

# Conference Opening Address

## The African University in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Indigenous Knowledge Systems and the Academy<sup>1</sup>

**Fikile Mazibuko**

The theme of this conference, namely 'The African University in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century' dovetails neatly with the overall ambitions of our institution, the University of KwaZulu-Natal. We at the University of KwaZulu-Natal aspire to be the premier University of African scholarship. Let me emphasize this from the beginning: We do not strive to be a University in Africa but an African University; there is a big distinction between the two. Universities located in Africa are no different from Universities located elsewhere in the world, Europe in particular. Universities in Africa function more or less as extensions of European and American universities. Outward directed, these universities generally adopt research and teaching agendas of foreign institutions. This is not surprising in a way, given that most modern African universities – I say modern because the idea of a University or Higher Centre of Learning is not a new one in Africa – are intertwined with the colonial project in one way or another. Most African intellectuals were trained abroad after independence and unfortunately it is not unusual for them to return to their home countries to replicate the research and teaching agendas of their foreign institutions. As a result, these universities largely remain Universities in Africa.

An African University, on the other hand, takes Africa as its point of departure. Research and teaching agendas are set with Africa in mind. While

---

<sup>1</sup> Paper delivered at the opening of the SAARDHE Conference, 27<sup>th</sup> JUNE, 2005.

taking cognizance of knowledge developments elsewhere, an African university addresses itself to matters of concern to the African continent. An example would be how to re-establish Africa as a major role player and equal partner in science, the arts, technology, and other disciplines. An African University seeks to affirm the dignity of peoples of the continent. It is highly critical of the view that nothing intellectually significant has ever come out of Africa. It also seeks to show that there is a direct relationship between knowledge and human interests, in the tradition argued by the German philosopher Habermas.

While there are many issues one could speak to in connection with African universities in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, in this address I want to re-visit two issues: *the language question* and *the development of indigenous knowledge systems*. The question of *language* and *the academy* is of course not a new one. However, as we enter the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is high time that major advances are made with respect to it. It is indeed difficult for African Universities to enter the global dialogue on unequal terms. Following Castellan (1999), the term indigenous knowledge systems will be used in this address to refer to inter-generational knowledge passed down by the elders of the community, as well as empirical knowledge based on careful observations of the surrounding environment (e.g. nature, culture, agriculture, and society). The term will also be used to refer to revealed knowledge (e.g. in dreams [*ukuboniswa*]), the philosophical underpinnings of knowledge, as well as the presumed relationship between the knower and the subject of his or her knowledge.

Throughout the address, examples will be drawn from South Africa and Africa at large.

## **The Language Question**

It would be remembered that in South Africa, *the language question in education was one of the issues that led to the student uprising of 1976*. It is this uprising that served as a catalyst for a series of events culminating in the democratic political dispensation in the early 1990s. Like her sister African states in the aftermath of formal independence, South Africa has to deal with the question of language – particularly, the language to be used in the courts, educational institutions, and the public sphere in general. During the

apartheid era the situation was very simple: English had already established its hegemony by virtue of being associated with the colonial enterprise. On the other hand, Afrikaans nationalists actively promoted the use of Afrikaans as a second national language, *using massive state resources* to achieve their objectives. Black/African languages remained the languages of the Bantustans and never achieved national prominence beyond those borders.

It is perhaps this association of Black/African languages with the apartheid mission that led to some eminent Black scholars such as Mphahlele actively promoting the use of English as a medium of instruction. Mphahlele wrote as follows on this matter:

... the [South African] government has decreed that the African languages shall be used as the medium of instruction right up to the secondary school. The aim is obviously to arrest the development of the black man's mental development because the previous system whereby English was the medium for the first six years of primary education produced a strong educated class that has in turn given us a sophisticated class of political leaders and a sophisticated following – a real threat to white supremacy (Quoted from Mphahlele 1963).

As Ngugi wa Thiong'o notes, the then government of South Africa did not restrict the use of language simply because it is inherently the best educational medium per se; it did so in order to limit access to the revolutionary literature available in the English language. *There is reason to believe that being educated in a language other than English retards one's intellectual development. There is a wealth of scientific literature that has been produced in French, German and other languages.* For example, it is highly doubtful that intellectual giants of the German School of Critical Thought, such as Habermas, would have reached their intellectual potential if they had received their education in a language foreign to them. There is also a wealth of philosophical literature in Japanese and Chinese, produced by communities who can hardly speak the Queen's language. Would the communities have reached this level of intellectual sophistication if they philosophized about their people in a language foreign to them? That is highly doubtful.

## **Mother-tongue Education and Concept Formation: The Russian School of Thought**

To the contrary, there is strong evidence indicating that mother tongue education plays a major role in the child's ability to form concepts, especially in the early childhood years. This literature has come from the Russian scholarly tradition, and is represented mainly by the seminal work of Vygotsky. Vygotsky, a Russian psychologist, argued that the development of mental concepts takes place at two levels. First, the child learns at the social plane, where significant others at his/her life, such as the parents, peers, and the like, play a critical role in educating the child. In the African tradition, the significant others could be extended to include the entire community, which is expected to provide social and moral education to the child. Later on, the child internalizes what he or she has learnt, and is now in a position to manipulate concepts on his or her own, without external assistance. *If one assumes that there is substance to this socio-cultural view of learning, how is the African parent expected to meaningfully play that scaffolding function of enabling the child to master abstract concepts,* if the concepts are being taught in a language that is foreign to both parent and child? It is not surprising that for the African child generally, learning merely becomes rote memorization for the sole purpose of passing examinations: learning is not internalized and owned by the child and it has no immediate applications outside the formal classroom environment (abstract not easy to related to one's broader life experience or even generate one's owns repertoire of life competences). For the African child, there is this wide discrepancy between his or her lived world and education. *For her/him, education is reduced to disowning not only his or her language but his lived experience and identity as well.* Of course, the African middle class continues to play a major role in this, as noted by Frantz Fanon. For some of them, education has become synonymous with mastering European languages. It is not unusual to find African parents who derive immense pleasure from the fact that their children not only speak a European language without an accent, but also of the fact that they are completely ignorant of their own mother tongue. Another related perspective is that in the high school experiences of high school learners in the late 1960s and early 1970s, mother-tongue languages such as isiZulu were made so difficult and abstract (with an emphasis on phonetics, for example) that the learner developed a negative disposition to

the language and an 'it's not worth it' attitude.

We are now delving into matters of identity, which we cannot explore at length here. Suffice to say that education, as demonstrated by the language question, is not a neutral process. To the contrary, it represents the very process by means of which subjectivities and negative valuations – ways of thinking about oneself and the world – are crafted. Kwesi Kwame Prah reflected as follows on this:

The use of French or English in the Elementary school is but a destruction of the African youth because their fragile minds are impressionable, their bodies fragile. And when you impose a foreign language as a language of culture, you are systematically destroying them .... The use of a given language leads you to assimilate at the same time the culture and the vision of life of those whose language you have borrowed ... The problem we face here is the fact through the colonial encounter Africans in most areas of human activity have acquired a syndrome of inferiority. The language problem and the dependency on colonial languages is a reflection of this (Prah 2000: 4, 5).

While the topic of *language and identity* is of immense importance, I leave it to students of identity theory. It is my belief that it is a very important area for research because for the African, the process of education could be most alienating. Of course, the situation is not as simple as I've depicted it here. I give another example where language in a subtle way entrench negative self-evaluations and relations. I am reminded of a poem that we were made to recite with much passion, 'Lui Letta'. We recited it in Afrikaans, a beautiful South African language – it is about *my lazy* sister (emphasis mine). This poem could easily confirm perceptions of the time, that 'Africans are lazy, they spend time sitting under the trees drinking' – a perception which does not consider very fundamental democratic ways of engaging with social issues, sharing and collective approaches to matters of the community and family. The other one is a beautiful poem titled 'The Cataract of Loudour' a poem which could easily make learners detach oneself from one's own beautiful natural environment – distance oneself from one's environment.

Castells (1998:52) opines as follows:

I would make the hypothesis that language and particularly a fully developed language, is a fundamental attribute of self-recognition, and the establishment of an invisible national boundary less arbitrary than territoriality, and less exclusive than ethnicity ....

Let us return to the question of language and mental retardation. It is *not* the use of African languages that retards mental development: the opposite could in fact be true. The use of foreign languages to educate people whose communities are not proficient in them, retards concept development [example of successful universities integrating culture, language and education: Stellenbosch, Pretoria, Japanese, Chinese universities]. Neither do African scholars, philosophers nor artists have total freedom when they express the philosophies and arts of their people in a foreign language [some South African poets & storytellers for example]. This is of course an issue that our brothers and sisters on the continent have debated fiercely. For example, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, in *Writers in Politics*, raises the question: *who is the audience targeted by African writers when they write in languages such as French, English and Portuguese?* He opines that:

If a Kenyan writer wants to speak to peasants and workers of any one Kenyan community, then he should speak in a language they speak and understand. If on the other hand one wants to communicate with Europeans and all those who speak European languages, then he should use English, French, Portuguese, Greek, German, Italian and Spanish (Ngugi wa Thiong'o 1981: 58).

The above reflections indicate that we should think critically about what we are educating our people for, and who our audiences are.

## **African Philosophy, Language and Lived Experience (The Forms of Life)**

It is perhaps unthinkable to talk about indigenous knowledge systems without touching on the relationship between *language and philosophizing*. Indeed, it is the very question of the existence or non-existence of African philosophy, and the languages it ought to be expressed in if it existed, i.e.

that it provides the major impetus for the indigenous knowledge debate. Indeed, great scholars such as Hegel, in their arrogance, dismissed the existence of African history and philosophy as a matter of fact. To them, there was no African knowledge or history outside the African's encounter with colonialism. Without delving much into this debate, I would take it as a given that any given cultural community will be forced by the challenges of life to develop responses to some core questions such as the meaning of life, the nature of human nature, and our relationships with each other and the universe. To reflect and philosophise about questions such as these is not the sole preserve of the European mind.

That there are African philosophies and knowledge systems is to me a fact of life: If there are Africans, it follows that there must be African knowledge systems, unless the African lived a pre-reflective life prior to the colonial encounter. African languages are repositories of philosophical knowledge. It is perhaps time this knowledge is explored in the languages that gave it birth. It is highly unlikely that philosophical traditions such as romanticism and existentialism would have taken the direction they took if they were expressed in *isiXhosa* or *isiNdebele*. This is because language captures the lived experiences of the people. The call for indigenous philosophizing in the local languages is not a call for a return to atavistic forms of knowledge – knowledge that is frozen in the past. It comes from the recognition that there is a direct relationship between language and thought. Further, language does not reflect the idiosyncrasies of individual thinkers, completely divorced from the background life-forms of linguistic communities in question. This is perhaps best expressed by the German philosopher Wittgenstein. For Wittgenstein, language does not refer to an independent entity 'out-there', to be discovered by speakers of the language independently. Instead, language refers to a background life-world – the forms of life. By forms of life is meant the nexus of social relationships and practices, the taken-for-granted ways of doing things, the social practices, the things people do, the unspoken ways of engaging with each other and the world (see Gramsci 1971). Here I quote Sewpaul (2003):

... issues regarding social justice, human rights, citizenship and democracy cannot be addressed within the restrictive language of markets, profits, individualism, competition and choice which

creates indifference to inequality, hunger, deprivation, exploitation and suffering, which excludes the voice of the *OTHER*. Educators, and practitioners in the field of social policy, social welfare and social work must have the power of criticism, and *MUST NOT* (e.a.) in the name of science and objectivity, distance themselves from power relations that exclude, oppress, subjugate, exploit and diminish other human beings. We need to create opportunities for the development of critical consciousness and transformative action (Sewpaul 2004:100).

A simple example, it is so common to hear those 'who have resources to help' in development and social welfare sector saying, 'We are only here to help'. It is not common to hear the mutual language (to communities): 'Can you share with us your programmes, can we be party to your programmes?' For Wittgenstein, it is against these background life forms that we justify our actions. In the academy, it could be argued, justification takes place with respect to the life forms of the dominant Western groups, while local ways of being in the world are ignored. The call for the need to conceptualise in the local languages is an attempt to bring ideas as close as possible to the lived experiences of the people whose meanings are in question. It is also an attempt to facilitate broader participation in education.

### **Language, Education and Power**

Apart from the themes above, it is also my belief that this conference will also engage the question of *education, language and power*. Questions of language and curriculum reform in the academy cannot be divorced from the question of power and equality, as philosophers such as Foucault have so eloquently reminded us. These questions cannot be divorced from the question of voice: that is, whose experiences matter and why? It is for this reason that I will now turn to how indigenous knowledge systems could be empowered.

### **Transforming the Curriculum – the Question of African Languages**

It is often argued that African languages lack the technical vocabulary to be



used in educational contexts. I argue that it is a question of readiness, it cannot be done with a 'bang approach'. Rather than becoming emotive, 'throwing tantrums' or defending the dominant languages of knowledge on this matter, I prefer to ask questions such as:

- Do South African languages have the technical vocabulary to produce and transform knowledge?
- If yes, how consistent are they – can they participate in global discourses or embed themselves in other forms of knowledge?
- If not, is there a possibility or potential for the South African languages to develop the technical vocabulary in the knowledge production and transfer industry, locally and globally?
- Are there specific forms of knowledge that can be clearly conveyed in certain African languages without corrupting the content and philosophies?
- Can we develop case studies for ourselves as academics addressing these issues in practice?
- How do we begin to address issues of originality and repletion in African language-based science?
- How can we measure the elasticity level of some of our African languages in so far as production, exchange and transfer of knowledge are concerned?

A colleague for example argues that these questions can not be answered. He cites two objections to my position: African languages, like all languages are capable of absorbing other ideas. (That is why we already have terms for HIV/Aids in isiZulu, isiXhosa.) However, in the event that the technical vocabulary cannot be assimilated into local languages, there is no reason why specific specialist terms cannot continue to be referred to in the languages of their origin. For example, English is replete with specialist terms borrowed from Latin which continue to be used to date. Likewise, medical and legal discourse in English is replete with borrowed terms. Are we suggesting that African languages are not elastic enough to do just that? Experience proves us otherwise.

There is however, an even more important objection. Objection to curriculum transformation and the use of local languages also have to do

with the belief that indigenous communities have nothing to contribute to the curriculum. We have already spoken to that with respect to African philosophy and history, Hegel's brave assertion that there is no African history being cited as an example. However, we should take cognizance of the fact that education as we know it – that is formal Western education – was never meant to benefit the African. It was meant to service the needs of the colonial masters. To that extent, there was no need to include indigenous knowledges in the curriculum, except for that knowledge deemed essential to facilitate the African's capitulation to colonial rule (i.e. to accept his subjection and the accompanying subjectivity as a fact of life).

Unfortunately, *the view that there are no African knowledge traditions* remains firmly established in the academy. The dominance of this view is such that it is not unusual to fib aboriginal Africans who would be prepared to fall on their swords in defence of it. To be educated does not only mean to be educated in Western ways and traditions. Africa has a profound stock of knowledge in medicine, agriculture, educational and psychological development, theology, and the like. These knowledge traditions predate the colonial encounter and have continued to date. For example, the World Health Organization has consistently showed that close to 80% of people in Africa depend on traditional healers for primary health care. African knowledge traditions need to become part of the curriculum. Our students and academics need to be encouraged to research and write scholarly articles on them. Of course, the knowledge should not be taken at face value and in isolation. It needs to be studied in relation to other intellectual traditions. The interpenetration of African and other knowledge traditions is important. Most important, we need to resist the token status afforded indigenous knowledges in the academy: their special status as subjects reserved for ethnic students of the occasional, curious European or American student. Indigenous knowledges need to be fully entrenched in all aspects of the curriculum. It is my belief that mechanisms to achieve this objective need to take centre-stage in related studies.

### **On the Decolonization of Research Methodologies**

In addition to the above, there is an urgent need to revisit the research paradigms and methodologies in the academy. While the dominant

empiricist paradigm is suitable for researching natural science phenomena in particular, they are not necessarily the best for contextualizing education. This is because these methods are based on the assumption that the purpose of research is to discover dis-embedded, supposedly universal facts of nature. Knowledge production is generally regarded to be value-free: it is considered to be independent of the presuppositions and philosophical orientation of the researcher. With this assumption of researcher objectivity, the dominant trend has been to reproduce – by way of replication – Western findings. Most of these replicated studies have taken place without the questioning of their philosophical underpinnings. The tendency to replicate Western ideas has stifled the growth of indigenous knowledges. In some quarters, it has grossly distorted the experiences of indigenous communities. This is *not* to say that empirical research has no place: this is merely a call for the diversification of research methodologies and a critical reflection on one's pre-suppositions.

There is a view in some circles that those who use narrative/qualitative research methodologies are better equipped to study indigenous knowledge systems. Such methods put the researcher in a much better position to study in depth the lived experiences of a people, it has been argued. We have perhaps already seen this with the study of HIV/Aids as a social and cultural phenomenon. Apart from this, such methods are considered to be in tune with the oral nature of most African societies. Further, they are generally regarded to be critical and emancipatory, the best example being the manner in which they have been employed by feminists to question dominant gender relations in society. Similar methods could be used to question the hegemony of Western forms of knowledge. Most important, we need to note that it is not the method per se that is important, but the critical, reflective attitude of the researcher.

Another example comes from the need to address the issues of informed consent when engaging traditional healers and counsellors. Do we only require of them to sign an Informed Consent Form, or are there more complex issues we need to address – e.g. intellectual property rights.

## **Recognizing Diversity in Ways of Knowing**

Diversity exists not only with respect to the content of knowledge but also

with regard to the ways of knowing. In the conventional Western tradition, the knower is a disinterested observer: he/she stands at a distance, uninvolved. He/she maintains a doubtful, sceptical and very adversarial attitude. Indeed, an element of doubt and scepticism is essential to knowledge production. What becomes problematic is the assumption that this is the only authentic way of knowing. Also, it is problematic if the teacher, in adhering rigidly to this approach to knowledge, alienates the students in the process. Education becomes a painful process.

On the other hand, there is what is called a *connected approach to knowing*. This form of knowing is characterized by an attempt to find resonance between one's ideas and the ideas of others. The goal is not to achieve dominance over the other, but to create a joint space – a dialogue – in which ideas are shared. Special attention is paid to the feelings of the other as well. The overall objective is to find connection and to enhance the relationship between the knowers. Throughout the learning process, there is a deliberate attempt to affirm, rather than dominate, the other. This is a way of knowing that is prized in most African communities. It is the attitude that most African students bring with them to the academy. This way of knowing needs to be recognized and affirmed.

There is thus an urgent need to look into alternative teaching and assessment methodologies to affirm this way of knowing. These could include the following among other methodologies:

- The use of stories/ narratives (orality)
- Smaller group discussions supervised by senior students acting as mentors
- Biographies and case histories
- Journal methods in which personal reflections are captured
- Comparing socio-linguistic experiences

As mentioned above, these teaching methodologies need to be accompanied by matching assessment procedures, which I also believe will be discussed in this conference.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, there are multiple challenges facing the African University in

the 21<sup>st</sup> century. African universities need to break away from the tradition of seeing themselves as appendages of Europe or America, that is, Universities in Africa. African universities need to engage as equal partners in this global dialogue which is the production of knowledge. To achieve this, we need to seriously revisit the position of indigenous African languages in the Academy. I have also maintained that indigenous knowledge can contribute to mental decolonization and hence, empowerment. Indigenous knowledge is part of the global dialogue constituting international knowledge. However, first it needs to be salvaged from marginalization so that it can enter the dialogue about how to create universal knowledge as an equal partner. These are some of the challenges facing the African University in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## References

- Alexander, N 2002. *An Ordinary Country: Issues in the Transition from Apartheid to Democracy in South Africa*. Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal University Press.
- Castells, M 1998. *The Power of Identity. The Information Age Economy, Society and Culture*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Castellano, MB 1998. Upgrading Aboriginal Traditional Knowledge. In Dei, GJS, B Hall, & D Goldin-Rosenberg (eds): *Indigenous in Global Contexts: Multiple Readings of our World*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Fanon, F 1970. *The Wretched of the Earth..* Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Foucault, M 1980. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews & Other Writings 1972-1977*. Colin Gordon (ed). New York: Pantheon Books.
- Gramsci, A 1997. *Selections from Political Writings 1910-1920*. London: Lawrence & Wishart.
- Habermas, Jürgen 1971. *Knowledge and Human Interests*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Mphahlele, E 1963. Letter to the Editor. *Transitions* 11.
- Prah, H 1998. *Between Distinction and Extinction: The Harmonisation and Standardization of African Languages*. Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press.
- Prah, KK 2000. *Between Distinction and Extinction: The Harmonization and Standardisation of African Languages*. Centre of Advanced Studies of

African Society.

Sewpaul, S & D Holscher 2004. *Social Work in Times of Neoliberalism: A Postmodern Discourse*. Pretoria: Van Schaik Publishers.

Wa Thiong'o, N 1981. *Writing in Politics: A Re-engagement with Issues of Literature and Society*. Portsmouth: Heinemann.

Deputy Vice-Chancellor and  
Head of College of Humanities  
University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN).  
mazibukf@ukzn.ac.za