go to his home province. There will always be differences (Focus group, 17 November 2007).

The interviewees from BSS referred to another proposal which they also rejected. The proposal was that their association should merge with Khomanani and form a Limpopo student organisation. As a sign of how ethnic identities were stronger than provincial ones, the proposal was rejected, although the view that the two could partner for sponsorship was entertained. Although the constitutions of the cultural associations project the policy of openness, speaking to the office bearers confirmed that the clubs had a strong ethnic basis of who the membership targets are:

Although the constitution states that the membership of Khomanani is open, from the beginning the aim was to target Tsonga students. Overtly Khomanani was an open cultural student body, but covertly it was Shangaan (Shivambu, interview, 24 October 2007).

Yes, anyone can join our society. But Bapedi are the main source of our membership (Mphahlele, interview, 8 November 2007).

The operation and activities of the seven student cultural organisations confirm what Werbner (1996:4) calls the use of ‘culturally nuanced resources of social memory for negation, for affirmation and for playful fun’ in the construction of identities. One example of the use of ‘culturally nuanced resources’ is the choice of the names of the associations. The name Ekhaya which is what ECUS is called, means ‘home’ in IsiXhosa. The name is meant to evoke a feeling of belonging and family. Thari E Ntsho is a Tswana idiomatic expression. Although the literal translation is ‘black blanket’, the expression is used to reflect indigeneity. Maitazwitoma derives its name from a Tshivenda idiom ‘*Maitazwitoma ha fani na madzulafhedzu*’, that indicates how making a start is better than doing nothing. Before becoming BSS, the Bapedi Students Society was named *Sebeshong le kgorong* which literally translates to ‘a homely gathering’. From interviews it is clear that in choosing their names, different cultural student organisations are determined not only to indicate the language and ethnic group that they target, but they draw heavily on the idioms of their language groups. Besides being signifiers of target groups, what is also significant about some of the names is how, in choosing the name, there is an attempt to create boundaries of who is the core membership and who is not. Language and its idioms are the best link with the past.

The second example of how culture is constructed to create identities came to the fore when the participants in the focus group were asked to explain the fact that in all the associations the majority were male students. What emerged as a response is what Pattman (2001:228) calls ‘problematism of women’. In a study of the formation of masculine identities at a teacher’s college in Zimbabwe, Pattman describes the use of apportionment of blame and eroticisation of women’s bodies as one of the ways male students constructed their identities. While no reference was made to women’s bodies, the focus group blamed female students for the low participation of women in the cultural organisations. One participant complained, ‘whenever people have to volunteer only the guys do so. That’s very depressing. Women don’t participate. Few women volunteer’.

With a little bit of probing this ‘problematism of women’ revealed deep-seated sexism, justified on the basis of culture:

We do discuss issues about the role of women. While we stick to the customs but we somehow realise that today's women are not the same as the ones in the olden days. We show them that although today's women try to be independent, this is impossible (Focus group, 17 November 2007).

We tell the guys to respect our women; that's the first thing. Then try to listen to each other. But still women should not try to overpower us because I think there is nobody who would allow that. It's unreasonable (Focus group, 17 November 2007).

If men can be respected, then everything will be fine. But today's women sometimes tend to be ambitious and want to control men and want to implement things that are impossible. That thing is still there. You can't accept a woman to control you. The main thing is respect. If women can respect their husbands and men respect their wives, then things will be fine. It's not that we say men must beat their wives. It's not like that. That one is not allowed (Focus group, 17 November 2007).

There are things that women cannot do. And those women who are real, they understand that there are things that women cannot do. In terms of gender equality, I think it is a good thing but it is has still to be open to what women can do or not do. Generally women are emotional although there are few who are strong. That's why the transformation process is slow (Focus group, 17 November 2007).

Whereas it is unquestionable that the student cultural associations are using ethnic identities as the basis of organisation, what is not clear is whether the emergence of this form of organisation is leading to ethnicisation of student politics. Although there is evidence that at Wits the establishment of other cultural organisations was a response to the existence of ECUS and perceived Xhosa chauvinism (Shivambu, interview, 24 October 2007), there is no evidence of ethnic mobilisation over resources between the different associations. But as Chabal (1996:49) argues whether the political impact of ethnicity is constructive or destructive depends on the specific historical context. Presently, unlike in Zimbabwe (Gaidzanwa 1993 and Zeilig 2006) and Nigeria (Beckman 2006), there is no evidence to show that ethnic competition has crept into student politics. This may be a result of a division of labour where inclusive student organisations take charge of politics and the ethnic ones are responsible for the so-called 'cultural' issues.

Ethnic and political identities

Probed in the course of the research was the way in which members of the cultural organisations perceived political student bodies. The first thing that came out of the research is that the majority of the interviewees saw the two forms of organisation as playing different roles. There is also an explicit understanding that culture is not political. A member of ZSCS was explicit about the separation when he said: 'We can't be held back by politics. We recommend that our members join other organisations. It's no politics in the cultural society. It's all about culture' (Dladla, interview, 2 November 2007). The position was further articulated when Mphahlele made the following distinction between student political bodies and cultural groups: 'One is culture and the other one is politics. It's a belief system in the cultural society versus political choices.' (Interview, 8 November 2007).

When asked why few members of the cultural groups belonged to political student organisations, some of the informants disputed the AISU statistics that reflected that not a single member of the cultural groups belonged to either the ANC Youth League or SASCO. They pointed to certain members of the cultural groups who were on the SRC and who also served in structures of political organisations. The secretary of ECUS who wore ANC Youth League T-shirt when interviewed asserted that many of the cultural societies' members had participated in campaigns against fee increases that took place in 2007. The second response was to admit that few members of cultural groups belonged to political organisations. The financial implications of joining more than one student club were raised as the reason why students who belonged to cultural groups were not registered with student political organisations. The membership fees for the cultural societies range from R30 to R200 per annum. Whatever the reason is for the situation where few cultural groups' members are paid-up members of political organisations, there is some basis to argue that many informants make a distinction between political and ethnic identities. In her study of student activism at Wits and one other South African university, Dawson (2006) identifies three student identities – political, ordinary middle class students and a struggling poor minority. What is interesting about these three identities is how little crisscrossing occurred.

To understand this it is vital to look at what has happened to student political organisations after 1994. In a study of public protests between 2002 and 2004 in 12 historically black institutions, Koen, Cele and Libhaber (2006:407) found that 'students no longer share core set of values or an organisation that binds them nationally'. Dawson (2006) makes the same conclusion in her study of student activism. According to her, while the South African Student Congress (SASCO) is the dominant organisation in the higher education sector, there is a

distance between the organisation and the majority of ordinary students. Like Koen, Cele and Libhaber (2006), Dawson (2006:293) concludes that in the post-apartheid period 'it would be inaccurate to suggest that there is evidence of an emerging or re-emerging mass student movement in South Africa' but suggests that 'the soil is fertile at present for such a movement to grow'. In this context it is plausible that cultural organisations have stepped in to deal with questions of alienation among students.

Conclusion

The student movement has definitely changed since the ushering in of the democratic dispensation in South Africa. By law, university students sit in governance structures of institutions of higher learning (see Cele's paper in this collection). Moreover, the landscape of higher education has changed with institutions that were racially segregated becoming more mixed. This has definite implications for student composition and nature of student organisation. As they participate in governance of universities, militant organisations of the past also begin to change. This is a process that is not only driven by intra-institutional changes. The changes at a political and socio-economic levels also influence the nature of student organisation at different universities. The story of the seven cultural organisations at Wits shows the various forms that student organisation can take depending on the nature of the institution; the attitude of students to authority inside and outside of the university; and the national and international socio-economic order.

There is a danger to equate student activism with political student organisations or protests around student grievances. As Dawson (2006:280-281) argues for an endeavour that plots student activism along a latent-manifest continuum, it is vital to realise the plethora of forms that student organisation can take. Also critical is to appreciate how varied the forms of organisations will be depending whether the period is one characterised as a political upsurge or lull. The ethnic-based cultural organisations that are emerging at South African universities are a form of student organisation. They need to be observed and studied.

Notes

1. Cattle that a woman's family asks from a man before agreeing that their daughter could marry. Presently, cash instead cattle is used as *lobola*.
2. Student slang for residence.
3. Cooked maize meal and a Southern African staple food.

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