

## Book Review

# Barbarism in Higher Education: Once Upon a Time in a University

NHLANHLA MAAKE

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Barbarism in education? Sounds like a contradiction in terms. Barbarism in politics, though odious, has arguably become more conventional than in education. If true, it is a serious indictment indeed. Nhlanhla Maake's memoir seeks to take the reader through a thicket of institutional practices that seem to be contrary to the spirit and letter of transformation at a particular university: as he experienced it. It is a gripping memoir of Maake's 'once upon a time in a university' sojourn.

It is indisputable that tangible historic changes have taken place in the tertiary sector in the last two decades or so. Racial, gender, and other apartheid discriminatory practices that largely defined admissions and the demographic profiles at many universities have been abolished, at least in their *de jure* form, by the Higher Education Act (1977) and the Employment Equity Act (1998), for example.

Current black student enrolment in many historically advantaged universities exceeds the 50 per cent mark. Female enrolment has also increased remarkably. Although increases in the academic and staff complements are sturdily surging forward they, comparatively, lag far behind black and female student enrolment. If we measured progress solely on the basis of numbers we could conclude with great satisfaction that significant advances have been made.

But behind the proud achievement record lurks a furtive world with utter disregard and contemptuous cynicism that goes against the grain of meaningful progress. It is a *de facto* reality that often escapes the public glare; it is a grim world in sharp contrast to the one protected by an iridescent façade. This is at least the story as told in *Barbarism in Higher Education*, a gripping memoir of Nhlanhla Maake's 'once upon a time in a university' sojourn.

If one were to read the book in isolation, in other words without knowledge of numerous and varied accounts and anecdotes similar to those recorded by Maake, you would be tempted to conclude that it is a fictive work written by a scorned *dramatis persona*. There is, however, a disturbingly sizeable body of accounts that corroborate Maake's narrative.

There is, for instance, the report issued by the Ministerial Committee on Transformation and Social Cohesion and the Elimination of Discrimination in Public Higher Education Institutions in 2008 that captured oral testimonies and written submissions from stakeholders, many of which sounded eerily similar to the account in *Barbarism in Higher Education*.

The report found that various forms of discrimination existed (and still exist) in many tertiary institutions and that these expressed themselves to a greater or lesser degree in various forms, embedded in institutional, governance, cultural, linguistic, gender, epistemological, pedagogical, and curricular practices. Persistent discrimination was also found to be rife in student residences. It understandably portrayed a generic picture and therefore lacked the specificity offered by Maake's account of his experiences at the University of North West. It bears noting that in the planning phases of the Ministerial Committee's investigation it was the intention to conduct further investigations focusing on individual institutions. Unfortunately, time and resources did not permit.

Jonathan Jansen's *Knowledge in the Blood* is another powerful account of the operant dynamics at play affecting the consciousness of white students, in particular, certainly not exclusively, as well as other factors complicit in the preservation of a particular identity at the University of Pretoria. The power of history, society and family, the transmission of embedded knowledge and the sedimentation of all these serve as a counterpoint to desired norms in a constitutional democracy. It is another validating testimony.

Other well-known episodes that lend credence to Maake's tale are, though different in their emphases, the Mahmood Mamdani at UCT (see 1998 special issue of *Social Dynamics*) and Malegapuru Makgoba at Wits (see Statman & Ansell, 2000) experiences. Reaching further back in time is the Achie Mafeje injustice in the 1950s at UCT. There is also Lewins' (2006) and Murray's (1982, 1997) penetrating historical accounts of the sordid racial and gender discrimination at the purported bastions of liberalism UCT and Wits; and from another angle, Nkondo's (1976) *Turfloop Testimony: The Dilemma of a Black University in South Africa* and the muscular campaign by the apartheid state to impose a narrow Afrikaner epistemology and pedagogy at the ethnic universities established under the hegemony of apartheid. And then there is Tabensky's (2005) "My Life at the University of Pretoria", an account of an alleged dubious appointment in the department of philosophy and the convergence of racialised and class interests inimical to fairness and high academic standards. Other accounts of 'unfinished business', to borrow a phrase from Ntsebeza (2008), are Statman and Ansell (2000), Duncan (2005) and Fourie (2008). These, then, are the constituent parts of a spoilt quilt.

This diversion is neither irrelevant nor insignificant. It is an attempt to determine the plausibility of the allegations recorded in Maake's narrative. These episodes serve as corroborative evidence from the past and hint at the possible existence of many untold stories. What gives the memoir credibility is extensive documentation of correspondence among the protagonists and antagonists, and references to contravened policies. There is a litany of incredible allegations from corruption, nepotism, patronage to outright paternalism that without evidentiary documentation would seem implausible.

But it must be said, regrettably, that it is reasonable to suspect that the tale told in *Barbarism* resonates with many untold stories in some of South Africa's post-1994 tertiary institutions. It seems that the stains of the past still remain stubbornly etched in institutional memories. And this is the Achilles' heel in the system that wittingly or unwittingly undermines the potential for growth and development in all sectors. Denial of opportunities to even a single individual, not to mention large classes of individuals in society, is inversely a denial of peace and prosperity to all, including the gatekeepers and custodians of outdated traditions.

Universities in the 21<sup>st</sup> century can only thrive and prosper by unlocking themselves from the bondage of the past; boldly thrusting themselves into a vibrant future can only be accomplished by having transformative leadership in the management of the institutions equalled by a similar mindset in classroom practice. An enlightened academic community would divest itself from the prevailing compliance culture by embarking on a genuine, inclusive and substantive transformative project that will fulfil the aspirations of all. Is this a naïve expectation? Can a spoilt quilt be restored? That, I suggest, is the challenge that confronts South African universities if they wish to make a socially beneficial contribution.

Unlike many accounts of South African higher education, *Barbarism in Higher Education*, although seemingly a tad excessive in a few instances, is highly readable and captivating. It has all the traits of a novella full of intrigue and suspense. Each chapter opens with an aphorism foretelling the intricate innards of the University. To his credit Maake admits his account represents his personal experience and perspective but invites a counter narrative. Good editing is always good but in reading the memoir it becomes clear that not enough attention was given to this, thus blemishing what is otherwise a tremendously enlightening narrative. This should not be construed as detraction. *Barbarism* is a must-read for those concerned with the welfare of the academy and society at large. Reading it reflectively along with the other works cited above will increase the chances of achieving an elusive civilisation.

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