



The UKZN Griot. Of Territoriality and Tea Rooms

BY:

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'The territorial imperative.' These words penned by pop sociobiologist Robert Ardrey came to mind when I recently read a headline of the good King Goodwill lodging a land claim for the whole of KZN, while also demanding reparations from the British for the destruction of Ondine in 1879. The second thought I had was of Benedict Anderson's idea of the 'imagined nation'.

Indeed, everything is imaginary, including the fact the original inhabitants of Southern Africa, the so-called Bushman, are popularly thought to be nomads, with no fixed abodes. In fact, these first inhabitants of Southern Africa, who always had a system of clan rights to specific water holes, regularly traversed the same routes, and did understand the idea of "property" as they moved between pans, even if Jamie Uys's *The Gods Must Be Crazy* (1980) pseudo-ethnography suggests otherwise. Many later-by-far in-migrants who followed the Bushmen are demanding 'return' of "their" land while the always frugal and modest Bushmen had submitted just one claim in the Northern Cape to where they were pushed by colonisers from the north, south and east.

The Imperative, if I am to trust Wikipedia, describes the evolutionarily-determined instinct among humans toward territoriality and the implications of this territoriality in human meta-phenomena such as property ownership and nation building. In fact, I have read Ardrey's books so I know this to be an accurate rendition.

Just as kings, queens and clans imagine what their empires have been, or might have been, so do academic departments.

When I first arrived at UKZN I was struck at the rigid territoriality that existed within the institution. One of the mandates I was entrusted with by the executive on my appointment in 1985 was to breach territoriality, to facilitate interfaculty cooperation, and to generally make a nuisance of myself. While some manned the disciplinary barricades, many of my Centre's allies contributed modules in transgressing territoriality and in re-imagining theory: they came from the humanities (then known as The Arts), Medical School, Social Sciences, Education, Engineering and even the Sciences. Our effusive eclecticism was matched by our enthusiasm. For a few years we were

successful in breaching departmental boundaries and in re-imagining the academic enterprise. We even had tea together. Then SAQA came along and returned us to our disciplinary silos marked by our physical territorial haunts.

Much of Brenda Gourlay's tenure as principal was characterised by attempts to dismantle the idea of disciplines (conceptual territories) linked to departments (physical territories). My guess is that the motivation behind this move was cost efficiency, right-sizing and all those neo-liberal justifications that swept through the economy in the mid-1990s. The final institutional victory occurred in 2004 when Schools absorbed what previously were departments and Colleges absorbed what were once faculties. But disciplines did not disappear, because they were still linked to occupied territory (offices), the manning of the ramparts, and the same old signs that have never been replaced. Heads were recast as co-ordinators without authority or budgets, and mysteriously overnight, those departmental secretaries who survived the cut, were now assigned as School administrators. Not knowing what to call themselves anymore, 'disciplines' reappeared without departments. Disciplines still stopped at the front door of entrances and exits to departments.

So, in the face of the anti-disciplinary and anti-department, onslaught, how did disciplines retain their distinctiveness? The answer - tea rooms. That's how. The dominant entities had always had tea rooms, while the rest of us, cramped for space, just had kettles. The well-appointed tea room disciplines rarely invited staff from the kettle disciplines to come to tea. When we did drop in for a chat and cuppa we felt like intruders. So we sullenly drank our tea in our offices while we worked and lost out on regular socialising. The final nail in the coffin occurred in 2014 when the University just stopped – with no announcement - subsidising tea and coffee and stopped delivering the supplies. Now, everyone had to buy their own tea.

Students have never gotten their heads around the idea of Schools and they still call the disciplines within them 'departments'. They need something concrete to identify with. As do staff, who still imagine their tea rooms to be disciplinarily-bounded. Discipline equals nation and nation must be protected. But this is a false incubation as it is based on boundedness.

Departments, Schools and faculties are merely 'administrative conveniences', as Bill Freund always reminded in meetings. These conveniences merely operate at different interacting levels. At UKZN, the basic unit of administration, the department, no longer exists unless it has managed to retain its ring-fenced tea room. The discipline has become an inconvenience, it can no longer function for the convenience of either students or staff. We have all colluded in this re-imagination, but we have yet to see the result in practice in the sharing of tea rooms even to the tea room-deprived kettle disciplines located within some of our own Schools.

Rebuilding collegiality at UKZN will best start in the common tea room (to be still established) for morning and afternoon breaks. It's the smallest building block in the pursuit of the new social transformation. Remember, in the USA in the 1773s a revolution started with the Boston Tea Party. Tea is pretty powerful stuff. Especially when it is bobbing about in the harbour.

When will UKZN re-imagine itself as a collegiate, sharing and civil society that shares its tea rooms?

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Disclaimer: The views expressed in this column are the author's own.