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**Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies**

**Title**

A Response to WITS & an Update on a Push for Change in Higher Academia in South Africa

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6hw9862v>

**Journal**

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies, 38(3)

**ISSN**

0041-5715

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**Publication Date**

2015

**DOI**

10.5070/F7383027716

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# In Response to the Letter from the Wits History Department

Neo Lekgotla *laga* Ramoupi and  
William H. Worger

Our articles focused on general trends in higher education in South Africa over the past twenty years, and on transformation at the University of Cape Town, with specific reference to the Department of History. Relatively brief mention was made of the Department of History at the University of the Witwatersrand. However, the tone of response from Wits implies some identification with the criticisms made of UCT. While current events at UCT bear out some of the issues of transformation discussed in our articles, we would like to respond to the specific areas of disagreement that touch upon the University of the Witwatersrand.

1. **History Department Faculty:** With regard to the composition of the Wits history department, we did not discuss this at all in our essays other than for Dr. Ramoupi's question as to why a white member of the department would use a portrait of an African woman instead of her own portrait on her departmental web page. For Ramoupi, who is African South African, this substitution appears deceitful and conceals the apparent lack of transformation in universities in South Africa that call for the appointment of black South Africans as faculty in these institutions. In Ramoupi's essay, which is 20 pages long, this is the only reference he makes about Wits' History Department, and Wits does not address it in their letter. Wits' letter gives the wrong impression that Ramoupi's essay was about the History Department at Wits. It is about the disrespect accorded to African scholarship by former white universities in particular in the past 20 years of South Africa's liberation. We are encouraged to learn that there are nine historians at Wits (or ten, since the Wits letter claims nine members but has ten signatories), though at the time we wrote our essays (November 2014) the departmental web page listed only five. Even now, as of our writing this response six months later (May 9, 2015), four of the letter writers (including the Head of Department) are still not listed on the history website. With hardcopy catalogues no

longer being published the website is the place where members of the public (including prospective students) would likely look for information about faculty members and course offerings. We would leave it up to current Wits students to judge whether the addition of four black members of staff, two of them African, after 25 years, reflects a “*remarkable shift*.” (emphasis in original)

**2. History Department Curriculum:** The department does not list any courses on South African history at first year level, and it is impossible to find out what is actually taught since the department does not, unlike other departments in the university, make available to its students online a list of the books required for each class. Any first year history student looking for such information in *Wits’ Comprehensive Book List for 2015* ([http://www.wits.ac.za/files/b893c\\_901083001417530531.pdf](http://www.wits.ac.za/files/b893c_901083001417530531.pdf)) will be met by the line on p.76, under Department of History, “Please consult with School for book lists.”

At the same time that our essays were published (December 2014), a Wits graduate student, Simamkele Dlakavu, female and African South African, wrote an article, “Wits Political Studies Post-Graduate Students: On A Quest To Revolutionalise The Academy” (*Daily Maverick*, 19 December 2014), that addresses similar concerns to those that we raised in our essays. Whilst Dlakavu writes specifically about the Department of Political Science at Wits University, Ramoupi, who lives in Gauteng province where the institution is based, knows that her curricula and staffing concerns are reflective of the entire university, including the History Department, especially her reference to African history and blacks: “White supremacy says that African history, experiences, and thought are inferior compared to Western history, thought and experiences. Furthermore, it says, black African lecturers don’t have valuable contributions to make to the academic space, and the larger production of knowledge.”<sup>1</sup> In addition, recently a group of postgraduate students from Dlakavu’s department at Wits wrote an article, “Rhodes has fallen, now we must rise,” (*Mail & Guardian*, May 8-14, 2015) in which they support our concerns and those of their colleague, Dlakavu.<sup>2</sup>

**3. Promotion/Tenure of “Black” faculty:** Let’s not compare apples with oranges. It is arguable whether there is a “lack of, or delayed tenure mostly for African-American faculty in U.S. universities,” as distinct from other underrepresented groups such as Hispanics. But about 10 percent of UCLA’s History faculty is

African American, all of them tenured, slightly higher than their proportion of California's population, 6.6 percent. By comparison, blacks constitute 93% of South Africa's population, Africans alone (or Black Africans as the current South African Census terms them redundantly), 80%. Yet as we pointed out, on the basis of "clear evidence open to scrutiny by anyone who wishes to," whites still account for around 95% of South Africa's university faculty members (or staff in South African usage). Is Wits different?

**4. What Is In the Name?:** Wits' letter refers to Ramoupi's essay and says it was written by "Neo Ramoupi" whereas the author (Ramoupi) identifies himself by his African name, Neo Lekgotla *laga* Ramoupi, his real identity. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, talks about needing "to re-examine our entire colonial heritage" in his 2005 essay "Europhone or African Memory" in which he asserts that this process means having to continually examine our relationship to European memory in the organization of knowledge.<sup>3</sup> Awakening ourselves from the madness of colonialism and apartheid, the History Department in South Africa should know that "it is in naming that we can so clearly see the layering of one memory over another, the indigenous African memory of place [and name] buried under another, a foreign alluvium becoming the new visible identity of a place [and name]. Europeans implanted their memory on the minds of the colonized. To name is to express a relationship, mostly of ownership."<sup>4</sup> Apartheid called Neo Lekgotla *laga* Ramoupi "Neo Ramoupi," which misrepresented Ramoupi's identity. In 2015, for Wits' History Department to call him "Neo Ramoupi"; Ramoupi feels he's been recolonised and his African identity and African name *apartheidised* again!

While we welcome the additional information provided by the Wits letter writers we are surprised by the personal tone of the language used, especially in the first and last paragraphs as compared with the bulk of the text, since we did not use such language in our essays. Accusing us of engaging in "poor research," using "anecdote and innuendo" rather than "fact and substance," masks the fact that whatever transformation has taken place at Wits has not been transparent to anyone wishing to examine the record. To paraphrase the language used in the letter, poor accountability is disingenuous and a sign of poor citizenship.

Dr. Neo Lekgotla *laga* Ramoupi and Dr. William H. Worger

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2014-12-19-wits-political-studies-post-graduate-students-on-a-quest-to-revolutionalise-the-academy/#.VURbk9gcQfg>

<sup>2</sup> Fatima Mukaddam, Shibu Motimele, Ofentse Mboweni & Luke Feltham, “Rhodes has fallen, now we must rise,” (*Mail & Guardian*, May 8-14, 2015) <http://mg.co.za/article/2015-05-07-rhodes-has-fallen-now-we-must-rise> .

<sup>3</sup> Ngugi wa Thiong’o, “Europhone or African Memory: The Challenge of the Pan-Africanist Intellectual in the Era of Globalization,” in Thandika Mkandawire (ed.), *African Intellectuals: Rethinking Politics, Language, Gender and Development* (Dakar: CODESRIA Books, 2005), pp. 155-164.

<sup>4</sup> Thiong’o, ‘Europhone or African Memory,’ pp. 157-158.