The Challenges Facing African Thought and African Universities in the 21st Century

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Introduction

We live in an age of intellectual uncertainty, of paradigmatic change and disorder – the age of globalisation and information technology. This is also the age of post-isms, from post-modernism to post-colonialism or vice versa. As Zeleza (1997: 494) explains:

> This turbulence is a product of new currents and ferment in both scholarship and society, of transformations in disciplinary epistemologies and global politics, especially owing to the rise of feminism, the evident crisis of both socialism and capitalism in the contending blocks of the old cold war, and the unravelling of the project of national liberation in the post-colonial world. While no national or regional narrative is immune from fragmentation, it is the decomposition of the dominant 'Western' metascripts that has received most attention, which is frequently credited to the rise of post-modernism in western academies, a creed now being exported to the rest of the world with the missionary zeal of past Eurocentric discourses. Often overlooked are the challenges and confrontations from African, Asian and Latin American Studies, which have played a vital role in the fragmentation, explosion, and deconstruction of the hegemonic western paradigms.

These deconstructions, which are often articulated in post-structuralist theories, are desirable (Zeleza 1997: 494). They become desirable when they attempt to dismantle western discourses. 'from their pedestal of universal claims to knowledge, they strip western modernity of the will to truth, and open up spaces for previously silenced and dissident voices' (Zeleza 1997: 494). The idea of African thought in education, there can be no doubt, has likewise made an important impact. It is however important that the related changes needed in higher education not be driven by outside organisations and markets.

At one level, therefore, it is of concern that higher education institutions should be responsive to the changes that are taking place in society in virtually every country globally. Even though the nature of the changes differs from region to region, and even within some regions, specific changes often vary from place to place (Zeleza 1997:494), we can assume that there are major challenges that higher education institutions have to face. At another level, scholars should take into consideration the new contexts, methods, insights, and theories that have revolutionized many disciplines, so much so that old western approaches have lost their paradigmatic prestige and coherence in favour of more localised – and in our context, African – perspectives.

This article focuses on this complex of issues in the light of the attempt to develop African thought in university education.

The Challenge of Globalisation

Global restructuring of economies has had a major impact on higher education systems of the world. According to Kuseni Dlamini the term globalisation:

> Describes some key aspects of recent transformation in world economic activity, which includes deregulation, financial liberalisation, and technological advancement as well as the socio-economic and political effects associated with these (cf. Vil-Nkomo 1999: 273).

Dlamini further states that:

> Deregulation and financial liberalisation have accelerated the movement towards an integrated global market economy with serious implications for the domestic and foreign macro-economic [realities] for policy formulation. Technological advances are making natural frontiers more porous as the movement towards an orderless world gains momentum regardless of what states do or do not do (cf. Vil-Nkomo 1999:274).

Africa mainly functions as raw material and resource for global capitalist economic forces. In terms of the forces of globalisation, this situation may worsen. Even though globalisation presupposes that the world interact and collaborate on economic matters, the picture portrayed by Dlamini means that the third world or so-called developing world will be even worse off than during colonial times when many indigenous cultures and societies remained intact despite the destruction of these cultures. With the arrival of multi-national companies from imperialist countries like the USA and Britain, local economies may be threatened with extinction. Supported by international market forces like the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, it seems as if local economies will suffer through this one-sided approach – there is no mutuality, or even mutual investment and equal collaboration in this scenario. Even more important is that globalisation cannot be exclusively treated as an economic entity. It is a package of economic, cultural, imperialist domination in the post-colonial era. It is colonialism undercover or dressed differently. African intellectuals and politicians have not conscientiously addressed this complex of issues.

Africa in the Global Economy: What Implications for Politics and Policies?

Timothy Shaw argues that Africa and even non-African states have to recognize strategic economic and political changes brought about by the global economy. These are:

> (a) Internationalisation of state in terms of relations and directions of economy, polity, society, ideology, population, culture, etc.

(b) Divination of the state given cumulative impoverishment, internationalisation adjustment, and communication.

(c) Erosion of democracy at the national level [giving rise to] the irony of democratic practices being advocated and advanced when they are simultaneously becoming less efficacious.

(d) Rise of sub- and supra-state actors from internal as well as international 'civil society' in response to novel challenges and opportunities as the state declines.

(e) The rise of new 'mix' actors coalitions aimed at responding to the dialectic of globalisation and fragmentation, which may yet come to challenge and even supersede the established neo-liberal hegemony in terms of labour/employment, gender, ecology, democracy, peace/security, etc.

(f) Popular pressure for sustainable democracy at all levels, from sub- to supra-national – i.e. from local communities/NGOs to non- and inter-governmental organizations at regional and global levels in part in response to continued tendencies towards authoritarianism, corporatism, anarchy, irregularities, etc.

(g) Redefinitions of foreign and security policy in terms of both actors (i.e. not just states) and content (i.e. new highly politicised issues of crime, drugs, ecology, migration/refugees, gender, etc.) leading towards 'popular' responses along with 'new' functionalism and religionalism; i.e. defined by communities rather than only by governments (Shaw 1995: 1).

In such a context the sovereignty of the state will be eroded, rather than being peripheral in confronting these global issues. Africa will be forced to toe the line. Africa will be a property of the international market forces worse than it was in the colonial period. The emergence of global policy has encouraged not only formal constitutional changes, national conventions and multi-party elections, but also facilitated the expansion of global NGO networks and the popularization of the notion of civil society. These new social movements tend to cluster around a set of contemporary issues, from democracy, peace, and security to human rights. They also have the tendency of demanding accountability and transparency from governments. When the sovereignty of the state is eroded, such a state cannot singularly redirect its

economy. The interest of global capitalist organisations is always profit, not local development. Hence they always demand peace and security from the local governments to protect their interests, and they pay lip service to the imperatives of human rights. Globalisation, therefore, as it defines this relatively new world order might prove to be more harmful to local communities and their aspirations than what they have experienced hitherto at the hands of Western imperialism and colonisation. The question here remains as to the kind(s) of local and national politics and policies needed to intervene in this complex.

African Culture in the Global World

Africa has been to Europe a source of raw materials and cheap labour for its commercial enterprises and lucrative profit. In order to fulfil this historical mission and profit realization in Africa, the foreign organisations had to subdue or even destroy local systems catering for the needs and aspirations of local communities. There is no respect for different cultures of the world. The dominant culture is European culture, which is universalized. This needs to be studied and analysed in local contexts. As Vimbi Gukwe Chivaura (1998; 1990) wrote:

> After we have understood Europe's destruction of African cultural and economic institutions and their replacement by its own as business, then, we will be in a position to know the appropriate action to take to liberate Africa's creative potential from continued repression and exploitation by Europe.

From the evidence of history, European culture in Africa cost lives, human worth, and minds (Chivaura 1998: 191). European culture as part of a global package indicates nothing else but the extinction of local cultures. This comes about when African leaders and intellectuals turn away from their own cultures and put 'the destiny of their countries in European hands' (Fanon cited in Ngugu 1981: 77). With globalisation European systems in Africa will continue with their hegemony. By continuing to embrace these systems, African leaders and intellectuals continue to turn their backs on their own people, culture, and history and surrender themselves to Europe for direction, in political, social, cultural, and moral matters.

European culture in Africa has also become big business. This culture is sold to Africans through the media, science fiction, magazines, school textbooks and other sources of information. Many movies Africans watch on television and movie theatres, and songs broadcast on radio, promote the culture and values of Europe, with no relevance to Africa. English language has become no more a language of international communication but marginalization and subjugation of local languages. Ousmane is right therefore by saying that:

> New leaders of Africa today are all-ears to Europe ... and speak to their people in European languages. Neither their radio, ... television, ... press nor cinema uses the national languages, which are not used at any level in the schools either. The media, which should constitute right schools to replace the traditional evening gatherings ... to create awareness, are simply ... relay stations for the former mother country. African capitals are chief provinces·of New York, Paris, Rome, London, Madrid and Lisbon. There is the mad rush of the African heads of state to be received in Moscow, Peking, Washington, London, Bonn, ... extending their cups, vying with each other for prestige, ... claiming non-alignment and hypnotizing slogans ... based on no economic or cultural reality in their respective countries (Ousmane 1979: 9f).

African leaders and intellectuals therefore through global culture have lost their minds to Europe by losing their own culture. They have become possessed and a property of Europe. Carter G. Woodson says:

> When you control a man's thinking·you do not have to worry about his actions. You do not have to tell him to stand here or go yonder. He will find his proper place and will stay in it. You do not need to send him to the back door; he will cut one for his special benefit (cf. Smitherman 1986: 201).

Global culture propagated by Europe ignores the fact that Europe and Africa are different. They have different beliefs, cultures, and institutions that impart opposite cosmologies. Not only does globalism ignore the fact that Africa is different from Europe but that the entire globe is multicultural.

Local cultures therefore are undermined over against the superior European culture, with no recognition of the multicultural complexity of the world.

Competing Ideological Interests in Africa

The other problem, which retards the development of African thought in Africa is posed by the many competing ideologies in Africa. Various institutions, governments and organisations have contributed to the problems of postcolonial Africa. In some cases their involvement was direct and in others, indirect. African countries after independence gained admission to the United Nations and for the first time they could participate in international diplomacy. Imperial powers whether West or East competed for Africa's allegiance. Various factors led to this ideological competition. Africa had rich mineral wealth with a potential for foreign markets of its goods. The Eastern block particularly led by the Soviet Union contributed largely to Africa's liberation by assisting the liberation movements with some of them later constituting the first democratic governments of the new independent states. After independence, Africa became a terrain on which the West and East competed for access, power and influence. As a result Africa was ideologically divided between the capitalist West and communist East during the so-called cold war era. Ideological division led to Africa's underdevelopment in that the West was hostile to African countries allied to the communist East. It had a paternalistic attitude of preventing the spread of communism. All countries allied to the communist East and advocating communist or socialist policies could not benefit from international financial institutions like the IMF and the World Bank. By the end of 1990 virtually all previously socialist governments of Africa had crossed over to the West and pursued capitalist policies even though they also were not working in and for Africa.

Competition among Academic Disciplines in the Education Market

Due to their commitment to reason, one would not expect competition among and within academic disciplines. However, the last few years have witnessed a growing tendency of competition among various academic disciplines, particularly between the social sciences, natural sciences

information technology and economic management sciences. This was brought about by various factors. The first factor was the recent market appeal to educational institutions to produce graduates who will be able to fit the demands and requirements of markets. Educational institutions therefore had to be responsive to the needs of the markets and redesign their curricula according to the dictates of the markets. The second factor is that there is an emphasis on science and technology. It is seen as essential for human development. Solutions to human problems like poverty, illiteracy, and other social ills, it is assumed, can only be found in science and technology. This has led to the third factor, which is a dwindling of student numbers in the social sciences and a lack of financial support in these disciplines. In fact, the sciences and economic subjects are better subsidized than their counterparts in the social sciences. African Studies, a branch of the social sciences, therefore, has to compete for survival with the sciences and market-related subjects. As an African discipline which attempts to bring African insights into the predominantly western education, it is perceived as something archival and of no value for modernity.

For some, a productive focus on African contexts and cultures has no contribution to make in education. Western universalistic education and thought is seen as essential not only for knowledge production but also for human progress.

The Under-representation of Black Academics in Universities

There is an under-representation and a low academic status accorded African academics in most South African universities particularly in the previously white institutions. Recent media reports reveal that ten years of democracy have not brought any equity in most of South African universities. Racial inequities have been implicated in the persistent problem of under-representation and the low academic status of African members in South African higher education institutions. In the academic hierarchy, which favours whites over blacks, the latter academics limit their contribution or influence. Higher education institutions are greatly influenced by, and cannot be analyzed apart, from, the larger social, historical and cultural context. Attempts to improve the status of African academics must therefore

consider how higher education institutions particularly in South Africa are characterized by an academic hierarchy, which assigns schools to various prestige levels based on numerous criteria (e.g. student assessment, staff/ student ratio, and selectivity of admission). The opportunities available to African students in South African universities are linked to their degree of access to higher prestige colleges and universities. Historical and ongoing discrimination, the operation of the academic prestige hierarchy contributes to the maintenance of substantial educational inequality. African academics on the other hand face barriers due to the historical, cultural, and social factors that frequently have shaped their relations with white academics generally. Such inequities explain the lack of African thought in academy.

African Intellectual Thought: Ideological and Political Dimensions

One of the most significant obstacles to revolutionary fundamental changes in Africa is mental colonialism, conservative, reactionary and dependent thinking of the African intellectuals or so-called educated class. Trained by colonial masters, African intellectuals are mere students ready to carry out orders of their former masters. Their intellectual training has bred a dependency syndrome in them and left them with the pride of Cambridge, Oxford, London universities where they have been trained to be better colonial agents. Hence they cannot be entrusted with the mission of liberating the African continent. Chango Machyo explains the condition of the African intellectuals:

> Generally speaking, the educated African is not a revolutionary. And the higher up in the educational ladder he or she climbs, the more conservative, reactionary and dependent he or she becomes. The role of the educated African is always to seek to be on the safe-side where the chances of falling into things of eating are brightest. Those who seemed to be revolutionary during their youth, slowly but surely shed their revolutionary outlooks as they grow up. They change their colours and preach 'moderation' and 'we must be realistic' joining the continuing efforts being made to derevolutionize the masses – the peasantry and workers – and urging

them to forgive and forget (Machyo 1996: 58ff).

The same sentiments are expressed by Chancellor Williams:

> ... Black officials once elected to office, turn out to be as conservative and reactionary as any [white] congressman from the backwoods of Mississippi (Williams 1987: 333).

African intellectuals and revolutionaries, on ascending to power – whether university or state – sometimes carry out the instructions of the ex-colonial masters even more rudely than the masters themselves. Intellectuals' dependence has betrayed the African revolution for political emancipation. Their intellectual training has not only tamed them but also made them better civil servants of the colonial and now globalising systems. Their education has not made them to be better leaders, radical policy-makers, project initiators and developers nor critical thinkers. This is the kind of education that Walter Rodney describes as 'education for subordination, exploitation with creation of mental confusion and the development of underdevelopment' (Rodney 1976: 264).

The history of the struggle for liberation in Africa was intended to change this white paternalism still embraced by African intellectuals including potential leaders. The 'talking on behalf of blacks' and 'thinking on what is best for them' that was acted by colonial masters is still continuing even after colonialism. White people in Washington, London, and Paris decide and blacks implement the decision. When those decisions do not bear fruits they (blacks) are chastised for being inexperienced, corrupt and undemocratic. And the same African intellectuals continue to go to these Western countries for more advice and expertness, which in the end does not work in the African context. Sometimes the African intellectuals make as their own 'the ideologies and value systems of the oppressors ... even when the result is demonstratively against themselves' (William 1987:331). In Africa, foreign ideologies and value systems are embraced in the name of progress, modernization, and even globalization. The development of African thought in both academy and politics will only be possible the day African intellectuals make an ideological shift to Africanism.

Towards the Realization of African Thought: Recommendations and Prospects for the Future

The nature of the challenges highlighted above, primarily those that deal with the challenges African thought faces, imply that solutions are not going to come easily. The recommendations that one can make must point, in the first instance, in the direction of improving African education, namely fostering the capacity for autonomous critical African thought.

a) Developing Critical and Autonomous African Thought

With the above analysis of dominant western thought in education and society, there is a need to change this paradigm. Only critical African thought can change the status quo. The reconstruction of the African consciousness will solve the problem of the imposed western consciousness on African people. Such consciousness is present among African students in particular – to aspire to be white – but then they loose their identity in the process. The same argument can be extended to other dominated groups of the world. One of the goals of African thought is to help reconstruct African culture. The goal is not to recreate the past African culture or to go back to some point in history. The goal is to create and reconstruct African values and genius in the context of hostile Western thought and culture. It is only when there is a developed African thought, that African people will be able to play a central role in world affairs. From this perspective, African thought will enable African people to determine their future.

b) Establishing South-South Collaboration

The second recommendation is that African universities should explore models of education, especially institutional, from other areas such as China and India. In these countries the education system is modelled according to the culture(s) of these countries. African universities can forge long-term links for cooperation with universities or research institutes in those countries because they have demonstrated some intellectual or ideological independence from the West (Crossmann 2004: 336).

c) African Intellectuals must Resist some Research Conditions from Foreign Donors

African intellectuals are financially dependent sometimes on foreign assistance for research. There can be no doubt that foreign donors have

rescued the scholarly enterprise in some African universities from penury. The assistance or foreign donation or funding has not come easily. African intellectuals had to pay a high price in terms of academic freedom and critical African thought. The conditions that usually come with these funding are around themes, parameters, methods and objectives that are defined by them. As David Court candidly admitted, the relationship between the donor and recipient is coherently unequal:

> One has resources, the other would like them. In order to gain access the applicant can hardly avoid adjusting the manner of his approach to accord with the known or perceived preferences of the donor in the process of self-restriction and hence reduction of freedom (cf. Zeleza 1997: 37).

According to Court, donors can also 'eliminate' work in certain areas by constraining the field to certain 'fundable' and manageable focuses as well as their linking to the meeting of 'certain bureaucratic schedules and goals' (cf. Zeleza 1997:37). Thus the donors often set the research agenda. They have succeeded in reinforcing dominant western thought and interests in Africa. They have succeeded to delegitimize or marginalize the production of critical African intellectual thought. African intellectuals therefore should resist such conditions from foreign donors and determine the African research agenda themselves.

d) The Promotion of African Languages as Medium of Instruction
The promotion of African languages (what is sometimes referred to as mother tongues) as medium of instruction appears to be an absolute necessary condition for the recovery and revalorization of African thought and culture. South Africa is a multilingual country with eleven official languages. African people also constitute the majority of the people of this country. The constitution of the Republic of South Africa also guarantees the right of every citizen to communicate and enjoy all the benefits and services of the country in his/her language. The problem in South Africa particularly among white academics is that they still associate African languages with underdevelopment. Just like the indigenous knowledge systems, African languages are seen as of no value when it comes to modernization and

development. They believe that they should be confined to African communities because they are too archaic to enter the academic arena. African languages cannot continue to be undermined in this way. Language is a gateway to defining African identity, to freedom, empowerment. Ngugi wa Thiong'o explains:

> The choice of language and the use to which language is put is central to a people's definition of themselves in relation to their natural and social environment, indeed in relation to the universe (Ngugi 1986; 4).

Matene has this to say also about the centrality of language in human society:

> … that nobody takes an attitude of neutrality or abstention, when the question of which language in education is raised. It is the acquisition of language, which makes the relationships between life and language very understandable. To silence somebody can mean killing him. And people would sacrifice their own life to defend their language (Matene 1999:165).

During his induction for the second term in office, President Thabo Mbeki took his oath in six official languages, namely siSwati, seSotho, Tshivenda, Xitsonga, English, and Afrikaans. By doing so, President Mbeki demonstrated the importance of our languages before the nation and the entire world. Repeated gestures like these may help to change people's attitude towards African languages. The renewal of Africa will not be possible if African languages are not given their right place. The Department of Education has already initiated a policy to bring tertiary institutions to have one of the African languages as medium of instruction.

Conclusion

African thought, we can conclude is not making headway in academia because of the continuing dominance of western thought in education. This is well translated in Western ideological thought in the education systems of

modernity, of which the universities in Africa have become the locus par excellence. Mafeje writing on the need for African intellectuals to re-Africanize their thought, reminds them of the guiding principles in Socratic thought: 'Know thyself' (Mafeje 1992). Looking at African philosophical thought, Mafeje finds grounds for reconstruction and self-realization (Mafeje 1992). Unwritten accounts of African people transmitted in stories, legends, myths, and so on reflect African philosophical thought in various ways and are a source of high significance and authenticity. In the history of its contact with Western countries, conflict, liberation and since the mid-twentieth century, independence, African intellectuals have developed a body of scholarship and thought that forms the basis from which African thought and the identity and practices of African universities can be fostered and further developed. This is the challenge facing African intellectuals in Africa – to develop national policies of higher education and academic policies on the foundations of African thought.

This will challenge Western systems of thought, that it has something to learn from Africa, particularly in terms of the rampant globalism the world is suffering from at present. Universities in Africa cannot continue to be mere copies of the Western universities. As public institutions African universities have to be shaped by and influenced by their social context on the one hand, and on the other, to address the challenges posed by globalisation. This article attempted to pinpoint some of he key issues. What has to follow is a meticulous addressing of each of these, from within the university's disciplines, and on the foundations of African thought.

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