



“Pathetic Scholarship” In Gukurahundi and Related Studies: A Silver Lining From Social Media Cloud

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ABSTRACT

“In every dark cloud, there is a silver lining”.

In this context, the perceived prevalence of pathetic scholarship in Gukurahundi studies and other cognate fields is cause for concern among scholars and practitioners. However, pathetic scholarship is not uniformly understood by interested parties, who largely base their arguments on Euro-American perspectives that only provide a partial understanding of this phenomenon. Against this backdrop, this paper seeks to critique pathetic scholarship, whether real or imagined, in Gukurahundi Studies, Media, Politics, Conflict, and Peace Studies, just to mention a few. For this paper, pathetic scholarship is understood as studies of sub-standard in terms of set criteria. Methodologically, this paper employs conversations and interdisciplinary discourse analysis with an alternative Afrocentric approach. In this paper, it is argued that pathetic scholarship has not yet reached a crisis point. In fact, pathetic scholarship (in its current form) carries the hopes and aspirations for interdisciplinary richness in tackling difficult subjects such as Gukurahundi and apartheid.

Keywords: Facebook; Social Media; Knowledge; Development; South Africa.

INTRODUCTION

“Pathetic scholarship nothing will come out here. The problem is the peer review system in these journals where you pay to publish!”

This infamous social media injunction is part of the status update that was posted on Facebook by Shepherd Mpofu on the 17th February 2023. It is reproduced here with its gross substantive editorial errors, perhaps a confirmation that it was meant to defend a thesis that was under imagined attack. This injunction was a direct response to a status update I posted on my WhatsApp and for some reason, it caught the attention of his eyes even though he does not feature on the list of my contacts, who have the privilege to view my status updates. The logical conclusion that can be drawn is that one of my contacts munched my status update and shared it

with Mpofu for reasons that are beyond the comprehension of this paper. On the 16th February 2023, at 23h46, I first posted the screenshot of the working title for the article manuscript entitled "Grappling with the *Ndebelification* of Gukurahundi studies", with a tag "done and dusted" (Author, 2023a). Therefore, it is possible that my status update was shared with Mpofu by one of my contacts who shares his angry and intolerant consciousness so far as Gukurahundi is concerned.

The purpose of this paper is not to proffer criticism of Mpofu's social media injunction as captured above. It is important for this debate to be broadened beyond the narrow prism of ethnicity, linguistics, and individuals. Emerging from this, the paper seeks to critique the notion of “pathetic scholarship” from a disruptive Afrocentric viewpoint (Asante, 2003). It is instructive

for the reader to note that while the question of pathetic scholarship stems from the subject of Gukurahundi as hotly contested mainly between the current author (academically), Mpofu (academically and publicly) and others, to a certain extent; it can also be observed in other fields of study and practice. The Afrocentric viewpoint in this paper is meant to offer an alternative and contextually relevant explanation which has recently permeated social media (Asante, 1990). Hence, social media is a manifestation of the Euro-American practices and value system; which are largely anchored on the lived experiences and consciousness of Euro-Americans (Mazama, 2003; Legodi & Shai, 2020).

The foregoing observation should be understood within the context that the ownership of social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp and Twitter (now renamed X) rests in the Global North (Legodi & Shai, 2020; Ndaguba, Shai & Arukwe, 2019). Returning to the gist of this paper, the notion of pathetic scholarship is not a recent development, and it is emphatically neither limited to Political Science nor Media Studies. It is just that it is at times called in different names ranging from “madness”, “bullshit” to “nonsense” scholarship. Elsewhere, I have characterised pathetic scholarship as epistemic madness in reference to contemporary Public Administration scholarship in South Africa (Author, 2023b). On the one hand, Kirchherr (2022) sees pathetic scholarship as “scholarly bullshit” and she laments the prevalence of this phenomenon in sustainability and transitions literature. On the other hand, Tourish (2020) notes a growing concern of scholars about an increase in “nonsense” within Management Studies. While my previous work and that of Kirchherr (2022) and Tourish (2020) have a common denominator with linguistic/semantic variation; Marjanovic (2023) argues that we have not reached a crisis point and those who attempt to paint

such a bleak picture are driven by a sense of exaggeration and hopelessness.

The justification for this paper rests in the parallel perspectives in the literature which address the questions of who accounts for pathetic scholarship and in which manner it finds expression within academic circles. This question remains unsettled, and it is not the intention of my paper to settle it. My intention is to broaden the debate in a field that has not been adequately theorized and explored (Marjanovic, 2023). This point should be understood within the context that pathetic scholarship and its various names and forms is hinged on profanity, a practice that is not common in academic circles; despite the long history of its use in the arts, business, and politics (Greene, 2013; Kirchherr, 2022). Provocative and shocking as it may appear, the reader’s attention is drawn to the fact that the application of profanity in this paper is not the author’s invention/handwriting, he draws from those scholars who have used it in historical and contemporary times (Greene, 2013; Kirchherr 2022; Marjanovic, 2023; Author, 2023b).

In this conceptual paper, no attempt is made to present the typology of pathetic scholarship. This dimension has been critically and in detail addressed by previous scholars (Kirchherr, 2022; Marjanovic, 2023). For instructive purposes, however, pathetic scholarship is understood in this paper to denote studies that are grounded on “pathos, persuades by appealing to the emotions of the reader or listener” (Greene, 2013, p. 1389). Greene (2013, p. 1389) reinforces the conception of pathetic scholarship by arguing that its argument “exists in parallel to logical argument, which appeals to deductive or inductive reasoning, and ethical argument, which appeals to the character of the speaker”.

THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMING

Theoretically, this paper is based on Afrocentricity as articulated by intellectual giants such as Asante (2003) and Mazama (2003), just to mention a few. This theory was chosen as the contextual and theoretical lens for this paper whose research and writing are largely based on African consciousness; as demonstrated through the use of African metaphors and proverbs to enrich the analysis of this paper (Asante, 2007). Furthermore, the choice of Afrocentricity was informed by its propensity to foster epistemic justice (functional role) alongside its cognitive role (Mazama, 2003). Because the author of this paper is an African, it would logically make sense to base his studies on concepts, ideas, theories, and philosophies that are centered on Africa, her people, and their culture. A failure to observe this may result in intellectual derision that can manifest in the form of a more dangerous double consciousness (Azibo, 2011). Meanwhile, the attention of the reader is drawn to the fact that in this paper theoretical framework is not only understood as an integral part of the literature review; it is also viewed as a part and parcel of the research design hence the choice of theory for any study (including the current one) has serious implications for the methods chosen and applied to address a particular research problem. Due to the symbiotic relationship between theoretical framework and research design, it then follows that this paper is located within the Afrocentric paradigm - a re-enforcer to the broader qualitative research methodology (Milam, 1992). To be precise, the data for this paper was collected through conversations and interdisciplinary discourse analysis with a slant toward Africanity (Legodi & Shai, 2021).

It is worth remembering that among the data sources used for this paper is Mpfu's Facebook post referred to above. From an ethical point of view, Mpfu

“voluntarily” made his Facebook status update (also read as post) public. At the time when he posted the status update in question and I wrote my article, he did not provide a “disclaimer” that such cannot be used for academic purposes. Besides, his right to consent cannot weigh against my right of a reply in a scholarly manner; especially when such posts cast serious aspersions on my academic and professional standing, that of my associates, and the institutions I am affiliated with. Otherwise, all research processes for this paper were conducted with due regard for the fundamental ethical principles in an Afrocentric context (Milam, 1992). This point is important because of the competing conceptions of ethics in research and beyond. This is because my academic works are the subject of his post. Thus, the author occupied a central position in the conceptualization, operationalization, and reporting of the findings for the research of this paper hence the use of first-person “I” in this paper is justified by the fact that its paradigm is dismissive of the notion of objectivity, which is generally deemed as the inter-subjectivities of those who regard themselves as the connoisseurs of the truth or scientific knowledge in broader terms (Azibo, 2011). Besides the above, in this paper the researcher is also a research instrument who is central in data collection, analysis, and presentation as per suppositions of Milam (1992); and Xu and Storr (2012).

The findings emerging from the discourse were descriptively and critically analyzed and then, narratively and thematically presented. Equally important, the elements (perspective, orientation, and grounding) of Afrocentricity were also used as the analytical categories for the research of this paper. These elements are based on African values such as cooperation, interdependence, and communalism, just to name a few (Mazama, 2003). The methodological direction of this research was alive to the reality that this paper's

primacy is not the quantification of data. But an attempt to paint a qualitatively rich picture of the phenomena being studied within the context of very limited respondents (Author, 2016).

SIFTING *PATHOS* FROM *LOGICS* IN GUKURAHUNDI AND RELATED STUDIES:DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

Current international trends in research are treading towards interdisciplinarity (ASSAf, 2021), a notion that echoes the cooperation of scholars and the cross-pollination of ideas in different disciplines. This is because the problems bedeviling society are so complex and compelling that they cannot be easily addressed through pointed and/or inward-looking approaches. A coordinated and interdependent approach in the mode of interdisciplinarity is critical to our shared quest as scholars to use science to positively make a difference in society. As such, the suggestion that no less than 50% of publications in sustainability and transitions qualify as inferior scholarship is nothing more than a guess (ASSAf, 2021). This is because some of the works that speak to the heart of sustainability and transitions are featured in non-disciplinary journals hence they address issues that overlap with key topics in sister disciplines such as Political Science, Sociology, Economics, and Law, just to mention a few.

In fact, contributions by non-subject experts tend to be valued and welcomed in certain disciplinary journals as they introduce new dimensions to the targeted readership. For conservative disciplinary subject experts, contributions by non-subject experts may be misconstrued and quickly dismissed as poor or inferior scholarship. I argue that in research, we do not have a good or bad research problem, as provisioned in Western-centred scholarship. It then follows that the notion of inferiority or superiority of scholarship is also non-existent in reality. When such binaries find expression, they are deliberately used as a means to perpetuate existing divisions in society; especially

between those who claim to know (knowers) and those who are purported as not knowing (Maserumule, 2011). This injustice has been recently challenged by advocates of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) to a point wherein the undervalued and underrated knowledge bearers/holders (research participants) and practitioners within the African communities ought to be properly acknowledged by principal investigators and where possible, robbed in as co-investigators (PMG, 2023).

Like research participants, some of the scholars who are said to be producing inferior scholarship have innovative ideas and at times they are limited in terms of their capacity to communicate in a manner that is acceptable to the scholarly community (Smith, 1999). Contextually, the existing divisions within the scholarly community are fuelled by unhealthy competition between scholars. This practice also finds resonance in Eurocentric value systems due to its pollution by selfishness and individualism. As it is metaphorically retorted in some circles that “behind every dark cloud there is a silver lining”, it then follows that what is deemed as pathetic scholarship is not a total waste. It can serve the purpose of sparking or sustaining a debate in lieu of laying a fertile ground for future research. Besides, it has to be borne in mind that what is normally valued by scholars in a particular discipline may not necessarily enjoy a certain level of recognition by scholars emanating from elsewhere hence scholars from different academic persuasions can research a common theme. However, the interest or focus of their research may vary in terms of dimension and/or approach (Shai & Vunza, 2021). For example, when it comes to Gukurahundi Studies, Media Studies scholars will be interested in reporting/representations in the discourse, while Law experts will focus on legal implications and Political Scientists may be preoccupied with political forces at play.

Therefore, disciplinary rigidity and arrogance have a rich potential to erode the interdisciplinary wealth that has long served as a bedrock for Gukurahundi Studies. Such rigidity and arrogance are germane to Eurocentric value systems with a hardened attitude and false belief in its leadership in civilization and other processes in the society (James, 1954). While modern scientific research is generally perceived as discipline-based, one should hasten to point out that the provincialisation of academic disciplines is a Westernised construct and it does not gel with the African thought system (Author, 2021; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018).

Sebola (2018) attributes the current patterns and trends in scholarship to reviewers and editors of scientific journals. This is a tired argument that I have brutally dismissed elsewhere (Author, 2021). Contrary to this, Marjanovic (2023) puts the blame on authors as being responsible for the proliferation of pathetic scholarship. Apparently, most of these scholars chase the quantity (number) instead of the quality of publications. In disregard of the complementarity between quality and quantity, the emerging and exclusive tendency was caused by the fact that the current system of evaluating and rating scholars is metrics-driven (NRF, 2020). The impact of scholarly work tends to be measured by citation index as opposed to real effect in finding lasting solutions to societal problems. This approach is problematic because not all works that are cited by scholars have been really read. Also, because scholars have mastered the art of co-existence and suitability in the system, others tend to cite one other and overlook those who are not in their circle even though their works may be more relevant and compelling.

In the case of South Africa, the drive towards quantification of scholarly works is even worse. This is because in addition to prospects of academic growth, promotion, and tenure that come in

recognition of one's publication record, some universities highly incentivize their personnel for publishing (ASSAf & Universities South Africa, 2018). In short, some universities in South Africa share the research output subsidy received from the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) with the authors. Sadly, this trend has unintentionally produced a situation wherein South African academia is divided between teachers and researchers. Subsequently, an unhealthy working environment has been availed among academics due to the fact that in some universities, researchers enjoy higher regard than ordinary teachers. This is particularly the case in research-intensive universities. On the other hand, teaching-intensive universities tend to treat research as a luxury and therefore, not create an environment that is conducive to scholarly productivity. Those who actively teach do not see research as part of their responsibilities as academics.

Similarly, those who actively research do not see teaching as part of their responsibilities. In short, there is an emerging trend in South Africa wherein teaching and research are treated in some universities as mutually exclusive due to the wanton commercialization of scholarship (Motau, 2018). The latter has sacrificed quality when it comes to research on the alter of chasing profits. The foregoing analysis does not in any way imply that it is not possible to strike a fair balance between quantification and quality of research outputs, but it is not easy to do so. One gets compromised in the process as universities pressure their academic staff with the mantra of "publish or perish". In the midst of this, the polemic question is what needs to be done? I argue that there is an urgent need for the revitalization of African value systems (i.e. humanization) within the higher education sector. This system will go a long in terms of inculcating or resuscitating the culture that values humanness over money and material

acquisitions as per the Sesotho proverb: *Feta kgomo o sware motho* (Ramose, 2002).

According to Marjanovic (2023, p. 2) “Academic publications that do not make any notable scientific contributions may not necessarily have negative consequences on the development of a particular academic field as a whole”. This is because there is no scientific proof that suggests pathetic scholarship consumes publication space that could otherwise have been used for cutting-edge scholarship. After all, the categorization of scholarship as pathetic or cutting-edge is not sacrosanct among scholars. The foregoing analysis should be understood within the context that scholars/authors operate with competing or varying backgrounds, perspectives, methodological inclinations, and interests (Milam, 1992). While pathetic scholarship cannot be promoted, the fact remains that it is not deliberately produced. Those who bash new entrants into what they consider to be uncharted territories are understood by Lao Tzu’s order that “a great man is hard on himself; a small man is hard on others”. As such, the producers of pathetic scholarship cannot be condemned to oblivion. At least, they made an effort out of passion and commitment to produce something intellectual. Thus, research and writing are an art/skill that can only be honed and perfected with time. As such, it is not in the best interest of knowledge development and promotion to ridicule the scholarship of those scholars (especially those emerging) whose work may not necessarily meet our subjective standards. Thus, they may be discouraged and demoralized from giving it a try in the future. Such a fear can only work against the efforts to grow the next generation of academics who operate in a sector that is already slim in a developing country such as South Africa. Related to this, Jim Rohn (undated) reminds academic leaders that “a good objective of leadership is to help those who are doing poorly to do well and to help

those who are doing well to do even better”. As such, destructive criticism (as opposed to constructive critique) has no safe space in knowledge creation and development.

Marjanovic (2023, p. 5) moves that “whether an article genuinely deals with an issue that it declares should not be judged merely by its title or the highlighted keywords but by its content”. This motion dovetails with a long-held warning among readers “do not judge a book by its cover”. But the rise of social media has created opportunities for some scholars to popularise or market their publications. Sadly, the same social media has been exploited by others to pursue hate speech in a manner that devalues the credibility of the works of those they intellectually differ. In certain cases, such disagreements raged on social media and other media platforms in such a manner that closely brought into disrepute the names of the universities where the differing scholars are affiliated. I am not suggesting that scholarly excellence is the preserve of certain universities over others. For Marjanovic (2023, p. 5), when research is bad, it is bad regardless of who is its producer. It then follows that when research is ugly or good, it is ugly or good regardless of its producer and his/her institutional affiliation. However, the binary standing of research as either good/evil, qualitative/ quantitative, and empirical/non-empirical is problematized by Maserumule (2011) who sniffs the complementarities between this knowledge(s). Therefore, it ought to be known that the characterization of some works as pathetic scholarship may as well simply qualify as a “rant”. Hence, the conclusion is at times made on the basis of insufficient evidence by authors who intentionally blur their scholarly and activist obligations to achieve a particular political cause. In relation to the latter, Frantz Fanon (undated) has this to say:

“Sometimes people hold a core belief that is very strong. When they are presented with evidence that works against

that belief, the new evidence cannot be accepted. It would create a feeling that is extremely uncomfortable, called cognitive dissonance. And because it is so important to protect the core belief, they will rationalize, ignore, and even deny anything that doesn't fit in with the core belief".

Emerging from the above, it is noted that some scholars have produced many publications on Gukurahundi (Mpofu, 2019). But none of their works offer any new knowledge. Such scholars feel entitled to be over-cited by those who come after them. Yet their works in the main would qualify as a product of what is known within scholarly circles as "salami slicing" (Adams, 2022). In this, the only gratuity that we can offer them is to cite their latest publication or just that one publication that captures the master of their thesis. In a highly unequal society such as ours, it is unlikely that a scholar will regularly produce seminal works (Marjanovic, 2023). Thus, the acceptability of a submission for publication partly depends on the explicit or implicit agenda of the targeted journal. For example, some journals have a clear transformation agenda which causes their editorial board to be sympathetic to contributions on previously marginalised topics/themes; even though their submissions may not be perfect (if there is such) in terms of clarity of thought and scholarly rigor. Other journals are produced to advance a particular narrative (dogma) and any misfit to such a narrative is rejected. If the foregoing analysis is anything to go by, then Wendi Jade's conviction is as correct today as it was in proverbial yester years. Jade (undated) cautions that "An environment that is not safe to disagree in is not an environment focused on growth- it's an environment focused on control". Nevertheless, the fact remains that our work would not be liked by everyone. But such does not make them pathetic. After all, we are not writing to be liked. We are researching and writing to stay and make a difference within our

academic disciplines and the society at large.

CONCLUSION

The Sesotho proverb has it that "Molato ga o bole". The rough translation of this expression denotes that time does not change the truth. What follows is that pathetic scholarship has been a feature of our academic establishments for centuries. While pathetic scholarship has proven to wield both positive and negative implications; its description has also been abused/exploited by some scholars to achieve narrow and short-term goals. On the question of the value and waste attached to pathetic scholarship, the outlook is dependent on the epistemic and ontological location of the observer, and the relation between the author and the reader. Knowledge creation and development is a complex and ambitious task, especially for the Global South and Africa in particular. As such, it is important for scholars in Africa to put aside their ethnic, linguistic, political, personal, and other differences in collective pursuit of the knowledge of reality. Hence, it is only in the knowledge of reality that situated truth can be found and redirected for the purpose of positively shaping policy formulation, adoption and implementation in a manner that will maximally benefit our people. Lastly but not least, feelings and emotions cannot be suspended but they should not be allowed to cloud scientific judgment in the treatment of sensitive subjects such as Gukurahundi, apartheid, and other conflict situations with an ugly charge.

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