



From the Ground Up: An Autobiographical Reflection of Sol Plaatje University's First Decade

Jesmael Mataga^{1*}

'As a product of social agency, SPU must ensure it cannot be the proverbial "ivory tower". It must remain intellectually rigorous yet socially present.'

Abstract

What does the establishment of a new university signify and entail within the context of post-independence/post-1994 southern Africa? Which historical, structural, political and subjective factors shape such an undertaking at a time when universities are under increasing scrutiny and their social role is being reconsidered? This article reflects on the inaugural decade of Sol Plaatje University (SPU) in Kimberley (2014–2025) through an autobiographical and reflexive lens, examining the institutional dynamics that informed the creation of a new university in post-independence southern Africa. The emergence of SPU coincided with growing debates about the purpose of higher education and intensified calls for the decolonisation of universities across the region, particularly following the #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall movements. Situated within this critical historical moment, SPU's first decade provides insights into efforts to make higher education more responsive to the needs of post-independence African societies. Rather than offering a comprehensive institutional history, the article analyses selected responses to decolonisation within the Humanities and Social Sciences. It argues that SPU represents an important case study for understanding the complexities of higher education reform, institutional transformation, and the pursuit of more inclusive and epistemically transformative educational systems in post-independence Africa.

Key words: Fallist movements, institutional dynamics, complexities of higher education, decolonisation, transformative educational systems, relevance, future of African universities

* Associate Professor, Museum and Heritage Studies, Sol Plaatje University, Kimberly, South Africa. Email: Jesmael.Mataga@spu.ac.za

Résumé

Que signifie et qu'implique la création d'une nouvelle université dans le contexte de l'Afrique australe post-indépendance et post-1994 ? Quels facteurs historiques, structurels, politiques et subjectifs façonnent une telle entreprise à une époque où les universités font l'objet d'un examen critique croissant et où leur rôle social est réinterrogé ? Cet article propose une réflexion autobiographique et réflexive sur la première décennie de l'Université Sol Plaatje (SPU) à Kimberley (2014-2025), en examinant les dynamiques institutionnelles qui ont présidé à la création d'une nouvelle université dans l'Afrique australe post-indépendance. L'émergence de la SPU a coïncidé avec l'intensification des débats sur la finalité de l'enseignement supérieur et des appels à la décolonisation des universités dans la région, notamment à la suite des mouvements #FeesMustFall et #RhodesMustFall. Inscrite dans ce moment historique particulier, la première décennie de la SPU offre un éclairage sur les efforts visant à rendre l'enseignement supérieur davantage adapté aux besoins des sociétés africaines post-indépendance. Sans proposer une histoire institutionnelle exhaustive de l'université, l'article analyse certaines réponses aux appels à la décolonisation dans les sciences humaines et sociales. Il soutient que la SPU constitue un cas d'étude important pour comprendre les complexités de la réforme de l'enseignement supérieur, de la transformation institutionnelle et de la quête de systèmes éducatifs plus inclusifs et épistémiquement transformateurs en Afrique post-indépendance.

Mots-clés : mouvements « fallistes », dynamiques institutionnelles, complexité de l'enseignement supérieur, décolonisation, systèmes éducatifs transformateurs, pertinence, avenir des universités africaines

At the Deep End: Some Notes on Methodological and Conceptual Underpinnings

This reflection employed a desk-based literature review and systematic document analysis, complemented by an autobiographical self-reflection by the author. The initial phase of the methodological approach involved a systematic review of publicly accessible institutional documentation, government reports, and scholarly literature pertaining to the origins, establishment, early development and expansion of SPU. These sources provide critical information on the institutional objectives that informed the creation of SPU, with particular focus on its commitment to regional development, social justice, and the transformation of the higher education landscape. Central to this documentary corpus are SPU's five-

year strategic plans, which are currently in their third iteration (2025–29). In addition, annual reports, academic plans, research strategies, and other official documents offered insights into SPU's foundational principles, institutional ethos, and strategic orientations regarding research, teaching, community engagement, and academic programme development over the past decade. Second, this article adopts a biographical–reflexive methodological orientation, explicitly engaging my positionality as a member of the founding team of SPU and, more specifically, as the inaugural Head responsible for leading the establishment of what has subsequently become the university's Faculty of Humanities. The analysis draws on my experiential knowledge accumulated during SPU's formative phase and throughout the subsequent decade of the institution's consolidation and development.

This reflection is positioned within, and theoretically informed by, a growing body of scholarship that critically interrogates the changing roles, functions and responsibilities of universities in relation to marginalised communities. Of relevance is the conceptual proposition articulated by Gastrow and Kruss (2016), who contend that there is a need to establish and institutionalise a systematic and sustained 'link between universities and marginalised communities'. The university–industry–community framework underscores the need for strategic engagement of South African universities with the sectors in which they are located, particularly within historically marginalised communities or settings. The proposition is embedded within the broader scholarly discourse on the so-called 'third mission' of universities – also variously conceptualised as community engagement or academic citizenship – which encompasses activities that extend beyond the traditional core functions of teaching and research to include the systematic mobilisation and application of academic knowledge for addressing immediate, context-specific challenges within local communities. These scholarly contributions underscore that public universities, in addition to their core academic mandates of teaching and research, bear a responsibility to proactively address the social, economic and developmental imperatives of their surrounding communities. In examining university–industry–government relations, Cooper conceptualised the so-called 'triple helix' model, a triadic configuration of research-oriented interactions designed to advance both knowledge production and economic development (Cooper 2011; Carayannis, Barth and Campbell 2012). This framework foregrounds the view that the epistemic function of universities ought to be oriented towards the university as a 'public good', with a normative commitment to promoting

social justice and fostering broader processes of social development (Kruss et al. 2012; Kruss and Gastrow 2016; Fongwa and Luescher 2022; Ngandu 2024). At the core of these suggestions is the dimension of societal benefit to communities. Accordingly, universities are now perceived as firmly 'anchored' in their respective locales and embedded within specific socio-spatial contexts and are increasingly expected to operate as catalysts for local, social and economic development, within socially and economically marginalised communities (Bank, Cloete and Van Schalkwyk 2018; Fongwa 2023).

For the South African context, as it is for other African regions, the thinking underscores that universities should catalyse local economic development through participative knowledge exchange, empowering communities to address livelihood challenges while also benefiting from their (communities') indigenous knowledge systems (Fongwa and Luescher 2022; Ngandu 2024). Located in a small, economically declining mining town in one of the largest yet least economically resourced provinces of the country, the SPU operates in a context characterised by pronounced social and economic marginality. This positioning required the formulation and implementation of deliberate strategies to engage with and derive mutual benefit for local communities (Kleinsmith 2015; Ballim 2018; Fongwa et al. 2022; Ngandu 2024).

As detailed in the following section, the formative strategic priorities of SPU emerged as a direct response to the economic and social marginalisation that characterises the small town located in the country's largest province. In this context, the SPU positioned itself as 'a university within a town' (SPU 2015: 14), articulating an institutional vision, mission and set of values grounded explicitly in principles of social justice (Ballim, 2016; Fongwa and Luescher 2022). The establishment of SPU occurred at a historical moment when the role of universities in a post-independence, post-1994 sociopolitical context was under critical scrutiny. Higher education institutions were increasingly condemned as sites that reproduced colonial power relations through their institutional architectures, spatial configurations, and modalities of community and knowledge engagement. This critique was vividly manifested in student protests and the broader intellectual debates on the decolonisation of universities (Mbembe 2016; Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Zondi 2016; Nyamnjoh 2016; Jansen 2019). As an institution established in the post-1994 democratic era, the SPU was expected to contribute constructively to addressing the deep social inequities and structural harms produced by apartheid. It was expected that a university founded in this period

would differentiate itself from historically established institutions that were widely regarded as less responsive to or less representative of the socio-political and economic realities of wider South African society.

While this reflection draws on my own positionality in the Faculty of Humanities, notably there are several other social and community-based projects that have not been the focus of this paper. The university's growing contribution is substantiated by a body of commentary, reflection and empirical analysis on its impact, which, taken together, tends to project a predominantly positive assessment of both its historical trajectory and its prospective role (Kleinsmith and Horn 2015; Ballim 2016; Fongwa and Luescher 2022; Mataga, Mokae and Marumo 2022). These studies have already revealed the significant role of the SPU in economic stimulation and community interdependence, reflecting the institution's central position in the city's economic resurgence (Ngandu 2024). Although a growing body of literature has, over the past decade, increasingly recognised SPU as an 'anchor institution in place-based development' (Fongwa 2023: 92; see also Kleinsmith and Horn 2015; Ballim 2016; Coetzee and Werner 2018; Fongwa and Luescher 2022; Ngandu 2024), the extent to which the university can substantively realise and sustain the roles and responsibilities implied by this designation necessitates continuous monitoring, as well as ongoing, investigation and analysis.

The Sol Plaatje University (SPU) in Context

Brian Willan, a distinguished historian renowned for his study of the figure of Solomon Tshekisho Plaatje (commonly referred to as Sol Plaatje), after whom the university is named, authored a meticulously researched and richly illustrated monograph entitled *Sol Plaatje University: An Idea and its Origins* (Willan 2020). In this monograph, Willan (2020) presents a systematic and analytically rigorous account of the historical foundations underlying the establishment of the university, meticulously tracing the institution's development over a ten-year period. The study documents, in detail, the key phases of its institutional consolidation and academic achievements, situating the university within the broader higher education landscape as one of only two universities established in South Africa in the post-1994 era. Willan argues that although the SPU was formally created by a central government directive, its real origins lie in a longer local and regional history shaped by sociopolitical struggle. This historical embeddedness informs the institution's character, priorities and ethos. A key stated goal of the SPU is to redress historical injustices by widening educational access for previously excluded individuals and communities. (Willan 2020).

The SPU is one of two newly established public universities created after 1994 within the state sponsored ‘Development Framework for New Universities in the Northern Cape and Mpumalanga Provinces’, a South African government framework that outlines the planning, structure, and establishment of two new universities (Sol Plaatje University, SPU, and the University of Mpumalanga, UMP) (DHET 2012), which sought to address inadequate post-school education capacity and promote regional development through academic hubs, catalysed by anchor universities. SPU was named in honour of Solomon Tshekisho Plaatje (1876–1932), a prominent cosmopolitan intellectual in South African history, acclaimed for his scholarly achievements and substantial contributions to African political discourse and literary heritage. Sol Plaatje was a multi-faceted South African intellectual whose life’s work at the intersection of journalism, literature and politics laid the foundation for the modern liberation struggle. As the first Secretary General of the South African Native National Congress (later the ANC), he became a voice against the 1913 Land Act, documenting its devastating social impact in his seminal work, *Native Life in South Africa* (Plaatje 1916). Beyond his political activism, Plaatje was a linguistic pioneer who translated Shakespeare into Setswana and authored *Mhudi*, the first novel in English published by a Black South African – and a literary work recently re-examined for its profound historical insights. Recent scholarship emphasises Plaatje’s extraordinary role as a cultural bridge-builder who navigated the complexities of colonial identity while fiercely advocating for African land rights and national unity (Willan 2018; Haire 2020; Mokae and Willan 2020; Willan and Mokae 2023).

Notably, the SPU was officially inaugurated in 2014, following the South African government’s initiative to establish higher education institutions in regions that had been historically marginalised under the apartheid education system. Located in the historically significant city of Kimberley in the Northern Cape province, SPU was conceptualised as a strategic intervention to address established geographic and socio-economic inequalities. The region has long been characterised by widespread poverty and underdevelopment, accompanied by limited access to advanced academic infrastructure and resources (DHET 2012; Kleinsmith and Horn 2015; Ballim 2016, 2018; Ngandu 2024). The establishment of SPU was a key part of the post-1994, post-apartheid agenda to dismantle racially segregated education by promoting equitable access to quality higher education. In 2024, SPU marked its tenth anniversary, a milestone that invites critical reflection not only on university formation in post-apartheid South Africa, but also on the changing roles, purposes and significance of

universities more broadly – especially as their value is increasingly questioned amid growing calls for decolonisation and a systematic re-examination of their mandates, visual iconographies and curricula.

In 2015, the #FeesMustFall movement, led by student organisations across South Africa, articulated demands for tuition-free higher education and called for the transformation of universities into sites of critical engagement with the enduring colonial epistemic and structural legacy (Nyamnjoh 2016; Shepherd 2024). Consequently, the establishment of the SPU was not only a response to region-specific educational needs but was also aligned with broader national discourses on higher education reform and the decolonisation of academic epistemologies (Leibowitz 2017). Unlike older South African universities, the SPU was considered unencumbered by the history of advantage and disadvantage associated with higher education institutions established during the previous political dispensation (SPU 2015), thereby positioning it as an ideal environment for decolonial methodologies.

Yunus Ballim, the founding and inaugural Vice-Chancellor and Principal of SPU, provides a critical reflection on the complex challenges associated with establishing a new university in the post-1994 context, a period during which the role, function, and societal value of universities within a rapidly transforming, post-independence social order were subject to intensive examination and debate. Ballim pertinently asked:

How do you start a university? What Institutional arrangements make the most sense? What academic programmes ? ... the fact that we could ask such questions also meant we could reimagine the responses, and re-envision the way in which a university should rise to the challenge of its social purpose in a South Africa after Apartheid, unfettered by the historical legacy that burdened the development of so many of the existing Universities in the country? (Ballim 2020: 4)

Founded within a significant historical and socio-economic context, SPU adopted a clear social justice mandate from its inception. Its inaugural (2014–19) Strategic Plan set the tone, declaring that the university would work to ‘enhance democratic practice and social justice in society, and promote social, economic and educational development through teaching, research, and engagement with the community’ (SPU 2014). Across its three strategic plans (2015–19, 2019–24, 2025–29), social justice remains a central guiding philosophy, with its Vision describing it as ‘a university critically engaged in learning, research and development,

while improving democratic practice and social justice in society' (SPU 2014: 5). Further, and in line with this social justice focus, the university's Mission also envisaged the institution as:

an intellectual space for the production of ideas and knowledge that facilitate and enrich participation in, and democratic transformation of political, social, cultural, and economic life. As a functional symbol of the new South African order, the SPU is unencumbered by the history of advantage and disadvantage related to the institutions of higher learning established during the previous political dispensation (SPU 2015: 11).

What is also notable and has been adequately documented is that in its initial decade, the strategic positioning of SPU within Kimberley as a 'university in the city' was firmly established during the university's formative years, serving as a foundation for its role and influence in a town that was experiencing economic decline (Kleinsmith and Horn 2015; Willan 2020; Fongwa et al. 2022; Ngandu 2024). SPU demonstrated an awareness of the importance of this geopolitical positioning, evidenced by the way it articulated its institutional identity and strategic orientation as a 'university in town' rather than a typical 'university town' (SPU 2014: 14). The inaugural strategic plan of SPU explains this positioning by proposing that the institution would, over time, catalyse the transformation of Kimberley into a classical 'university town', understood as an urban environment that develops in form, function and character around and as a direct consequence of the presence of the university (SPU 2014). SPU rightly acknowledged that as a small city, Kimberley already possessed its own character and identity as a city that extended beyond the scope of SPU. However, the university also noted that it was undeniable that its location in Kimberley would eventually significantly influence the economic prospects and the development trajectory of the city (Kleinsmith and Horn 2015; SPU 2015; Willan 2020; Ngandu 2024).

This placement and positioning was an ample opportunity for a university that would integrate within its location and would create ways of working that made incisive contributions to the local community, the city and beyond. In line with this positioning, the SPU recognised that it would play a major role in, and actively help shape, the future development trajectory of Kimberley. For example, it was clear that the spatial plan of the university, intricately inserted into the centre of the city, would change and reshape the urban plan of the city (see Image 2). Therefore, in the physical planning stage of the university, it was envisaged that the new campus would become embedded in the urban fabric in a way that would benefit both the university and the surrounding community through the evolving

socio-economic and cultural opportunities generated by their relationship. Spatially and economically, the establishment of a new university, in the middle of the city, would profoundly reconfigure the dynamics of what was otherwise a declining mining city.

From the Ground Up: New Universities in 'Marginal' Places

In early 2015, on my first day of work at SPU, I walked into a room with two colleagues – the university called them the 'Heritage Studies programme team'. After my arrival, the three of us formed the nucleus of what was supposed to mutate into a fully-fledged school. At this stage, the three-member team ran a one-year undergraduate Higher Certificate in Heritage Studies, which has remained a flagship programme at the university (Benneyworth and Pinto 2019). In 2015, the inaugural cohort of students in Humanities/Heritage Studies was enrolled, and in early 2016 the certificate programme produced its first thirteen graduates at Sol Plaatje University. Although modest in scale, this initial graduation was of considerable symbolic significance, as it marked the early tangible outcome of the broader process of establishing new universities in South Africa in the post-1994 period. In the modest graduation hall, with students accompanied by their families and friends, and supported by a small but dedicated and enthusiastic complement of administrative and academic staff, Sol Plaatje University was formally integrated into the core institutional landscape of public higher education in South Africa.

On a personal level, I experienced considerable anxiety about the decision to join the newly established university. This concern was primarily informed by the fact that by the time I joined the university, there was very little physically and structurally at that time and also that my appointment at SPU coincided with a particularly volatile phase in the South African higher education sector, marked by widespread unrest across university campuses, as students mobilised to advocate for free and decolonised education for economically marginalised groups. When I joined SPU in early 2015, #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall were at their peak, calling for the unravelling of dominant knowledge practices and university iconographies, recognition of diverse ways of knowing, and reduced university costs. Being at SPU then was surreal. The university was only a few months old, and building what many hoped would be a university free of colonial and apartheid legacies was both challenging and exhilarating. It quickly became clear that, despite our recent establishment, we could not remain insulated from the broader trends and systemic forces shaping higher education. Possibly because it was newly established and had a relatively small student

body, our university offered on-campus students better material conditions than those at older, larger institutions, especially regarding tuition fees, accommodation and learning support. However, these measures could not fully shield the university from broader developments affecting other higher education institutions and campuses. In a show of solidarity, our small student cohort joined the ongoing movement for the transformation in South African universities.

Despite the challenges of our establishment, we positioned ourselves as a niche university, focusing on academic programmes aligned with the socio-economic needs of the Northern Cape and South Africa’s broader development objectives. As reflected in the vision and mission of the SPU, the university aimed to be a relevant and responsive institution, engaging in critical research and teaching while promoting social justice and democratic practices (SPU 2015). According to the first academic plan, the academic focus of the SPU would be intentionally narrow, focusing on fields that address the unique characteristics of the region and contribute to national development.

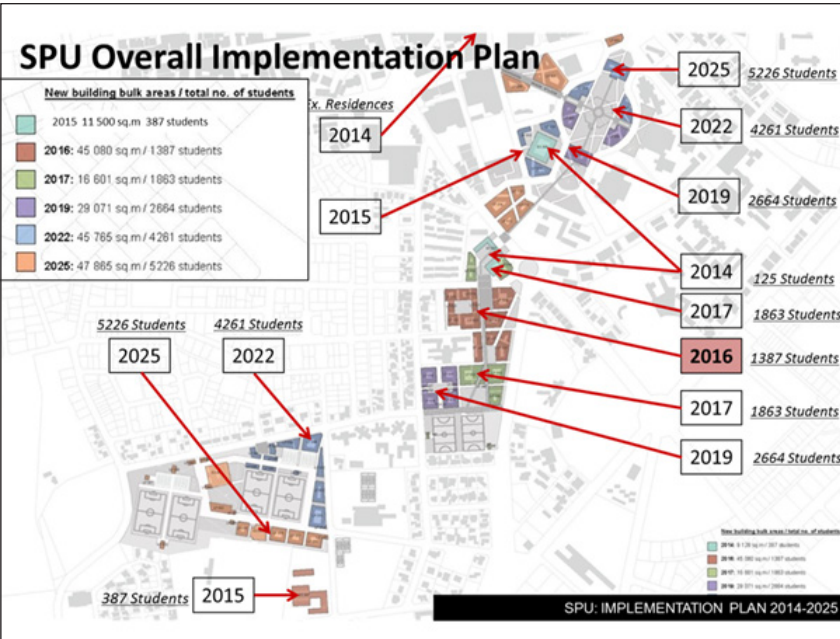


Image 1: Physical layout and implementation plan of the SPU infrastructure. The diagram shows how the physical plan of the university was intricately woven into the fabric of the city, changing the physical and architectural structure of the city (Image credit: SPU; see also Kleinsmith and Horn 2015: 497)



Image 2: Part of SPU's Central Campus in 2025, showing the Main Library in the centre and the Moroka Multipurpose Building on the right, with Rock Art motifs drawn from Driekopseiland, a petroglyph site near Kimberley, etched into its metal façade (Photograph : SPU)

The establishment of a new university encompasses a multitude of concurrent processes. The first among these was a significant infrastructure project (Image 1), which involved the construction of new facilities and the rehabilitation of existing structures. Images 1 to 3 illustrate the degree of development experienced by SPU. Although these may initially appear as mere visual representations of the infrastructural segment, they are rich in symbolism, conveying the visual, emblematic and conceptual ideals associated with the establishment of a new university in post-apartheid South Africa and within the broader context of postcolonial Africa.

During the development of physical infrastructure, the university had to put in place administrative and governance frameworks, design and implement reputable academic programmes, and build a robust human resource base while developing a collaborative network with local communities – all initiated *de novo*. Therefore, from the outset of this institution-building process, it was evident to those involved during the formative years that establishing a new university in the post-1994 period represented a distinctive opportunity to create an institution that was, at least in principle, unburdened/ relatively less burdened by the inherited structural and ideological legacies of apartheid. This awareness is reflected in the university's initial strategic plan, which positioned the project of establishing the new university ostensibly unencumbered by

the legacy of colonialism and apartheid (SPU 2015–19: 11). However, it was recognised while this historical legacy persisted and remained, in practical terms, inescapable, as they were partly manifested in prevailing socio-economic conditions, including unemployment, widening social inequalities, and pervasive poverty. Regardless of the persistent legacy of the economic and social structures of the apartheid-era, the university perceived itself as ‘a functional symbol of the new South African order’ and saw itself as ‘unencumbered by the history of advantage and disadvantage pertaining to the institutions of higher learning established during the previous political dispensation’ (SPU 2014: 12). The university’s newness afforded a unique opportunity to design the university from its inception with decolonial principles in mind, rather than dismantling established colonial and apartheid structures. This moment in establishing a new university was seen as enabling institutional systems and curricula free from colonial and apartheid legacy, thus making a substantively decolonised university possible (Fongwa 2023). In particular, although the university’s activities and curriculum were not explicitly labelled as decolonial, efforts were made to challenge the inherited and deeply ingrained practices and systems embedded within policies, structures and curricula in South Africa (Ballim 2018). The strategies ranged from mundane to strategic. For example, given the institution’s modest size and the fact that most students came from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, all students received accommodations and support, including access to world-class information technology (IT), food, and other necessities. It was recognised that the material conditions of the students, at least during their time on campus, were vital for effective learning. From its inception, the institution articulated the ambition to establish itself as a world-class university and strategically positioned itself as an ‘ICT-enabled university, making substantial investments in educational technologies to support teaching and learning for academic staff and students’ (SPU 2014: 1).

Due in part to its relatively small enrolment, as well as a deliberate institutional emphasis on high-quality pedagogy, holistic attention to students’ lived experiences and intentional development of the ‘third curriculum’, SPU has achieved pass and throughput rates that exceed national averages, compared to sector-wide trends of decreasing performance on these indicators. The high patterns in pass rates challenged the dominant assumption that students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds or materially under-resourced schools are inherently less likely to succeed in higher education. Rather, the high graduate throughput rates at SPU indicate that, despite the

economically marginalised background of students, the provision of adequate material, social and academic (including technical) support enables them to achieve academic results that are comparable to or even exceed those of students coming from resource-rich backgrounds and institutional environments.

A salient aspect of SPU's institutional trajectory as an emerging university seeking to confront and transcend established structures of inequality in the apartheid-era, was its commitment to a social justice-orientated agenda (Ngandu 2024). As articulated in the preceding section, the formative strategic plan of SPU, along with its Vision, Mission, and Values, shows the university's commitment to a social justice agenda. The university's Vision Statement, sees the SPU as 'A university critically engaged in learning, research and development – while enhancing democratic practice and social justice in society' and posits that, as 'a site of learning, the SPU is envisaged as an intellectual space for the production of ideas and knowledge that facilitate and enrich participation in, and democratic transformation of political, social, cultural and economic life' (SPU 2014: 1). Furthermore, SPU's inaugural Strategic Plan (2014–19) assertively declared that 'the drive for equity, social justice, and democracy is a particularly significant policy focus in the context of South African higher education, given the high levels of poverty and inequality that remain endemic in society' (SPU 2015: 5). Its mission and positioning are defined as follows:

to become an institution of higher learning uniquely positioned to: graduate citizens competent and capable of realising the aspirations of society; produce new knowledge impacting on key challenges of the region; engage critically with communities of discourse and communities of people in order to search for pathways to equitable development (SPU 2014: 12).

In its formative years, SPU was highly intentional about its identity. As a university woven into the fabric of a historic city in a culturally and linguistically diverse province, the university's iconography clearly expressed its local origins, while expressing universal knowledge ideals. Its emblem, bearing the motto 'Light from Africa for Humanity' in the province's three main languages, rooted the institution locally while expressing its value and contribution to universal knowledge. The emblem features a local quiver tree – valued for its environmental, cultural and medicinal significance – topped by a star symbolising a beacon of hope (Image 2). Also, named after historical and intellectual icon Solomon T. Plaatje, SPU draws on his well-documented forward-looking cosmopolitanism and intellectual achievement (Willan 2018,

2022; Willan and Mokae 2023). By taking his name, the university affirmed the value and contribution of African intellectuals, including those whom apartheid and colonialism could not silence. Naming its main buildings after characters from some of the country's earliest literary works, including African-language texts like *Mhudi*, SPU foregrounds the resilience and importance of African knowledge and intellectual traditions (Haire 2020; Mokae and Willan 2020).

The university's location in the city symbolises the revitalisation and reclamation of a place long shaped by extractive mining, which began with the discovery of diamonds, just moments from where the university now stands. The university's presence in the city centre has reshaped the architectural and visual landscape and stands as a major visual and symbolic challenge to the lasting effects of extractive colonialism (see Image 1). Its recent acceptance of a donation from the De Beers diamond company epitomises this 'reverse engineering' of colonial extractivist symbols: the Harry Oppenheimer House, named after a leading diamond mining benefactor and the tallest building in the city, is now owned by the university. Beyond its striking physical presence, this handover of the building to the university is deeply symbolic. It suggests a forward-looking, post-1994 institution, with African knowledge reclaiming a symbol of capitalist extraction. The university has also grounded its identity on the city's history and heritage. Within and next to its three campuses are key Kimberley heritage sites, including the Oppenheimer Gardens, the Diggers Memorial – honouring colonial mining and the labour behind it – and statues of figures such as Cecil John Rhodes, Sol T. Plaatje and Frances Baard, all historically linked to the city. In addition to this are building facades decorated after ancient rock engraving from a site near the city or mosaics crafted after the province's rich geological and palaeontological heritage (Image 2). Adjacent to campus are sites like the Sol Plaatje Museum and fractured heritage sites such as the Malay Camp Memorial, dedicated to residents forcibly removed between 1939 and 1959.

In many ways, the university contributes to these layered and sometimes contested histories of this historic city. Building on SPU's institutional commitment to social justice, its rootedness in place, and its effort to transcend the legacy of apartheid highlighted in this section, the following section examines how the university responded to debates and demands for decolonising higher education. It shows how SPU's formative years were shaped by these broader calls, focusing on curriculum design and community participation in the Humanities, Social Sciences, and Indigenous African Languages, and how approaches in these disciplines reflected ongoing decolonisation discussions.

SPU and the Need for Epistemic Decolonisation of the Humanities

As a new institution established in 2014, the SPU emerged during a period when calls for the decolonisation of South African universities were intensifying. These calls for decolonisation gained significant momentum, especially after the 2015–16 #FeesMustFall/#RhodesMustFall student protests, which not only opposed tuition fee increases but also challenged persistent colonial structures in higher education (Langa 2016; Nyamnjoh 2016; Jansen 2018; Reiter 2022). The aftermath of the #RhodesMustFall movement significantly stimulated discussions, debates and methodologies on the decolonisation of universities. A continuous array of writings from academics, university bureaucrats, student formations, and general communities across Africa has centred on the questions of decolonisation. Despite the fissures, debates and disagreements within the colonialism discourse, such discussions have prompted a re-evaluation of the curriculum and how curriculum decolonisation now constitutes the core of the global academic knowledge project (Mbembe 2015; Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Zondi 2016; Leibowitz 2017; Bhambra, Gebrial and Nişancioğlu 2018; Jansen 2018; Jansen et al. 2019). In southern Africa, this is evidenced by the increasing publications on decolonising universities, focusing on transformation, change, and the associated struggles and achievements (Jansen 2016, 2023; Habib 2019). Located within ongoing discussions, debates and contests on decolonising universities in Africa, these writings emphasise the persistent 'struggle for the soul of a university' (Chetty and Merrett 2014).

In the Humanities, focus was placed on revising curricula in response to perceived threats to the Humanities and Social Sciences in a neoliberal context that prioritises utilitarian fields such as Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM). In South Africa, the response was reflected in the Department of Higher Education and Training's *Charter for Humanities and Social Sciences* (DHET 2011), which aimed to reinstate the importance of the Humanities and Social Sciences as central. Since then, persistent discussions have continued on how to transform universities from 'ivory towers to ebony towers' through 'transforming curricula in the humanities and social sciences' (Tella and Motala 2020; Reiter 2022). There is increasing consensus that decolonising the humanities in Africa requires critically reassessing the Eurocentric curriculum, challenging the dominance of European epistemologies, and recognising how these have marginalised other ways of knowing (Mbembe 2015, 2021; Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Zondi 2016; Nyamnjoh 2016; Bhambra, Gebrial and Nişancioğlu 2018). The approach calls for incorporating African epistemological systems, languages

and cultural paradigms into the curriculum, reaffirming their worth and legitimacy. This demands a rigorous review of content, pedagogical methods, and theoretical paradigms in humanities education, questioning their relevance and biases

The establishment of the SPU was directly influenced by the objective of decentralising higher education and enhancing its accessibility to historically marginalised communities in the Northern Cape. In pursuing its social justice agenda and acknowledging its geopolitical context, the inaugural leadership of the SPU, although not explicitly stating it, aimed to incorporate the ideals of decolonisation into the very essence of the university, particularly within the curriculum, language of instruction, and institutional culture. Its location in a relatively marginalised community in itself provided a foundation for reimagining teaching, learning, and research methodologies distinct from those of older universities (Kruss and Gastrov 2015). One of the principal strategies used by the SPU in participating in the decolonisation agenda was through the development of its curriculum. The university's dedication to curriculum transformation was in direct alignment with the broader national discourse concerning the decolonisation of higher education. In response to the period's calls for decolonisation, SPU's academic programmes and community engagement initiatives were designed to align with these discourses. As noted in the 2016 Annual Report, in the Humanities and Social Sciences, SPU prioritised offering academic programmes that emphasised local, African and indigenous knowledge systems, alongside the more conventional 'Western' academic models (SPU 2016b).

Reflecting on debates on decolonisation, the team recognised the need to transform curricula without marginalising other forms of knowledge and ways of knowing. Rather, as Ballim argued,

Our curricula must be ever respectful of the irreducible plurality of human opinion. This means that we have to avoid calls for us to acknowledge only one interpretation of history and to genuflect before the singular ideological position – whichever one happens to be in the mind of the particular group in discussion with us at the time (Ballim 2018: 143).

Ballim also called for,

the transformation process of the curriculum has to recognise our students as autonomous learners who can form their individual opinions after careful consideration and reflection [and that] there are no forms of knowledge or ways of knowing that are not accessible to some of our students simply because of their 'Blackness', 'poorness', 'Africanness', etc. (Ballim 2018: 143).

In its initial academic plan, the SPU identified the field of Heritage Studies and African languages as significant focal areas, articulating that,

One of the notable attributes of the Kimberley and the Northern Cape lies in its exceptionally rich repository of human and natural heritage. This repository is present both in structured collections and in informal communal and natural contexts... Situated within this yet-to-be-documented narrative, SPU possesses a distinct opportunity to make a considerable contribution to global intellectual advancement and understanding within this academic domain (SPU 2014: 13).

The institution's location made heritage studies, especially on local Indigenous communities, heritage sites, languages, archival resources, and knowledge systems, central to its research and teaching. By explicitly recognising the importance of local Indigenous epistemologies, cultural heritage, and languages in its inaugural strategic and academic plan, SPU committed to drawing on its immediate socio-cultural environment to shape its research agenda, pedagogical practices and community engagement (see Image 3).

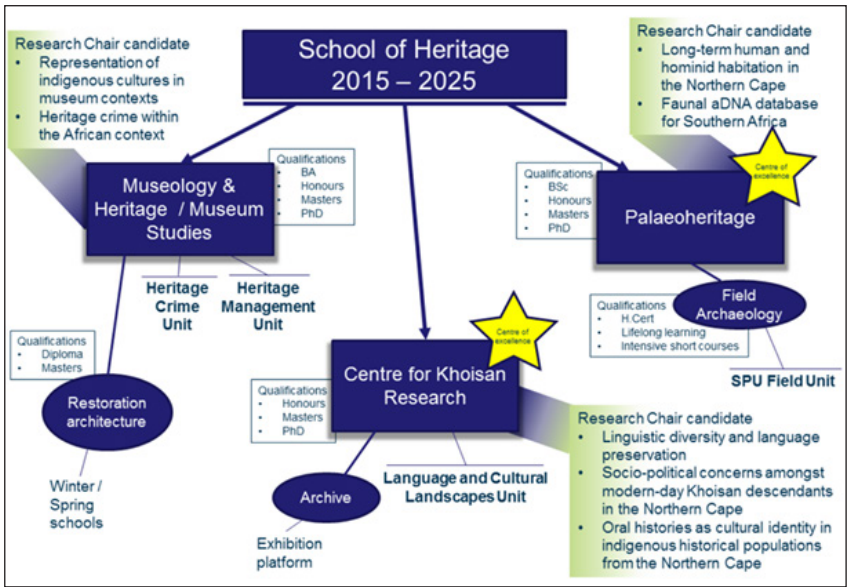


Image 3: The plan for the School of Heritage at SPU. This diagrammatic presentation of the research and teaching thrust for a School of Heritage, was the foundational document for the establishment and growth of what is now the Faculty of Humanities (After Olivier 2014: 5)

Consequently, when the school began to develop academic programmes, colleagues were acutely aware of contemporary 'decolonial' discourses, and the expectations placed on a newly established university such as ours. During the formative years of our faculty, the work undertaken by colleagues in Languages, Anthropology, Archaeology, and Heritage Studies serves as salient examples, illustrating both a heightened awareness of decolonial imperatives and a commitment to reflexive practices informed by decolonial theory. For instance, drawing on their experience of developing and teaching foundational programmes in Archaeology and Heritage Studies, two of my colleagues reflected on how these disciplines have advanced decolonial approaches in higher education by engaging with the established, yet fractured and highly contested heritage landscape shaped by the town's colonial mining history (Benneyworth and Pinto 2019). Working with local museums to give practical exposure to students, most of whom had never encountered museums or heritage sites, colleagues found that museums and public culture spaces offer tools within the existing heritage landscape to research, teach, engage and challenge entrenched colonial biases. Another colleague's undergraduate Anthropology course incorporated collaborative work with artists and a local dance/performance collective, culminating in a film, a musical performance, and a student-curated exhibition that challenged the city's mining history, physically represented by the 'Big Hole', left in the centre of the city from long years of diamond mining (Truys 2018). In a reflection, curiously entitled 'Trash, teaching and the city: The "Big Hole Counter Narrative" project and the Urban Anthropology' (Truys 2018: 55), Truys suggests that 'by interweaving practice-based engagement, anthropological theory, and alternative research and narrative methodologies, the course constituted an intervention that critically interrogated and disrupted the developmentalist trajectory that underpins the 'romanticised and sparkling' representation of Kimberley as the 'city of diamonds' (Truys 2018: 55). Commenting on Truys' work, Majombozi (2018: 67) notes that the institutional novelty of Sol Plaatje University creates a 'clean slate' for critical reflection and experimentation with new pedagogical approaches in Kimberley, a city marked by a harsh colonial and apartheid past. Majombozi (2018) likewise commends Truys' paradigm of embodied learning, which exposes usually unseen phenomena, creates space for learners to articulate marginalised or suppressed experiences and perspectives, and supports interpretation via multiple sensory channels. According to Majombozi, this model enabled students to communicate and uncover previously concealed stories, especially when they were encouraged to draw on semiotic modes and languages that matched their own meaning-making practices, such as song, dance, and other forms of embodied expression (Majombozi 2018).

In addition to the opportunity for new decolonial methods of curriculum development and delivery, represented by the two cases above, the university's location in the linguistically diverse Northern Cape provided space for a decolonial thrust rooted in local Indigenous languages. Building on scholarly debates concerning the transformative capacity of language (Mkhize 2020), and on analyses of the role of African languages in the decolonisation of South African higher education institutions (Helland 2013; Kaschula and Wolff 2020), the Northern Cape province presented a strategic research site for interrogating the linguistic challenges that have characterised post-1994 South Africa (Prah 2018). This context further enabled an exploration of the ways in which African languages can function as central to the broader decolonisation processes (Wa Thiong'o 1986). Given the highly multilingual context of the Northern Cape province – where Khoi and San, Afrikaans, Setswana, isiXhosa, and several other African languages have historically coexisted, and where there is sustained advocacy for the official recognition and revitalisation of Khoi and San languages – the prioritisation of these Indigenous languages represented a strategically advantageous point of departure for institutional intervention at the university. In alignment with this mandate, the School of Humanities identified the critical imperative to re-establish intellectual discourse in Indigenous languages and to promote their systematic development, particularly within contemporary linguistic and academic domains. SPU acknowledged the long-standing, structurally embedded marginalisation of African languages and the attendant epistemic erasure experienced by communities for whom these languages are primary means of communication and thus worked towards the systematic recovery and reintegration of the knowledge encoded within these linguistic and cultural systems. Consequently, recognising both the importance of engaging with the 'language question' (Brock-Utne 2003) and the pivotal role of language in processes of national transformation, reconstruction and development (Webb 2002; Alexander 2012), particularly given the persistent adverse sociopolitical and economic conditions and the marginalised status of African languages (Beukes 2009; Cakata and Segalo 2017; Prah 2018), SPU strategically prioritised the advancement and systematic development of African languages.

As a strategic intervention, and as reflected in its inaugural strategic and academic plans, the SPU elected to significantly contribute to creative writing and reading in African languages (SPU 2025). The university intentionally leveraged the extensive human, natural, cultural and linguistic heritage of the Northern Cape to establish a robust foundational framework for teaching and learning, research and community engagement (SPU 2015). At the level of academic disciplines within the School of Humanities,

a principal mechanism through which the school engaged with and responded to processes of decolonisation in its humanities curriculum was the prioritisation and systematic integration of African languages within its foundational degree offerings, specifically the Bachelor of Arts (General) programmes. In this context, the school undertook a formal commitment to provide African languages as both a medium of instruction and discrete subjects of study. This decision reflects an acknowledgement that African languages function not merely as instruments of everyday communication, but also as critical epistemic and cultural resources through which indigenous knowledge systems are generated, transmitted, legitimised and valorised. Within the Bachelor of Arts (BA) programme, and with the explicit aim of promoting multilingualism and intercultural tolerance, all students were required to complete a compulsory introductory module in conversational proficiency in an African language that did not correspond to their mother tongue. Although the BA programme offered majors in more than ten additional disciplines, fields such as Heritage Studies and creative writing in African languages functioned as key platforms for introducing students to multiple epistemological frameworks and for advancing the status of marginalised African languages, as well as diverse archival repertoires and knowledge systems. In addition to academic programmes focused on African heritage and to the growing recognition of the centrality of linguistic issues within the social sciences and humanities in post-1994 South Africa (Cakata and Segalo 2017), the following section synthesises selected institutional strategies through which the university contributed to the revitalisation and advancement of marginalised Indigenous languages.

SPU, Communities and Indigenous Languages: Repatriation and Recovery²

As highlighted in the preceding section, Sol Plaatje University (SPU) has explicitly prioritised the revitalisation and advanced the re-intellectualisation of local and Indigenous languages. Located in the Northern Cape province, characterised by its linguistic diversity and a tapestry of indigenous languages, including the threatened and endangered Nama, Khoi and San languages, SPU's involvement in the revitalisation and promotion of local or marginalised languages, as well as the reopening of Indigenous linguistic and cultural archives and epistemologies, has been notable (Mataga, Mokae and Marumo 2022). SPU acknowledged that African languages possess the transformative potential to recalibrate and significantly deepen decolonisation processes within African higher education institutions (SPU 2015). This critical intervention acknowledges the enduring linguistic

marginalisation and the systematic epistemic erasure of valuable knowledges produced within, and transmitted through, the communities that speak these languages. Universities occupy a pivotal position in the revitalisation and intergenerational transmission of Indigenous languages, functioning as key institutional actors in their documentation, preservation and sustainable development. The strategic approach adopted by SPU deliberately engaged with the longstanding 'language question' in Africa, which problematises the precarious sociolinguistic position and institutional status of African languages and seeks to redress both their historical and contemporary marginalisation (Wa Thiong'o 1992; Brock-Utne 2003, 2015; Prah 2017).

SPU's strategy was to deploy the discipline of 'Creative Writing' as a dynamic pedagogical and cultural intervention, on the basis that the contemporary culture of creative writing and reading in African languages in South Africa remains markedly underdeveloped. This condition was taken to warrant a deliberate and systematic institutional response by the university (SPU 2014: 15; cf. Mkhize 2020). This was complemented by targeted community-based, capacity-building project aimed at inculcating writing in the local languages. The projects integrated the intellectual expertise of language and literature scholars from SPU with the professional skills of experienced translators and community-based language practitioners.

In this regard, SPU's 'repatriation of letters' translation project, is worth noting (see Mataga, Mokae and Marumo 2022). The translation project was rooted in local concept – '*phetsolelo*' drawn from the local Setswana³ language. According to the project lead, Professor Shole, '*phetsolelo*' signifies translation as a form of repatriation and the recovery of values, symbols and profound meanings that are often lost when African experiences are depicted in foreign languages such as English (Shole 2012, 2016; Shole and Pooe 2020). According to Shole and Pooe (2020), this notion of repatriation or '*phetsolelo*' derives from the Setswana proverb '*ga e phetsolele nageng*', which translates to 'that which is in foreign lands must be returned home' (Shole 2016). Shole elucidates that the proverb is customarily related to the return of mortal remains or sacred elements to their original location and community. In this context, African narratives written in languages other than indigenous African languages represent a form of linguistic exile, where '*phetsolelo*' serves as a repatriation mechanism, restoring these narratives to their origins (Shole 2016; Shole and Pooe 2020).

Therefore, inspired by an innovative conceptualisation of translation as the reclamation of intrinsic values, symbols, cultural essences and diverse ways of knowing, the formidable 'repatriation of letters project' embarked on an ambitious journey to meticulously translate a curated selection of

English novels and other compelling creative literature back into the rich linguistic tapestry of Setswana (SPU 2016). The primary objective of this innovative programme was twofold: first, to systematically address and ameliorate the critical shortage of novels written in Setswana; and second, to affect a substantive 'repatriation' of those narratives and literary works, which although originally produced in English, are profoundly embedded in Setswana cultural frameworks, idiomatic structures and expressive conventions. The specialised project team systematically identified a curated corpus of seven books (comprising six novels and one work of non-fiction) for implementation in this pilot phase of the programme. The selection was governed by stringent inclusion criteria stipulating that the texts be written in English while being firmly situated within Setswana-speaking communities, with additional preference accorded to works whose authors are native Setswana speakers or, optimally, satisfy both conditions. The selected literary masterpieces of the literary repatriation project, comprising *Mhudi* by Sol Plaatje, *Taung Wells* by Martin Koboekae, *Sarcophagus* by Tuelo Gabonewe, *This Book Betrays My Brother* by Kagiso Lesego Molope, *Maru* by Bessie Head, *Call Me Woman* by Ellen Khuzwayo, and *Matters of Life and Death* by Lesego Malepe, stand as a testament to the rich tapestry of Setswana linguistic influence. Each of these titles either originates predominantly from Setswana-speaking authors or is deeply embedded within Setswana-speaking communities, thereby reflecting and sustaining a high degree of cultural specificity and authenticity.

This collection embodies a vibrant spectrum of themes and writing styles, and features some of the most pivotal works crafted by South African writers over the past century. Despite their English articulation, these titles resonate deeply with the cultural and linguistic nuances of Setswana. The project underscores the intrinsic value of African languages, highlighting their capacity to convey and sustain the totality of societal knowledge, as a society's worldview is inherently embedded within its language. As recently noted by Awung and Wagner (2025), Plaatje's linguistic style in *Mhudi* is aligned with that of other African authors who are argued to engage in a form of mental translation, transferring creative concepts from their indigenous languages to European languages during the writing process. In reviewing the translation of *Mhudi*, Awung and Wagner (2025) concur with Shole (2016), that African literature written in English, such as *Mhudi*, may be aptly characterised as local language narratives, articulated in English, and that this characterisation suggests that its translation requires the deployment of strategies designed to reconstitute, as far as possible, the cultural worldview of the source text within its original cultural frame of reference in the target text (Awung and Wagner 2025: 63).

In addition to the translation initiative, a further community-based language revitalisation programme was the annual Northern Cape Writers Festival (NCWF). This festival was complemented by a range of community-oriented activities designed to engage emerging and established writers, as well as the broader reading public. Held annually since its inception in 2007, the NCWF – co-hosted by a public department and various stakeholders in the arts sector (SPU 2016; DSAC 2019; SPU 2019b) – has achieved considerable recognition as a transformative literary platform, effectively mediating between emerging local talent and the national, regional and international literary landscapes. The festival's programming included an annual 'Sol Plaatje Lecture', which became the cornerstone of the festival and often focused on intellectual traditions and South African heritage (SPU 2016). The programme also included workshops and round tables on creative writing and publishing, along with panel discussions on topics such as indigenous languages, protest poetry and the creative process. The events included the Children's Festival, a dedicated programme for young readers that encourages a culture of reading from an early age. Additionally, one of its most notable milestones was the *ArtLit* initiative, which was intended to forge transatlantic collaborations between South African and American artists, leading to international exhibitions (SPU 2016, 2019b; DSAC 2019). Beyond the one-week programme and awards, the NCWF year-long programme has comprised community workshops and public readings that have successfully nurtured a robust culture of reading and writing in all provincial districts, ensuring that South African stories are told in local African languages like Nama, Setswana and Afrikaans (SPU 2016, 2019b, DSAC 2019).

Using this space and leveraging its intellectual resources, SPU has adeptly facilitated the convergence of a thriving community of writers, both experienced and emerging, thus establishing a fertile ground for engagement, collaboration and networking. As these initiatives spurred capacity building and community development, they also nurtured an intellectual environment ripe for the flourishing of creative writing in local languages.

Conclusion

The inaugural decade of Sol Plaatje University (SPU) presents a case study of the intricate opportunities associated with the decolonisation of higher education in South Africa. Despite substantial obstacles, SPU has achieved significant advancement in developing both a curriculum and an institutional culture that embody the decolonial mandates of the post-1994 educational environment. The strategic initiatives of SPU collectively delineate an

institution actively immersed in its post-independence/post-apartheid milieu, striving to actualise the ideals of a decolonised university. In its first decade, SPU continues to articulate a compelling depiction of an institution profoundly engaged within its post-independence framework. From its foundational dedication to social justice and its progression towards integrated community engagement, to its increasing adoption of African languages and indigenous knowledge within its curriculum, the SPU indicates a deliberate initiative to unravel colonial heritages. However, despite its potential to serve as a prime candidate for decolonised higher education in the African context, it is imperative to note that the ideals associated with a decolonised university remain constrained. The architectures of universities remain inherently bureaucratic, predominantly governed by an amalgamation of legal, statutory, procedural, policy and institutional directives that impede any comprehensive realisation of decolonial projects. Although progressive in nature, the case of SPU illustrates that the decolonial journey remains ongoing and inherently complex. Thus, while acknowledging the advantageous position of SPU as a recently established university, which allows for agility in innovation and the construction of systems free of historical burdens, its progress points to the persistent intricacies and paradoxes that challenge the decolonisation of higher education in Africa. Notwithstanding the constraints universities still face in relation to a decolonial agenda, what can be gleaned from the SPU case is that, through persistent critique, universities – especially those newly established – possess the potential to gradually influence the pathway towards the attainment of a decolonised higher education structure within Africa.

Notes

1. Dr Zamani Saul, Premier, Northern Cape Province, Speech delivered at the SPU Chancellor's Investiture, 24 March 2026
2. This section drew from Mataga, J., Mokae S. and Marumo L. 2022, 'Nurturing partnerships for language development: The SPU-DSAC creative writing programme in the Northern Cape Province', in S. Fongwa, T.M. Luescher, J. Mataga and N.N. Mtawa N.N. (eds), *The Role of Universities in Society: Mapping University Community Engagement in Secondary Cities*. SunMedia, pp. 175–99.
3. Setswana is one of South Africa's 12 official languages, and is also spoken in Botswana, and parts of Namibia and Zimbabwe (see <https://humanities.nwu.ac.za/languages/setswana>). According to the 2022 census data, in South Africa's Northern Cape province, Setswana is spoken by approximately 35.7 per cent of the population, making it the second most spoken language in the province after Afrikaans. Available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Northern_Cape#:~:text=In%20the%202022%20census%2C%2054.6,speakers%2C%20after%20North%20West%20province

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Declaration

I declare that I used Writefull's AI application (<https://www.writefull.com/>) to paraphrase, proofread and copyedit, the drafts for this article.

