5 An Entente for Progress Between Knowledge and Power: The Challenges of African Intellectual Development

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Introduction

Never before has intellectual development of this continent been as important as it is today, at the dawn of the twenty-first century. Among the forces placing new urgency on our understanding of the importance of knowledge and knowledge production systems are the following:

- The powerful forces of globalisation that would see higher education marketised, commodified and regulated by GATT agreements that would favour those already dominating the multimillion dollar market in this area, while leaving the intellectual development of Africa to be determined by the profiteering interests and labour needs of a disparate collection of external players,
- The emergence of the global knowledge society, in which the rapid development and proliferation of new information and communication technologies opens up new vistas of possibility in research and teaching, while at the same time threatening to deepen global inequalities through the digital divide,
- The shifting global geopolitical context of U.S dominated unilateralism and its accompanying knowledge regime,
- The rapidly shifting socio-political and economic challenges of this continent and its states, which place new and distinct demands on our knowledge institutions at the present time.

The link between power and knowledge, and the politics of knowledge production have long been apparent to any society that has experienced domination.

Today, more than half a century after the formal end of colonial rule, we are facing a veritable crisis over the ownership and future direction of our knowledge systems, systems established as a major fruit of our political independence, and which we have always understood as holding the key to development. This crisis of direction is especially evident for those working at the apex of the systems which we have set in place during the last half century or so of independent development, namely the tertiary sector, upon which I will concentrate my attention.

There is new international interest in rescuing this sector from its currently rather parlous state, this being the legacy of imposed financial constraints being coupled with local demands for increased capacity. Only last month, a number of our higher education leaders were invited to NY to attend the re-launching of a major initiative of six U.S Foundations to revitalise African universities. The Higher Education Partnership has promised to inject 200 million US dollars into our system. This is a follow up to the initiative launched 3 years ago, at which time 100 million dollars were committed. While this money comes from six major US Foundations, there is also much interest coming from an array of other stakeholders too, as various transnational corporate investors and HE (Higher Education) service providers display growing levels of cross-border activity in the HE sector.

And why not? This is a lucrative global market, worth over 30 billion dollars per annum, in which the OECD countries enjoy a monopoly that will be consolidated by the inclusion of higher education in the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs. For some time Western higher education institutions have sought to mitigate their own cash constraints by globalising themselves – and expanding their internationally marketable course offerings accordingly. The World Bank has switched from a SAP-linked strategy of constraining African government investment in universities, to instead seeking to play a leading role in the redirection and reform of Africa's higher education landscape.

However, all this is recent. The point to emphasise in the context of all this new voracity is the need for veracity. We should note that Africa's tertiary system has been almost completely built with African public money, in response to the demands of African people. Despite the global economic policy doctrines constraining the levels of public investment in higher education, African public resources will continue to sustain the larger part of the sector, and guarantee African knowledge production and mass access to higher education for the future. Even though our Vice Chancellors are now likely to find themselves compelled to spend more time overseas soliciting for money more than ever before, international donor contributions have only ever been a minor aspect of

funding, and their influence on the sector has perhaps been unduly emphasised. It is due to the provision of free university education that there are educated Africans all over the world, and why we can speak of an African intelligentsia at all.

As Africans, we have a vested interest in developing independent, regionally grounded intellectual capacities. Not only have intellectuals been the main articulators of pan-African, nationalist and subnationalist visions and ideologies, but they also have key responsibilities with regards to policy development. It is the capacity for directing, producing and activating African knowledge for African purposes that will determine the extent to which we are capable of taking hold of and directing the future development of the region. This requires collectivised intelligence, technical expertise, and analytical skills grounded in a thorough knowledge of our regional conditions and guided by a profoundly African-focused philosophical orientation. Our guiding principles should be dedicated to reversing the regions under-development, redressing the conditions that have allowed underdevelopment, and to addressing the myriad challenges and concerns that beleaguer our lands and suffer our peoples. Today, we are moving away from the legacies of dictatorial regimes. These often employed some of our most skilled academics to underwrite their actions, but on the whole undemocratic regimes have had little love for intellectuals, especially not for those who have insisted on doing what the late Edward Said characterised as 'speaking the truth to power', no matter what cost. Today's politics requires scholars and policy makers to work collaboratively towards building more democratic, gender equal and socially just societies. This requires us to develop a new level of rapport between knowledge and power, between women and men academics, the men and women in power – our politicians, policy makers and business people.

Taking Stock

Ever since ancient times, Africans have taken the production and transmission of knowledge seriously, as evidence through the numerous indigenous institutions and the various specialised cadres of people responsible for this. I will not list the achievements of the great and cosmopolitan centres of yesteryear here – except to say that the basic induction of all African scholars should include a grounding in the diverse elements of African intellectual traditions.

We might also include a critical treatment of the colonial era, as this added a handful of colonial colleges to the African educational landscape. It would be naïve to overlook that fact that despite such a limited bequest, the colonial regimes

had a far-reaching and profound impact on the knowledge culture of this region. The cultural and material impact of colonial rule was such that this sparse infrastructure was accompanied by a far more massive psychological cultural impact, one that still permeates the global knowledge order of today.

Post-independence, we have entered a completely different phase in Africa's intellectual history. Here, we can be proud of substantial achievements in terms of establishing knowledge institutions. We have over 800 tertiary institutions on the continent today, with between 4-5 million students enrolled in Africa's universities alone. The building of public universities was not just about African governments regarding these as emblems of nationhood in the same way as a national anthem, a flag or an army of men; it was also in response to the huge public demand for the highest level of education. Women and men, rich and poor, rural and urban people of all nationalities and creeds have all seen the importance of education as a route to overcoming the three evils of underdevelopment – ignorance, poverty and disease. That Africa remains largely ill-educated (we have the weakest higher education sector in the world), impoverished (we have 17 of the worlds 26 poorest nations) and racked with pandemics (HIV/AIDS and numerous more eradicable diseases) forces us to think again about all the landscape, and to open our minds up to rethinking the higher education institutions of our era. While they may have generated much of the manpower needed to staff the emergent nation state in the 1960's and 1970's, the development challenges of our day come with different demands, and require the capacitation of both women and men citizens who are required to do much more than working for government.

More democratic and inclusive development is imperative to the future survival and development of this region. This requires educational institutions that are competent to contribute to the advance of social justice and equality. This requires continuation of the best achievements of our knowledge systems. It also requires some radical re-thinking. It requires no less than the development of a twenty-first century African knowledge agenda, accompanied by the design and pursuit of intellectual and institutional strategies to advance it. This responsibility cannot be left to charitable foundations, international financial institutions, corporate investors, or to the vagaries of market forces.

African governments have by and large tried to accommodate the huge public demand for higher education, and agreed that education is integral to development, to enhancing the level of participation in development and to ensuring the production of the human resources, skills and capacities needed to service development strategies. That they did so in ways that were largely derived from merely indigenising colonial structures and approaches is a matter of re-

cord, as is the fact of the brain drain, under-capacitation of our governments and the burgeoning knowledge needs of a continent struggling to take its place in the global community.

Today, we have a better understanding of the need for development to be reconsidered, to be pursued in a manner that is attentive to matters of political development and democratisation, to the building of citizenship and a new social contract between rulers and the ruled, to the need for environmental protection, to the rapid advances in technology and the costliness of technological obsolescence, to the high costs of not maintaining health and welfare services, to the human costs of epidemics of perennial poverty, of gender-based violence, conflict and criminality. Alternative development paradigms needs must respond to the fact that many of these problems are rooted in questions of access to the most basic resources at one level and a direct consequence of widening global inequalities at another. We are in a position to realise the costs of allowing socio-economic inequalities gender, class, ethnicity, region, religion and/or location to persist, and the need to re-school our societies to be intolerant of all of these things. We know that we need to bring our tertiary sector up-to-date with contemporary development thinking and planning so as to reduce our reliance on imported technical expertise. This has not only been very costly (the figures run to millions of dollars per annum and are part of the debt burden African nations continue to incur), but worse still, all that expenditure cannot be said to have served us very well, given the limited success of many of the projects and policies pursued.

The massification of African higher education institutions has been an inexorable process, but in keeping with the contradictory circumstances of its occurrence, it has occurred unevenly, with dividends that are also unevenly distributed. As a result, the profile of Africa's intelligentsia is not one that reflects the diversity of our populace or the realisation of the potential therein. While we may have somewhere between four and five million students enrolled at the present time, our enrolment rates – somewhere in the region of 3 per cent of those eligible – are still the lowest in the world, and the system cannot accommodate more than this fraction of the millions of young women and men coming through our secondary schools. Nigeria has the second largest HE sector on the continent with over 900,000 students enrolled at this time, but these amount to an enrolment rate of just 5 per cent (Jibril 2003).

If we take gender analysis as one of several tools that can test the extent to which our universities reflect the collective interests of African people, over half of whom are women, then this picture can be concretised. Nowhere on this continent do we approach gender parity in the academic staff profile of

universities. This ranges from women constituting as low as 9 per cent of the staff, to about 25 per cent of the staff being women in Nigeria and Ghana. Uganda has attained 19 per cent of the staff being women only after a decade and a half of affirmative action. Student profiles are also highly unequal, ranging from female students representing under 10 per cent in the Central African Republic, between 10-20 per cent in Ethiopia, Sierra Leone and Mali, to around 25 per cent in Ghana, Nigeria, Uganda and Kenya. This overall inequality is also uneven, the greatest gender disparities occurring in the most prestigious fields, with women still clustered in care-related disciplines and vocational courses.

A similar analytical exercise might be carried out along other social dimensions – although there has been a greater willingness to attend to inequalities of region and ethnicity in some countries (in Nigeria through the principle of federal character, in Ghana by assuring repre-sentation of people from rural communities). This suggests that we do realise that disparities in access ensure a level of exclusivity that is incompatible with the basic principles of democracy and national development.

The need for modern, secular and inclusive institutions that work at developing a sense of citizenship and social consensus, in a manner designed to mitigate the divisive legacies of political tyranny, injustice and divisions, cannot be overstated.

An Alternative Entente for Knowledge and Power

What then can one suggest towards the establishment of a new entente? It is clear that the seeds of this are already in existence, having been forged in the cauldrons of postcolonial contradictions. We have already experimented a great deal and developed a number of alternatives within and beyond the academy.

Knowledge Institutions

Universities have historically been large, bureaucratic and hierarchical, deeply resistant to change and innovation, with declining research and publication output. These have been under-resourced and depleted in the last decade or so, and are now already being restructured. This restructuring is being driven by a generic financially and administratively driven process of marketisation, rather than by any nationally or continentally designed agenda. This process is generating a set of constraints and opportunities which we are yet to fully assess, and which urgently need to be monitored, not just by those financing the reform, but also independently by the local community of stakeholders.

Meanwhile, substantial numbers of African intellectuals have migrated out of these structures, many of them overseas. But important to this discussion is the manner in which many have also stayed at home, sustaining an academic life by establishing a range of alternative institutions. The most dramatic example is offered by the manner in which Mandela and his comrades managed to turn his prison into a learning environment that became popularly known as a Robben Island university, now converted into a heritage museum.

During the 1980's and 1990s, African scholars responded to the fact that many of our universities had become impoverished and intolerant environments by establishing various alternative structures for knowledge production. These include scholarly networks like the Council for the Development of Social Research in Africa (CODESRIA) based in Dakar, the Association of African Women for Research and Development (AZRD)with offices in Lagos, Nairobi and Dakar, the Organisation for Social Science Research in East Africa (OSSREA) in Addis Ababa, South Africa Institute for Policy Studies (SARIPS) in Harare. More localised initiatives have included the Centre for Advanced Social Studies initiated by Claude Ake in Port Harcourt, The Centre for Basic Research (CBR) initiated by Mahmood Mamdani in Kampala, and the Centre for Research and Documentation (CRD) in Kano, established by a group of progressive scholars. These Centres have maintained close links with the universities, while providing funding and institutional support for the independent research and training activities that were not being delivered adequately in the universities.

Some relatively independent centres have also been established within universities, where they are subject to varying degrees of tolerance/resistance. Exemplars of this trend can be found in the African Gender Institute, located within the University of Cape Town, the Centre for Civil Society Research at the University of Kwazulu Natal, the Centre for Human Rights located within the University of Makerere and others. These various centres and institutes have over the years allowed many who might not have otherwise done so to survive as academics through the difficult years. More importantly, they have worked to keep independent research and scholarly traditions alive on this continent, in a way that deserves commendation.

New Paradigms for Research and Teaching

These alternative knowledge institutions may have been modest in scale for the most part, but they have consciously located themselves in African intellectual traditions, and set out to overcome both the legacies of imperial knowledge systems. As early as the 1970's scholars like Claude Ake were challenging

derivative paradigms of knowledge production, noting that left unchallenged, our received social science methodologies and theories would continue to uphold and legitimise imperialism. Transdisciplinary scholarship means moving beyond inappropriate disciplinary legacies, quantitative/qualitative divide, narrow empiricism and technocratic knowledge production.

Some of these sites have also worked to develop radical pedagogies guided by the need to activate and empower rather than to pacify the minds of learners. These have insisted on using participatory techniques and active learning, and to ground knowledge acquisition in a sense of social responsibility and citizenship. These offer something very different from the more authoritarian traditions still holding sway in the large scale lecture halls. In the context of growing demand, the development of interactive electronic networking strategies should also be taken seriously, and appropriate combinations of real and virtual engagement experimented and developed.

New Linkages and Technologies

Today many of the afore-mentioned research centres work to develop locally-relevant and informed intellectual capacity with strong community linkages. At the same time, they work continentally and transnationally to challenge the neoliberal reassertion of global hegemonies in knowledge production. To this end, networks like CODESRIA have developed important regional, South-South and South-North linkages. This body also models entente between knowledge and power by regularly bringing academics and policy makers into dialogues such as this one.

Conclusion

I would suggest that these various examples offer us important experiences and insights towards the broader project of developing a new pan-African entente between knowledge and power. Today power is unconventional. It is more dispersed, and the state bureaucracies and armies no longer hold the monopoly on power, that they once did. Alongside this older and more conventional organisation of power there is a new order emerging. There are now many other players involved in contesting and advancing development – new civil society and non governmental organisations, intergovernmental formations, political parties, community organisations, and of course various powerful financial, trade regulating and profit-making bodies, local, national and transnational. All these now variously powered players in development have knowledge-

producing components – the World Bank has established a large research unit that dwarfs the research output of all the knowledge institutions on this continent put together.

Knowledge production is also more dispersed. The university may still be the largest and most important sector for training and knowledge production, but it no longer is the only site, nor is it an homogenous one. Both the state and the university will survive, but they can best do so by taking a careful audit of their track record and working to transform themselves into institutions more compatible with pursing a continental knowledge agenda. The new entente between knowledge and power must be one that gives due credence to and supports multiple sites and modes of intellectual production, and to the importance of intellectual freedom in development. An integrating Africa needs pan-African knowledge institutions. Our pan-African scholarly networks need to be developed into a plethora of research and training initiatives. Why is so much left to networks which, by definition, have limited institutional capacity? Why is it taking us so long to establish something so clearly needed to advance the development of continental intellectual culture – a pan-African graduate school, more pan-African research centres, more pan-African training and methodology workshops, within and beyond the universities?

If development is freedom, then intellectual development must inform freedom.