

Acknowledging the agency and autonomy of the global South as a means of developing a culturally immersive approach to human rights.

1. Introduction

Chimamanda Adichie, feminist and author once shared that “The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.” This quote is of particular relevance in relation to the conversation on the academic and cultural research that the Cross-cultural Human Rights Centre leads.

Research has consistently revealed that discussion on human rights in the West is often dominated by narratives of the global South and its failure to uphold human rights. This stance is blind to the fact that in every geographical location, there may be certain shortcomings, however this does not mean that the entire system is corrupt.

In a post-colonial world where we have access to varied information and experiences, perspectives that are one-sided or in certain cases untrue should be open to deconstruction and reconstruction where necessary. The Cross-cultural Human Rights Centre at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (hereinafter referred to as “the Centre”) offers an alternative perspective and through its research aims to assist historically marginalised communities in realising their human rights.

To achieve this aim, it studies ways in which these communities make human rights a reality with the help of their indigenous knowledge and how these efforts can be enhanced while using that local knowledge. For the purposes of this research the Centre regards both formerly colonized peoples in the Global South and ethnic and religious minorities in Northern societies as historically marginalised communities. Indigenous knowledge is defined by the Centre as a set of traditional norms and social values, as well as mental constructs that guide, organise and regulate the people's way of living and making sense of their world, which have been handed down through generations by cultural transmission. Indigenous knowledge includes religion, which is undervalued in Northern research as a result of both Eurocentrism and secularism.

The Centre adheres to the view that, as was the case during the colonial era, academic research is still very much determined by Eurocentric concepts, insights and methodologies. According to the Centre, this is especially the case in the area of human rights, which therefore needs to be decolonised. This it tries to achieve by relying on indigenous knowledge, which it believes to be an undervalued tool with high potential. Ultimately, the Centre recognises that one cannot conclude on how human rights are perceived by communities outside of the Western hemisphere without truly being immersed in such communities, and understanding their culture. By

recognising this, the Centre is able to draw conclusions that are culturally sensitive and invites the participation of those affected by the discussion.

The marginalisation of the global south in human rights debate emanates from the definition attached to the concept of “universal human rights”, which only recognises those created and accepted by the West. This approach and definition of human rights creates a divergence in the human rights dialogue as it inherently assumes superiority of the West over other regions.

This point cannot be emphasised enough. What is often overlooked is the danger of alienating indigenous or minority populations, where their loyalty to the (invariably modern and liberal) national constitutions is placed under severe stress by the chorus of disapproval of their cultures and religions by forces of Eurocentrism and secularism. These will operate even where the indigenous population is not a minority at all, but the overwhelming majority in the demographics of the country in question. This is currently the tension that occasionally divides South Africans along opposite lines in terms of loyalty to, and belief in, the country’s much-vaunted modern constitution.

2. Loosening the Eurocentric grip on human rights

The Centre observes that a good human rights system must be an open system from the perspective of the state and the government. On the one hand, it should actively accept the experiences of foreign human rights, on the other hand, it should fully recognize the dilemmas and problems existing in its own human rights development. And more importantly, it should always maintain a tolerant attitude towards criticism, suggestions and different voices. If one insists that there is only one development model for human rights and only one concept for human rights, then it is very likely to form a negative development model of human rights, which will shrink the rights enjoyed by the people of the country, and reduce the feeling of happiness and living standards of the people.

From the perspective of international relations, a healthy international human rights mechanism must also be open and inclusive, and it should actively accept human rights perceptions and human rights judgments made by different states based on different histories, cultures, different economic and social conditions. It should take a positive attitude towards international exchanges and cooperation in human rights, and it should have an open attitude towards advancing the global agenda of human rights. In this sense, the basic position of the Centre is to be highly appreciated.

The Centre takes the position that human rights theory is being dominated by a concept called 'the universality of human rights', according to which human rights are of a higher order and cannot, therefore, be set aside by conflicting culture or religion. According to this universalist view, human rights are claims which can be brought against the state by autonomous, rational individuals with the help of civil society. These claims need to be enforced through law, which is regarded as objective knowledge, rather than through culture or religion, which are considered particularistic. Examples abound of the ineffectiveness of justiciable claims to rights in the context of a human rights discourse that is dismissive of indigenous knowledge and culture and

world view. At that point, no amount of exhorting citizens towards national cohesiveness will work.

According to the Centre, the notion of universality actually represents the liberal position on rights. By requiring Southern societies and states to adopt universalism they are expected to give up their own values and replace them with liberal ones. According to the Centre this position is untenable, since it is contrary both to the object and purpose of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (hereafter: UDHR) and to science.

According to the Centre, as the preparatory works show, the UDHR is a manifestation of epistemic pluralism: negotiators representing very different worldviews and cultural and religious traditions were intent on turning the document into a 'big tent', which would enjoy cultural legitimacy across the world. This cultural legitimacy assists in achieving the object and purpose of the UDHR, *i.e.* ensuring that people apply and respect human rights in their relationships with each other.

As far as science is concerned, the Centre points out that knowledge production everywhere is still being dominated by European thought, while other epistemologies are being discounted and marginalised. Although this Eurocentrism was introduced during the colonial period, it still persists even after colonisation has formally ended. One single way of knowing, the Northern one, is being put forward as the only valid way capable of generating knowledge. This leads to epistemic exclusion. According to the Centre, Eurocentrism sustains the myth that European epistemology is neutral and objective, and enjoys universal validity.

The Centre points out that, consequently, the European understanding of human rights is presented as *the* theory of human rights. The Global South is seen as a territory in which human rights are violated, while the North is the region where the standards are developed and where judgments about compliance and responsibilities are made. However, according to the Centre, philosophy and the social sciences demonstrate that all human rights epistemologies are equally valid, so no one can be considered to be hierarchically superior to the other.

The Centre takes the position that the notion of universality of human rights runs counter to the object and purpose of the UDHR and lacks a basis in science. Instead of turning Southern states and societies into stakeholders in the human rights project it alienates and marginalises them.

3. The receptor approach

The researchers at the Centre apply the so-called receptor approach, which is aimed at identifying social institutions which assist in implementing international human rights obligations. Social institutions are sets of patterned strategies, consisting of norms, values, and role expectations, for dealing with important social needs, which people develop and pass on to succeeding generations. As a consequence, social institutions are the cultural manuals on which communities rely to protect and promote the human rights of their members. By relying on ethnographic research, the researchers are able to identify social institutions which match international human rights obligations.

Where these institutions and values fall short of the obligations, they can be amplified with the help of home-grown remedies. Where possible, therefore, the receptor approach relies on the indigenous knowledge, as well as the resilience and the agency of the people. The researchers at the Centre compare their approach to the concept of permaculture which underlies ecological agriculture: both rely on what is already available locally instead of importing material from further afield which may not germinate.

The researchers of the Centre note that in many Southern societies a lot of effort is being put into observing and implementing international human rights standards, but that the resulting achievements are not always acknowledged at the international level. This causes unnecessary strains which may lead to Southern communities logging off from the international human rights system. To prevent this from happening, the Centre is assisting historically marginalised communities in the Global South to enhance their communication with international human rights organs. Thus, instead of producing a lot of paperwork to report to international human rights bodies, the Centre is exploring the possibility of uploading video clips representing cultural practices which the members of these bodies can then access.

The Centre argues that the receptor approach has found its way into the human rights discourse in the Global South. Thus, in Africa 155 NGOs and 287 academics have already pledged their support for it. Researchers at the Centre are currently developing a toolkit, which will make the approach suitable for application by researchers and practitioners.

Every year the Centre brings together a large number of scholars from the Global South during the Cross-cultural Human Rights Seminar. This international event is preceded by the annual Cross-cultural Human Rights Academy, which provides young scholars from the Global South with the opportunity to present their work, to increase their cross-cultural research skills, including the ability to ensure that their research is noted in the Global North, as well broadening their network.

The Centre facilitates the publication of the Cross-cultural Human Rights Review, which offers a podium to scholars from the Global South to show how human rights are being protected and promoted with the help of indigenous knowledge. The Review is being run by an independent editorial board consisting of prominent scholars from the Global South. Prof. Wim Janse serves as the editor-in-chief. Three issues of the Review are being published annually by Ubiquity Press.

The Review aims to broaden the discourse within the field of human rights by publishing stimulating research on the diverse cultural understandings and protection of human rights. It does not only refer to human rights law, but also to how human rights are being implemented through social institutions. The Review also calls for papers with a focus on research paradigms, including the de-colonial and anti-colonial frameworks. It aims to make the debate on human rights that is currently being conducted in the Global South accessible to a Northern audience, in order to facilitate a proper exchange of views. It brings to the forefront discourses which may otherwise end up in fringe publications and translates them into English when necessary.

4. Methodology

Because of their underlying rationalism, conventional positivist and post positivist research methodologies are poorly equipped to deal with indigenous knowledge, which is not recognised by rational Northern epistemology. As a result, if coded according to (post)positivist standards, indigenous knowledge is bound to be misrepresented. (Post) positivist research methods, which assume that researcher can study an object while being spatially, temporally and contextually detached from it, and are therefore presented as being 'neutral', 'objective' and even 'universal', actually masque the world view and the moral compass of the researcher. Consequently, these research methods, which determine what counts as legitimate knowledge and what does not, and which are presented as universal models, perpetuate the colonial mindset.

Therefore, (post)positivist research methodology cannot research that which is aimed at unveiling the indigenous knowledge of historically marginalised communities. Although serious attempts are being made to develop an alternative, decolonised methodology, this is still very much work in progress. Therefore, to compensate for the shortcomings of (post)positivism, the researchers at the Centre rely on *community based participatory research*, while drawing inspiration from critical theory, which includes *feminist theory*, *decolonial theory*, *critical race theory* and *critical anthropology*. In applying such a mixed methodology, they follow the guidance of Paul Feyerabend, who argued that to answer a research question it is necessary to use as many incomparable and competing methods as possible.

In community-engaged research the community which is the object of the study is consulted on the research agenda and during the research process. Much of the knowledge on which the research is built is supplied by members of the community. The development of bonds of trust between the community and the researchers is a prerequisite for this type of research. Rather than incidental contact to conduct a project on an ad hoc basis, this requires sustained relations of which research cooperation forms a part. To build such sustained relations, the researchers at the Centre offer their services to the community, such as assisting them in taking care of administrative or legal matters (ombudswork). *Community-based participatory research* is as rigorous as conventional research, while distinguishing itself by involving the community which is being studied as a stakeholder and answering a research question which is relevant to society.

The research of the Centre is cross-cultural in the sense that the researchers study how indigenous knowledge is being used to realise universal human rights norms in different cultural communities, while identifying replicable best practices. These best practices can serve as the basis for generalised toolkits and guideposts. To this end, the research is being conducted by mixed panels, which include cultural insiders, who are members of the community which is the object of the study. Consequently, the workforce of the Centre is very diverse: 80% of the researchers have a non-Western origin (at the Vrije Universiteit as a whole this is 8%). Including such cultural insiders stimulates the building of trust, ensures that the research will be conducted in accordance with the cultural and religious norms applicable within the community, and prevents misunderstandings. The efficacy of community based participatory research has a vivid example in the sub-Saharan region, where the work of the Women and Law in Southern Africa Trust unearthed, not just the importance of customary law in the enhancement of women's human rights in selected southern and eastern African countries, but the centrality of cultural

mobilisation in creating ongoing relationships between the researchers and the communities within which they worked.

5. China related research

Based on the experiences and observations of the commission concerning the society and culture of China, the best way to improve the human rights situation of China is not to purely criticize the problems of human rights protection in China, but to cooperate based on sufficiently recognizing its achievements and then providing advice. In this sense, the Cross-cultural Human Rights Centre has done very well in enhancing the presence of human rights in China during its communication with Chinese scholars as well as government officials.

NGO's and academics have been trying to impact China's human rights situation mainly through a strategy of 'naming and shaming'. According to the Centre, academic research shows that this strategy is ineffective and counterproductive. Therefore, alternative strategies and approaches need to be developed. As a consequence, since 2007 researchers attached to the Centre have been working together with the community of Chinese human rights scholars on the basis of *community-based participatory research*.

To further human rights in China the Centre relies on the Confucian epistemology underpinning Chinese society. According to the Centre, the Confucian notion of '*ren*' in particular serves as a robust foundation for human rights in China. This duty to act in a humane manner requires the ruler to act in a benevolent way towards his citizens. There is no legal sanction in case the ruler forsakes this duty, but he will lose face if he does, which in Chinese culture is regarded as the worst which can happen to a person.

Therefore, according to the Centre, in order to promote human rights in China one should persuade the ruler that realising them is the best way to act in a benign way. In this way the duty of the ruler to govern the country in accordance with the interests of the people is translated into his duty to secure their enjoyment of human rights. Within Chinese civil society an important role is accorded to academics and academic knowledge. The ruler is supposed to seek academic advice and to take it very seriously.

As part of this approach the researchers of the Centre latch on to the statements which President Xi Jinping makes as the moral leader of the Chinese people, such as the 'China Dream', the 'New Era', 'Rejuvenating the Nation', and 'Building a Community of Shared Future for Mankind', which are impregnated with Confucianism. Through his statements the President indicates an abstract, general route. This includes an invitation to academics to make the statement more concrete with the help of their knowledge. The academics seize the opportunity to put their intellectual eggs into that basket. In this way the statement is not only being made more specific, but it is also bended to accommodate their own views. Since the President needs the academics in order to make his statement more concrete, he will adopt the meaning given to it by the academics.

The Centre points out that the statements therefore do not represent a one-sided action by the President, but a two-sided process which offers academics the opportunity to impact policy.

Participation in this process by academics is quite common. This practice is part of the Confucian allocation of roles according to which academic advice weighs heavily and is being taken very seriously by the leader.

According to the Centre, this translation of international human rights norms into the slogans used by the President is an example of vernacularisation of human rights as described by Sally Engle Merry. According to Merry, universal human rights and cultural diversity can be effectively combined through vernacularisation. Local actors - in this case the human rights scholars with whom the Centre cooperates - translate international human rights into local jargon, in this case through interpreting and giving substance to the slogans expressed by the President. This leaves the international norms intact, but by wrapping them in local idioms their spread and acceptance is ensured.

The Centre claims that its approach towards human rights in China rests on two tried and tested methods. First, the idea that Confucianism serves as a foundation for human rights in China has already been put forward by a number of Chinese and international experts, such as Joseph Chan, Theodore de Bary, Sumner Twiss, Stephen Angle, Haiming Wen, Keli'i Akina, and Yong Li.

Second, its design to further human rights in China through Confucian epistemology owes tribute to a similar approach regarding public international law developed by the American scholar William Martin at the end of the nineteenth century. Martin's aim was to ensure China's emancipation by becoming part of the international society of nations. To gain such access China's rulers had to embrace international law, which at the time they considered to be an alien, European invention. To make international law more acceptable to China's ruling class, Martin proved that actual international law norms had already been developed and applied in Ancient China. In this way he succeeded in showing that international law actually had multiple sources, including a Chinese one, and that by accepting it China was not importing a foreign concept but reviving a longstanding tradition. Martin's approach has subsequently been adopted and extended by Chinese and international scholars such as Xue Hanqing and Stephen Neff.

In close cooperation with their Chinese academic partners, the researchers of the Centre have been organising seminars and publishing papers. In China, the Centre is working on three projects mainly. First, it is actively taking part in attempts to strengthen the rule of law in China. Second, it seeks to secure China's continued participation in the rule-based international order, mainly by relying on the concept of 'building a community of shared future for mankind'. As part of this exercise, in 2017 Tom Zwart published an article in the Chinese Review of International Law in which he encouraged China to engage in 'contesting through compliance': for China the best way to ensure that its criticism of certain elements of the human right system will be taken seriously by others within the international human rights community was to express it while loyally discharging its human rights duties under international law. The Centre and Chinese human rights experts claim that this paper has had an impact on China's international human rights position.

Third, researchers of the Centre and Chinese scholars are developing a pilot to combat terrorism with the help of Islam and the Muslim community rather than through repressive means. Jihadi terrorists try to legitimise their atrocities by tracing them back to the authoritative sources of

Islam, namely the Qur'an and the Sunnah. By teaching young Muslims the proper way to interpret these sources, they can be immunised against being drawn into the terrorist camp. The motto of the project is 'more Islam, not less'.

For his contribution to advancing the rule of law and human rights in China, Tom Zwart was awarded the 2020 Li Buyun Law Prize. Zwart has donated the prize money, amounting to 20.000 Euros, to Linfen Red Ribbon School in Shanxi Province, which offers education and a home to young children and teenagers living with HIV, who still suffer from stigma.

6. Assisting minority communities in Northern societies

Over the years the Centre has been working closely with minority communities in The Netherlands. The aim of the cooperation is to empower the members of the communities to realise their human rights within the democratic rule of law system. It has assisted these communities in their dealings with Government agencies and in their efforts to prevent and redress racism and discrimination. As part of these efforts the Centre has represented communities in a number of court cases.

In 2020-2021 the Centre assisted the Black community when tensions emerged between this community and Dutch criminal justice authorities. The researchers of the Centre found that the criminal justice authorities often lack cultural competence. Consequently, the Black community and the Centre are exploring setting up a project meant to increase the cultural sensitivity of these authorities. A first conversation on this topic has taken place between Tom Zwart and the chair of the College of Procurators-General, the highest criminal justice official in The Netherlands, and they have agreed to continue their conversations.

The Centre has also been working closely with the Dutch Asian community to tackle the racism it frequently encounters. At the request of an association which assists the victims of Dutch colonialism in Indonesia and their descendants, the Centre is developing an initiative which will allow Dutch society to come to terms with the colonial oppression that occurred in Indonesia, which has been swept under the rug.

The Centre also partners with the Dutch Muslim community to enable it to represent its interests and those of Islam while relying on the opportunities offered by the democratic rule of law society. Freedom of religion plays an important role in this, but non-discrimination and the freedom of association are also highly relevant. The basic assumption is that Islam and the democratic rule of law system can reinforce each other as long as there is trust between the community and the Government.

As part of this trust building exercise the Centre seeks connections between Islamic and state law. The Centre claims that thus far this has been a success for two reasons mainly. First, European and Dutch history owe much to Islam since it has made a major contribution to the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. Thus, the concept of human reason, which serves as the foundation of the Enlightenment, was developed by the Islam scholar and philosopher Ibn Rushd (and not by Thomas Aquinas). Second, Islam expects its believers who live in Muslim-minority

countries to respect the Government, to abide by the law and to fit into society. Dutch Muslims tend to take this duty very seriously.

The Centre provides the Muslim community with legal and strategic advice in its dealings with the government and it offers an 'Interest Representation by and for Muslims' course to young Muslims. Together with the community the Centre engages in community based participatory research. This has resulted in a proposal to prevent and combat terrorism with the help of Islam and the Muslim community. While the conventional repressive means to tackle terrorism diminish trust between the community and the Government, an approach which builds on the community's indigenous knowledge will enhance that trust. The office of the National Antiterrorism Coordinator has welcomed this initiative and together with the Centre and the community it is exploring ways to implement it at the local level.

The attack on the Twin Towers on 9/11 has strained relations between the Muslim community and the Dutch Government. The Government regards the Muslim community as a potential security risk, which increasingly leads to securitization of the relationship. Young Muslims are being kept under control with the help of repressive means - especially through criminal law. The Government also interferes with the way Muslims practice Islam by discouraging so-called Salafism and promoting a 'European' or 'moderate' Islam. As part of this campaign the Government engages in conversations with members of the Muslim community it considers 'trustworthy', but who at the same time lack authority within the community. On the other hand, advice provided by genuine representatives of the community is often ignored.

As a result of recent events the confidence of the Muslim community in the Government has reached an all time low. Thus, through a private agency a Government department has illegally infiltrated a number of mosques. In addition, the Tax Agency had adopted a policy under which all citizens who donated to mosques were identified as frauds, which meant that they were subjected to intensive scrutiny of their records.

In cooperation with the Muslim community and the Government the Centre is trying to transfer this low point into a turning point in the relations. It is developing a 'Working on Trust' agenda which is meant to improve relations on a structural basis. This requires frequent meetings between a Government delegation and genuine representatives of the community. Both sides will have the right to put items on the agenda. The discussions will not be limited to security issues, but will also encompass other topics which are deemed important by the community. Solutions will be based as much as possible on the knowledge and capabilities present within the community, Islam in particular, rather than on non-contextual repressive solutions designed at Government desks. The plan to prevent and combat terrorism with the help of Islam and the community will serve as best practice. Both the Government and the community have committed themselves to improving their relations in this way.

The Muslim community believes that the Centre plays a unique and indispensable role within the Dutch academic landscape, as well as within society as a whole, because of its considerable expertise, its bridge-building capacities, its low threshold and its impressive communication skills. As part of its community based participatory research the Centre treats the Muslim community as an equal partner. As a result of this

respectful treatment by the Centre the Muslim community increasingly considers itself a full part of Dutch society.

7. Developing peace bottom-up in Israel/Palestine

According to the Centre it is clear that the Middle-East peace process based on the Oslo Accords is stalling. This gives rise to tensions and violence, not only in the region, but also in many other parts of the world where Jewish and Muslim communities feel the pressure to take opposing positions. Therefore, at the request of regional stakeholders and of organisations of young Muslims in The Netherlands, in 2020 the Centre started to research whether indigenous knowledge can be relied upon to develop an alternative peace trajectory. This has led to a proposal, *'Relying on the grass-roots to build peace'*, to generate peace bottom-up, starting at the micro-level.

The situation in the Middle-East is often portrayed as a conflict between the homogenous Jewish and Palestinian peoples. However, research shows that this presumed binary does not represent the facts on the ground. For a proper understanding, ethnographic fine-tuning is required. Israel-Palestine actually is a highly diverse patchwork of different ethnic and religious communities. It has been described as an 'enclave society' in which members of different communities only rarely interact, because they strongly prefer the company of the members of their own group.

Nonetheless, such interaction does take place. Thus, Orthodox Jews from the so-called Mizrahim community meet frequently with Muslim Palestinians belonging to the Islamic movement to discuss religious topics. The Mizrahim, who are the majority group in Israel, are the Jews originally coming from Arab countries, who do not experience cultural distance to the Palestinians. Although these religious meetings take place below the radar, they can act as powerful receptors for bottom up peace. In addition, the past decade has witnessed a revival of Arabic culture among the Mizrahim, which has received a boost from the Abraham Accords, which were recently concluded between Israel and a number of Arab countries. This renewed interest in Arabic culture also paves the way for interaction between the Mizrahim and the Palestinians, which is likely to facilitate peace.

The research is aimed at uncovering these interactions across community lines, to distil best practices from them and to turn them into a replicable toolkit which can assist in bringing peace to the region bottom-up. The goal is to promote a sustainable peace which is culturally embedded, rather than an agreement which exists on paper only. The proposal developed by the Centre has been submitted for consultation to various stakeholders.

Based on my observation, the concepts, methodology, and conclusions of the Centre are insightful and inspiring in the field of human rights, especially helpful for intercultural communication.

Conclusion

Advancement in the sphere of human rights requires us to center the real life and cultural experiences of individuals within the communities that they affect. This means, transposing the

experiences of the West with the hope of achieving universal human rights could potentially be a recipe for disaster. Not only will that approach be perceived as antagonistic by those it affects, it also leaves communities feeling alienated in matters that require their active participation. Very often, this has been the approach towards the global South. As a result, the work of the Centre is of particular importance because it recognises the need to bring various communities together and integrates them into the conversation on changing human rights.

This work ranges from acknowledging the lessons of Confucianism and how it governs the approach to human rights within the Chinese community, to accepting the Freedom of Religion and providing space for Islamic communities to exercise that right freely without stigmatisation. In the Muslim community for instance, the transparency to which the Centre is committed allows for open and forthright communication which is not burdened by misunderstandings or misconceptions. It regards Islam, in particular Islamic law, as part of the solution rather than as part of the problem.

We diminish the rights of others when space is not created for their beliefs and cultures to be recognised, and in diminishing their rights we threaten the rights of every person. The Centre does the opposite of this. On the contrary, it provides a perfect example of how the Western perspective on human rights can take shape if it truly acknowledges the autonomy and agency of those that matter in the conversation.

Prof. Thandabantu Nhlapo (Chair),
Prof. He Zhipeng,
Sheikh Ilyas El Yousfi
Vidette Adjorlolo (Secretary)

APPENDIX: CV's of the Panel Members

Prof. Thandabantu Nhlapo was Deputy Vice-Chancellor at the University of Cape Town for ten years, where he had also served as Professor and Head of the Department of Private Law. Prof Nhlapo was a full-time Commissioner on the South African Law Reform Commission, where he was responsible for the development of the Recognition of Customary Marriages Act, passed by Parliament in 1998. He has also served on the Executive Councils of the International Society of Family Law and the International Institute for the Unification of Private Law. By presidential appointment, Nhlapo was Chair of the Commission on Traditional Leadership Disputes and Claims (“Nhlapo Commission”). He holds a BA (Law) degree from the University of Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland, an LL.B (Hons) from the University of Glasgow, and a DPhil in Family Laws from Oxford University. Nhlapo was awarded the honorary degree of Doctor of Laws by the University of Glasgow in 2012.

Prof. He Zhipeng is a Ph.D. in law (Jilin University) and professor of law at Jilin University. He is the Dean of School of Law and the Deputy Director of Human Rights Center in Jilin University. He acts as standing council member of the Chinese Society of International Law, standing council member of the China Society for Human Rights Studies, as well as Vice

President of the China Society of International Economic Law. His main research fields are international law, human rights, and legal education. In the field of international law, he uses legal philosophy as well as theories of international relations in the explanation of various issues in international human rights, international humanitarian law, and international economic law. Many of his books and articles are written in Chinese. Among these, Introduction on Philosophy of International Law, On international rule of Law, and A Chinese Theory of International Law have gained academic attention and received awards from Ministry of Education of China and other institutions. His recent studies deal with the notion, stance, and practice of international law of China.

Sheikh Ilyas El Yousfi is a highly esteemed imam, theologian, religious counsel, and Islam scholar, who preaches in a number of mosques and teaches at several colleges in The Netherlands. Sheikh El Yousfi enjoys the respect of many within the Dutch Muslim community and among government officials for his expert knowledge on Islam and his ability to build bridges between the Muslim community, general society and the government.

Vidette Adjorlolo obtained her LLB in Law and European Law at Queen Mary University of London, and her LLM at Tsinghua University, where she was a Schwarzman Scholar. She currently serves as the CEO of Sorted Chale, a Black-owned business.