

Academic Freedom and the Problems of Patriotism and Social Responsibility in Post-colonial Africa

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Abstract

This article interrogates the meaning of academic freedom in African universities after the attainment of political independence. It explores the nuances of the concept of academic freedom and traces its appropriation in African contexts. The article contends that African scholars operate in challenging political environments due to the quest by political leaders to dabble in philosophy. African ‘philosopher kings’ have sought to articulate grand visions and narratives of development and they brook no dissent in this ‘sacred quest’. As a result, African academics are generally expected to tow the line and endorse the grandiose philosophies articulated by the ambitious presidents. We argue that this is dangerous and results in loss of academic freedom. The article concludes by emphasising that African intellectuals can make more effective contributions to the nations by refusing to be co-opted and remaining faithful to the tenets of academic freedom.

Keywords: academic freedom, Africa, Politics, ideology, social responsibility, patriotism

Introduction

In the context of post-colonial Africa, the idea of academic freedom has remained a controversial one, even as the very issue of academic freedom is a global one (Altbach 2001). During the colonial era academics were subjected

to legalised suppression. For example, academics were not allowed to criticise the colonial state. Thus, one finds that certain literature which was subversive to the colonial order was banned from book shops and libraries. For example, books about Karl Marx and other literary critics of the colonial establishment were placed on a catalogue of banned literature. Some academics were actually exiled because of their writings which were suspected by the colonial authorities of disseminating dangerous ideas. For example, in Rhodesia (later to become Zimbabwe), Terence Ranger was exiled for his support for the nationalist cause. Some scholars were forced to go into exile or face imprisonment or murder from hit squads. In post-colonial Africa some academics have faced direct and sometimes indirect persecution. Those who critiqued the post-colonial governments have found themselves imprisoned or exiled. In general, the post-colonial state in Africa has been very sensitive to academic critiques or dissent.

The issue of academic freedom in post-colonial Africa has come to be tied up with issues of survival. Thus, the academic has to make a choice between freedom of literary expression and being a bread winner of his or her family by supporting the status quo. Faced with these two choices, some African academics found themselves sacrificing their academic freedom for the sake of their families. Even though an African academic felt inspired to write on a particular social issue related to social injustice, the need to support one's family usually leads this academic to practice some form of self-censorship. The new post-colonial political agenda of nation-building weighed heavily on African academics as they were required by the new African government to demonstrate their support of the new government in their writings and curricula. Most of the academics who became critical of the new political dispensation were seen as unpatriotic and sometimes the university itself was suspected of being a breeding ground for opposition politics (Mamdani 1993).

Another factor which has militated against academic freedom in post-colonial Africa has come in the form of the apparent absence of economic independence. Most of the programmes that run at African universities do rely heavily on external donor funding. Sometimes foreign donors determine what is supposed to be researched and disseminated as authentic knowledge at African universities. Any knowledge that is deemed prejudicial to the interests of the donor will not receive funding. What this means is that academic freedom does not exist (Ake 1994: 17). In the case of natural sciences that are

funded by foreign donors, it is usually the practice that copyright to the research findings is given to the foreign donor company or organisation prior to their dissemination. These donor companies are in most cases based in Europe or North America. What Africa knows about herself usually comes from outside. Colonial experience remains integral to Africa's discourse on academic freedom. Academic freedom is an ethical issue that impinges on whether academic freedom exists. This article argues that the quest for academic freedom remains relevant in Africa today ever than before.

On the other hand, academic freedom in post-colonial Africa has come to imply some commitment to the transformation of the curriculum through a process of indigenisation. Certain subjects such as African psychology, African history, African philosophy and African ethics were hardly taught at universities during the times of colonialism because the curriculum at these universities was mainly Euro-centric. The realisation that what Africa knew about herself was a knowledge that was disseminated from Europe carried with it a scholarly agitation among African academics to want to create their own knowledge systems. The discourse of indigenous knowledge systems is thus closely related to the post-colonial African quest for academic freedom.

Academic Freedom and Africa's Experience of Oppression

A discourse on academic freedom is integral to Africa's experience of oppression under colonial rule in the sense that the effects of colonialism are still being felt in contemporary Africa. Under colonialism, the African university was not a free market of ideas. Colonial authorities had a direct control on what was taught and researched and disseminated at these universities. Those academics who disseminated ideas that were deemed subversive by the colonial regime were imprisoned or had to go into exile for fear of their lives. Universities were infiltrated by government secret agencies. What was to be taught at these universities had to go through a process of government approval, a process that meant censorship by the colonial department of higher education. Writings such as those of Marxist thinkers were considered to be subversive literature which was not supposed to be taught at universities and other institutions of higher learning. Some academics exercised self-censorship in order to avert the wrath of the colonial authorities. In most cases the cold war era which polarised the world along political and economic ideological lines influenced the whole debate on academic freedom

in colonial Africa. Amidst this world polarisation along ideological lines, African academics used both of these ideological lines in pursuit of their political and economic liberative agendas.

Those African scholars who used Marxist analysis in their writings were usually considered anti-colonial or apartheid establishment. The main reason is that capitalism was mediated to African through imperialism. As Ali Mazrui put it,

But in Africa's historical experience it is indeed true that modern capitalism came along with imperialism. The enemy of imperialism is nationalism; the enemy of capitalism is socialism. If there is indeed an alliance between capitalism and imperialism, why should be an alliance between African nationalism and socialism? Such a paradigm of intellectual and ideological convergence has been found attractive in many parts of Africa (Mazrui 1983: 284).

Many African academics attributed most of the African social ills to capitalism. Thus, most of their intellectual social analysis was most informed by socialism. African novelists such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o wrote novels that were extremely critical towards the capitalist society of post-colonial Africa. Their criticism towards capitalism was partly related to rampant corruption which had become common place in post-colonial Africa. In their literary criticism of corruption and capitalism in post-colonial African societies sometimes resulted in these academics being imprisoned or barred from teaching and researching in institutions of higher learning. In this regard, the suppression of academic freedom in post-colonial Africa continued even after the demise of colonialism. It is partly for this reason that one finds that most of Africa's outstanding academics are employed in European or American institutions of higher learning. Although some African critics would want to accuse them of abandoning the continent in its hour of need, there is need to appreciate that some African governments have been exceedingly brutal in responding to criticism.

However, the debate on academic freedom in post-colonial Africa also oscillated between socialism and liberalism. Those who took the socialist trend of thought saw the oppression under colonialism as a result of a capitalistic economic system and its propensity to divide society along the dual lines of masters and slaves. In this way of thinking, the overthrow of colonialism

became synonymous with the overthrow of capitalism. Needless to say that this way of thinking resulted in the demise of the politics of pluralism in the form of multi-party democracy in post-colonial Africa. Some African politicians have compromised academic freedom by monopolising academic discourses. They regarded themselves as ‘philosopher kings’. For example, Julius Nyerere, the former president of Tanzania stifled academic freedom when he indulged in speaking on each and every social issue as an academic. In particular, Nyerere saw the demise of colonialism as synonymous with the end of capitalism and multiparty democracy. Thus, one finds Nyerere arguing that,

The European and American political parties came into being as the result of the existing social and economic divisions – the second party being formed to challenge the monopoly of political power by some aristocratic or capitalistic group (Nyerere 1968: 169).

We shall return to Nyerere below. Similarly, Kenneth Kaunda, the former president of Zambia, sought to popularise Humanism as the guiding state ideology (Kanu 2012). The idea that there was no class division in traditional Africa was used by African nationalists as a way of fostering a one party political system in post-colonial Africa. The killing of political pluralism became the fate of academic freedom. When political leaders articulate an ideological position in their writings the main casualty is academic freedom. Those academics who end up disagreeing with the writings of these political leaders are usually regarded as unpatriotic or counter revolutionaries. The main presumption was that the academic was supposed to research and disseminate that type of knowledge that is in line with the ruling party’s ideological orientation as enunciated by the leader of the ruling party. In some cases in post-colonial Africa, the ruling party and the state were conflated by political leaders to mean one and the same thing

Unlike their European counterparts the situation which African academics find themselves compromises their neutrality on various social issues. Whereas most universities in Europe and North America are well funded, the situation is quite different in Africa. This lack of funding leaves African academics vulnerable to manipulation by some politicians. Sometimes academics are summoned by politicians to act as advisers, an opportunity which carries with it an improvement in their economic standing in society. In these instances their intellectual neutrality on issues of socio-economic and

foreign policies is usually compromised. Joseph Ki-Zerbo observed that,

In Africa the situation is usually quite different. For here, all power might be concentrated in the hands of a single individual. Furthermore, the political vagaries by which a single party is identified with the state or even the people create situations in which every individual life is overwhelmed by a single triumphant political juggernaut. In such a situation the supposed neutrality of the African professor isolated in some laboratory with no stable political, social, financial or indeed any other base, is every bit as risible as the neutrality of a lone rabbit astray in the jungle (Ki-Zerbo 1993: 32).

In other words, poor economic backgrounds coupled with a political situation of totalitarianism compromises the value of neutrality among African academics. For example, when Julius Nyerere of Tanzania decided to embark on the path of a one party state coupled with an economic ideology of Ujamaa or African socialism, most of the academia and the curricula was expected to adopt this vision as enunciated in the Arusha declaration. Obviously when a particular socio-economic policy is adopted by the leader of the state as a national value, academics are expected to devote most of their intellectual energies supporting such an ideology in their curriculum and writings. Nyerere himself was popularly known as *mwalimu*, a Swahili word for teacher. There is no doubt that his intellectual sophistry gained him a lot of admirers among academics. When a politician is referred to as ‘teacher’ this raises a problem that what the politician says is most likely to be regarded as infallible. The popular belief that ‘politics is a dirty game’ could no longer be sustained when a prominent politician demonstrates that politics is also for the academics. This tends to inevitably silence any criticism that might be levelled against a politician from academics. Nyerere had brought some ‘hygiene’ into an arena which was for so long been regarded as a preserve for the ‘dirty’. Politics has been regarded as a preserve for the dirty in the sense that the popular image of politicians is that it has been associated with a profession for the demagogues in which there is no room for intellectual hygiene. Nyerere’s academic prowess as a political leader influenced the discourse of academic freedom in Tanzania in the sense that at last academics felt that they could find a national leader who shared in their intellectual cravings. When academics identify themselves with a particular politician there is a danger in the sense that academics will end up

sacrificing intellectual rigour for the sake of forging some solidarity with an academic politician. Nyerere is on record for proffering the idea of political hygiene by critiquing the western political system of multiparty democracy. Instead, he advocated a type of democracy within the one party system. Under Nyerere's leadership, as Mazrui observed,

When in 1965 Tanzania therefore experimented with competitive elections within a single-party structure, the motivation was, to some extent, political hygiene. If dirt in politics was to be avoided, it was essential to avoid the conditions which give rise to it. Pre-eminent among those conditions is inter-party political context. It was far healthier to devise elections in which members of the same party compete for office. In such elections the Party itself would be in a better position to control the degree of mutual mud-slinging which its members were to be permitted to indulge in (Mazrui 1969: 259-260).

Thus, Nyerere was implementing on the Tanzanian political landscape that which has never been fathomed possible – a democracy that was to differ sharply from the western multiparty democracy. In this regard, Nyerere was imposing himself in the Tanzanian political arena as a teacher or *Mwalimu* of democracy whereby competition for political power was supposed to be done within the ruling part instead of from without. Nyerere also exerted his responsibility as *Mwalimu* in the domain of economic policy when he came up with *Ujamaa* or African socialism as an economic policy that was to be followed by his country. African socialism or *Ujamaa* was for Nyerere an economic ethic that rooted in the African past. As a teacher par excellence, Nyerere would state it boldly that,

We in Africa, have no more need for being 'converted' to socialism than we have of being 'taught democracy'. Both are rooted in our past – in the traditional life which produced us (Nyerere 1968: 170).

That people referred to Nyerere as *Mwalimu* was not an exaggerated epithet, he had exerted himself as a philosopher king. In this regard some academics ended up supporting some of ideological teachings of Nyerere in a way that compromised the value of objectivity, which is usually indispensable to academic freedom.

Academics against Academic Freedom in Post-Colonial Africa

For example, in the aftermath of the Arusha declaration, the historian Terance Ranger observed that,

There was no room in Tanzania for a ‘freedom’ which allowed a small elite to exchange privileged or unpopular truths among themselves (Ranger 1981: 14-15).

When a national leader takes a stand on a particular socio-economic issue, the greatest temptation among academics is to try to make themselves relevant by supporting the national leader’s ideological stand. In this process, academic values of neutrality and objective criticism, which are the crucial prerequisites to academic freedom, are in the process unscrupulously sacrificed. The idea of thinking with the leader is more beneficial instead of thinking against the leader or criticising the leader against his or socio-economic policies. In the context of Tanzania during the times of Nyerere, after the Arusha declaration, some academics actually came out forcefully against the idea of academic freedom. Thus following in the aftermath of the Arusha declaration, some Tanzanian academics are on record for saying that,

The Government must be prepared to assume the main responsibility of policy-making and overall direction and must no longer be deterred by arguments of academic autonomy from doing so (cited in Ranger 1981: 16).

In such reasoning, it was actually academics themselves who undermined or who did not see anything of value in academic freedom. Rather, these academics decidedly took an unquestioning stand in support of Nyerere’s socio-economic ideological policy. For opportunistic purposes, Tanzanian academics saw it more valuable to think in unison with the ideological lines with Nyerere, even though his economic policy of *Ujamaa* ended up impoverishing Tanzania in a way that can best be described as preternatural.

In some cases, post-colonial African states have worked closely with those academics who are deemed to be in support of the ruling party’s ideological policy. In the case of Zimbabwe, academic freedom has been compromised by academics around what we would call in religious terms, ‘the

cult of the Liberation Struggle’ which is accredited for bringing freedom to Zimbabwe. When academics disseminate a particular knowledge that fits well within the grand narrative of the ideology of ‘the cult of the Liberation Struggle’, they are usually rewarded by the ruling party ZANU as patriots who are contributing positively to the post-colonial transformation of Zimbabwe. Ezra Chitando and Obert Mlambo observed that,

The so called patriotic history being encouraged to be taught in schools and preached in the State print and electronic media has created a new pedagogy and rhetoric that recasts the liberation struggle to suit a certain class of heroes. In this class of heroes are not only the people who fought in the liberation struggle, but also intellectuals and everyone who supports the project. At the heart of this kind of history are the anti-colonial, neo-colonial and the anti-neo-colonial trajectories which present a violent war hero with big dreams of creating a self-made empire (Chitando & Mlambo 2014: 38).

In such a context we have a situation whereby academics are the intellectual architects of an ideological history in support of the Liberation Struggle experiences of the ruling party. The paradox inherent in the academic support of liberation struggle project is that it lures academics into looking into the Zimbabwean ancient past at the expense of the future. Whilst Zimbabwe professed to be a new nation or a young state, the very idea of wanting to go back to ancient times tempts one to question the seriousness of the newly born nation’s concern about the future. An obsession with narrating the present whilst putting too much emphasis on what transpired in the past is related to the problem which Mazrui described as ‘monarchical tendency in African political culture’ which is rather ‘the African quest for a royal historical identity’ (Mazrui 1969: 206-207). According to Mazrui, this quest for ‘a royal historical identity’ is related to the issue of identity crisis that is usually experienced in the newly independent state. As he put it,

This revelling in ancient glory is part of the crisis of identity in Africa. ...When I first visited the United Nations in 1960-1 it was fascinating to listen to some of the new African delegates revelling in the innocence of the newly born nationhood. But involved in this very concept of re-birth is a paradoxical desire – the desire to be grey-haired

and wrinkled as a nation; of wanting to have an antiquity. This is directly linked to the crisis of identity (Mazrui 1969: 217-218).

The quest for an ancient identity has compromised academic freedom in the sense that any critique of the new order is usually regarded as unpatriotic or unconstructive. In post-colonial Africa, politicians have always spearheaded the grand narrative that is deemed to be the pillar for the newly independent African state.

When the former president of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki, came up with the concept of African Renaissance as his domestic and foreign policy, some of the academics in South Africa and the African continent adopted the discourse of African Renaissance in many of their activities of knowledge creation and dissemination. Here again, critical analysis of some of papers that were presented by some African academics at a conference that was hosted in Johannesburg shows the persistence of identity crisis as a motif that remained central to the African Renaissance discourse. Thus, one finds that the whole discourse is littered with papers that eulogise the African past in way that takes it for granted that African renaissance or rebirth is an historical momentous occasion that needs to happen. With reference to education at African Universities, Herbert Vilakazi had this to say,

We now know that Africa is the mother of humankind. This most marvellous of mothers not only gave birth to humankind, but she prepared the remarkable cultural foundation which some of her children took along with them as they left for other regions and corners of the world. Africa was, indeed, the first civilisation, held in the highest esteem in antiquity. You only have to ponder over the words used by Homer and Herodotus when they remarked about the Ethiopians and Egyptians (Vilakazi 1999: 202).

This is evidently a eulogisation of the African past as part and parcel of the genealogy of the modern human race in general. But thereafter the modern socio-economic ills of post-colonial Africa are attributed to colonialism and the history of western oppression and domination. There is no acknowledgement of the complicity of the African ruling elite in authoring Africa's numerous challenges. As for Vilakazi, the responsibility of an African academic was to modernise the post-colonial African society by creating a

narrative of continuity between the pre-colonial African past and the present. He avers,

Our intellectuals and intelligentsia, who must take the lead in building the new Africa, must engage in a most massive and serious process of re-educating themselves about the principles and patterns of African civilisation, whose knowledge they have largely lost (Vilakazi 1999: 208).

But how then does one bring about an African renaissance by resorting to some knowledge from the precolonial African antiquity which one has neither lived nor experienced?

However, the dominant motif of the African Renaissance discourse among academics was that the academia should participate in the transformation of the post-colonial African society. For many of the academics in Africa, Mbeki's vision of African Renaissance was about the renewal of the African continent as a whole economically and politically with reference to her place in the community of nations. No one bothered to question whether such a vision was practical, rather what we find is an uncritical support of the idea of African Renaissance. For example, when the Southern African Development Community (SADC) intervened in Lesotho against a military coup, Cedric de Coning wrote an article which interpreted the whole intervention of SADC in terms of African Renaissance whereby South Africa was portrayed as in the position to renew the whole of the African continent. This is the impression which one gets from Cedric de Coning when he said,

The intervention achieved all of its objectives. Africa was spared the misery of yet another military coup. South Africa showed the sacrifices it is prepared to make to protect democracy, and to ensure that its vision of an African Renaissance is not derailed – at least not in its own backyard (de Coning 1996: 39).

Whilst there is nothing documented in the SADC regional authorisation of this military intervention which stipulates the protection of the African Renaissance as one of the objectives, it is evidently clear that a political discourse of continental supranationalism was adopted by academics as integral to African renaissance. There is no attempt to question the relevance

of African Renaissance to the coup in Lesotho. There is also no attempt to question whether South Africa has the capability of renewing the whole of the African continent on its own.

In support of Thabo Mbeki's vision of African Renaissance, the University of South Africa went as far as establishing a Centre for African Renaissance. At the University of KwaZulu-Natal we have an Ujamaa Centre which adopted this name from Nyerere's socio-economic policy of Ujamaa. Whilst it can be accepted that there is nothing wrong in academically supporting politically innovative ideas from politicians, it is usually the reality of instability which characterises politics which should persuade us the more that academics should always adopt a critical stance towards social issues without any form of partisanship. When Thabo Mbeki left political office as president of South Africa, the discourse on African Renaissance died a natural death in the academia as well as the public arena. Equally, it is common knowledge that Nyerere's socio-economic policy of Ujamaa or African socialism impoverished Tanzania beyond description. In the last years of Mugabe's presidency in Zimbabwe, an economic blueprint, namely, the Zimbabwe Agenda for Sustainable Socio-Economic Transformation (ZimAsset) became a mantra. Academics sought to demonstrate how their specific disciplines 'contributed towards fulfilling ZimAsset'. With Mugabe's departure, ZimAsset died a natural death.

Sometimes African politicians who were intellectuals did not make a serious reflection of the sociological realities of their African context. The idea that Ujamaa was based on the African traditional economic ethic of collectivism was not critically reflected in relationship to the modern world capitalistic economic realities that are based on the modernisation of the means of production. The question which academics should have asked themselves is: How practical is it to want to collectivise poverty? When the discourse of African Renaissance went into oblivion with the end of Mbeki's presidency, so did the myriad of the voices of those academics who had previously supported this African Renaissance discourse. But what is usually neglected in the academia is a truism that discourses that are spearheaded by politicians are in most cases tainted with a politician's personal quest for populism, a rhetorical practice that is closely related to the belief in numerical strength. The acquisition of numerical strength usually manifests itself when a politician narrates what the majority of the population within a given context would want to hear. Further, this notion of 'the people' has been used to justify overstaying

in office. Politicians often argue that they cannot leave office because ‘the people’ still want them to continue!

However, it can be said that academics are not apolitical by nature. They do hold specific political points of views and political ideologies on issues pertaining to society and the economy. Sometimes their ideas have changed the course of history in a particular society and the world at large for better or for worse. The regimes that have oppressed their own people do usually have academics around them as advisers or as architects of unpopular national policies. In the case of colonial Africa or apartheid South Africa some academics were serving in the commissions that helped in the writing of oppressive legislations (see Trevor 1927: 99). In most cases professors were appointed by oppressive regimes to head commissions that were created to craft oppressive rules. The South African colonial Prime Minister Jan Smuts was a world renowned academic who intellectually believed in the inferiority of black people as a factor inherent in biological or evolutionary determinism. He writes,

No indigenous religion has been evolved, no literature, no art since the magnificent promise of the cave-men and the South African petroglyphs’, no architecture since Zimbabwe (if that is African). Enough for the Africans the simple joys of village life, dance, the tom-tom, the continual excitement of forms of fighting which cause little bloodshed. They can stand any amount of physical hardship and suffering but when deprived of their simple enjoyments they develop sickness and die (Smuts 1940: 38).

Obviously such writings had a great influence in policy formulation of segregationist colonial societies. Such writings were dehumanising in the sense that Africans were presumed not to have any grain of morality, religion and architecture. In other words, the African represented that type of humanity that was not fully evolved. When one take into account such historical precedents the obvious conclusion is that academics are not neutral and objective observers of facts. Rather, they harbour prejudices which they disseminate as objective truth. Academics have been at the forefront in creating prejudices as objective truths. Those ideas have sometimes become lethal to the wellbeing of society. In South Africa, the person who propounded apartheid into a systematic oppressive doctrine was an academic by the name of Hendrick

Verwoerd (Adam & Giliomee 1983: 42). It is in the light of such examples that one is more inclined to say that academics have contributed enormously in undermining the ethical ideals of a just and free society. A similar observation was made by Ki-Zerbo when he said that,

We know of cases where African intellectuals supported and advised regimes persecuting and torturing other intellectuals The motivation of all this is nothing more serious than personal ambition, tribal tension or ideological rivalry (Ki-Zerbo 1994: 33; cf. Khan 1975).

This type of behaviour is partly related to the issue that academics have a social responsibility, that is, they do not exist in a vacuum, but that they are fully immersed in society and are usually influenced by their social surroundings. It is for this reason that the issue of academic social responsibility poses a real dilemma to academic freedom.

Academic Freedom and the Problem of Social Responsibility

The assertion that academics have a social responsibility implies that they are responsible for what goes on in society, whether good or bad. A popular understanding of academic freedom is usually based to the idea that academics should be left alone to pursue their work without external interference or interference from the government. The tension within this idea arises when one takes into account what we have said above, namely, that academics are members of a given society and their activities have an impact in a society in which they are citizens. In this way of reasoning, academics are expected to undertake their academic activities as responsible members of a particular society because at the end of the day it is that particular society that pays the bill for work done by academics. In this trend of thought, George Hagan observed that,

Granted that it is society that bears the cost of sustaining academic work and using the products of universities, those who control society and its resources also assert that society has a right to control, or, at least, participate in the control of the activities of academics (Hagan 1994: 39).

In the light of the above observation, it needs to be stated that the idea that academics are members of society is not necessarily subject to a debate; rather, some scholars argue that the issue of social responsibility implies that academics are accountable to a small group of the ruling elite of society. It is this elite which has the power to control the professional activities of academics. In the African context, sometimes this group of elite belongs to the academic establishment. Thus, one finds that academics were leaders who for most of the nationalist movements that agitated for freedom from colonialism. Thus the aspirations of African nationalists infiltrated the activities of African academics. Most of the African nationalists such as Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere, Jomo Kenyata, Tom Mboya, Leopold Senghor, Nelson Mandela, Govan Mbeki, Robert Mugabe were actually academics or had sound academic credentials.

In the history of African nationalism we have a lot of evidence that shows that academics can devote most of their energies in a way that can bring about powerful socio-economic and political change. During the days of apartheid some academics were martyrs for the ideal of a just, free and humane society. Allan Parson's book, *Cry the Beloved Country* reverberated to the whole world as the most powerful critical voice against the then inhumane apartheid political system of South Africa. Telling truth to power rooted in structural evil has often resulted in sacrificing one's own personal freedom. In the case of apartheid South Africa, some academics have been catalogued among those citizens with a criminal record for actively critiquing the apartheid regime. On the other hand, one finds that during apartheid or colonialism, some academics were also in the forefront of providing the apartheid regime or colonial government with the literature it required to justify its own evil existence. Academic ideas can change society for better or for worse. It is for this reason that we should desist from the idea that academic freedom implies that academics are above society and its problems. Academics can create problems for society or they can provide solutions to society's problems. An academic's capability as a critical thinker puts her or him in a unique existential position in society. It is partly because of their intellectual exceptionalism that an academic's contribution to society must be informed by making a critical distinction between what is right and wrong. Thus, the whole issue of academic social responsibility is related to ethics. To what extent are academic activities sensitised to ethical values? When academic activities are pursued without any sensitivity to ethics, they basically become destructive to the same society they

purport to serve. But sometimes the temptation is to see academic activities as value neutral, that is, they are not committed to any social ideal.

An academic can be defined as someone who is concerned with the management of truth within his or her discipline in the generality of existence. Here, we have qualified the phrase ‘management of truth’ with ‘in the generality of existence’ because of my conscious realisation that there is a plurality of truths in existence. Within his or her particular discipline an academic contributes to this pool of truths. Ian Mitroff observed that,

Truth is a human activity that must be managed carefully for human purposes; to put it slightly differently, truth occurs only as the result of human activities for the purpose of solving an important human problem (Mitroff 1998: 70).

In the pursuit of truth, virtues such as honesty and the preservation of personal and institutional integrity are very important and should never be sacrificed. In their dissemination of truth, academics should be seen as serving the interests of society as a whole. Thus, they are required to contribute positively for the good of the community. When academic activities and discourses are only aimed at exciting academics among themselves to the exclusion of the larger society, then such activities and discourses become irrelevant to society in general. Hagan described academic social responsibility as follows,

The *raison d’etre* of a university is the discovery and dissemination of knowledge, and – let us also add, for the avoidance of doubt – the application of knowledge to the concerns and needs of individuals and society. To pursue and sustain these objectives, academic culture puts value on originality, commitment to truth, excellence, rationality, creativity, humility – in the sense of the readiness to accept one’s error, and respect for the opinion of others (Hagan 1994: 40-41).

Such a conceptualisation of academic social responsibility presupposes some sensitivity to ethics. The creation and dissemination of knowledge must serve the needs of society and not the other way round. On the other hand, the academic community is professionally expected to distance itself from the general community in order to be in the position to question some beliefs that

are usually taken for granted by the community. By distancing herself or himself from the community, the presumption is that the academic will attain more objectivity than when she or he is immersed in the community. Academic freedom helps the academic to contribute positively for the general transformation of societies. The effectiveness of academic activities in society can only be realised when they are not hindered in their search for truth. In post-colonial African context, this expectation is sometimes undermined when academics are expected to uncritically support the ruling party's ideological point of view. As we have seen previously, their unquestioning support of the ruling party is usually regarded as being patriotic. For example, Kwame Nkrumah saw the aim of education in Ghana in terms of constructing what he called a Ghananian character. As he put it,

Even the ordering of text-books is an involved matter that makes the introduction of new ones with a Ghananian character a prolonged affair. This is something that we are, however, getting on with, as it is vital that we should nurture our own culture and history if we are to develop that African personality which must provide the educational and intellectual foundation for our Pan-African culture (Nkrumah 1970: 49).

Whilst academics have a social responsibility, there will be in the position to fulfil their social responsibilities within an environment that does not prescribe to them what to do. The problem of having some politician masquerading as a 'philosopher king' and prescribing to academics what their curriculum should look like is that such political interference with the professional work of academics tends to undermine the importance of critical thinking in the academic's execution of his responsibilities to society. For example, as we highlighted above, when the discourse of African Renaissance went into oblivion with the abrupt end of Mbeki's presidency, so did the voices of academics who had previously supported this discourse.

Whilst academics can support the national political leader on a particular issue that advances academic freedom and social responsibility, their support of the national political leader on an issue of social responsibility should be done in a way that is purely academic – that the idea makes sense independent of the politician's motives. However, following some academic utterances of a national leader is also related to the problem of the academic

quest for power and legitimacy. It is a practice which is also common in the Catholic Church whereby it is a habit among theologians to quote Papal dogmatic teachings as a way of expressing the legitimacy and authority of their own theological ideas. Among most of the Catholic theologians it does not matter whether the Pope is wrong or not because what matters is to be seen as 'thinking with the Church'. Such an academic behaviour is most likely to sacrifice objective truth and academic independence for the sake of gaining power and legitimacy. However, we do acknowledge that some Catholic theologians have been subversive when citing the teachings of the Pope, while others have been very critical of the same. When academics adopt their practice of 'thinking with the political leader' they are most likely to sacrifice their academic freedom and their social responsibility.

Conclusion

The issue of academic freedom in contemporary Africa is not merely an academic issue. It is existential. It has a bearing on the very existence and well-being of African academics. Operating in socio-economic and political contexts that can be quite hostile, many African academics have to balance their academic pursuits with safety considerations. The emergence of some African 'philosopher' kings has compounded matters. The temptation is high for African academics to 'think with the political leader' and to endorse ideologies uncritically. The turn towards jingoism threatens academic freedom in Africa. In this article, we have enjoined African academics to uphold academic freedom and fulfil their social responsibility. It is only when African academics are free to disagree with politicians and their acolytes, as well as when they can state their positions on matters of national importance without fear or favour that academic freedom will be experienced and cherished in Africa. There must be freedom to think as one likes, write as one likes, speak out as one likes, without fearing for their safety. When this is granted, the academia will make a significant contribution towards social transformation in Africa.

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