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Whither African University?

Last month (February 2005) a group of academics from Tanzanian, Kenyan and Ugandan universities met to discuss and reflect on the state of academia in our countries. What is the state of our universities? Are they still the sites of generating knowledge? Do academics still pursue truth? Are our universities still the symbols of nationalism that they were in the 1960s?

As soon as we got our national flag and anthem, we set to construct a university. The first batch of students, in fact, attended their first classes in the then TANU building at Lumumba before the University College of Dar es Salaam, one of the three colleges of the University of East Africa, moved to the Hill. It is said that Mwalimu personally wanted to locate the university on the very best grounds amidst the greenery of trees. What was then called Observation Hill was the answer and the university was given a lot of land, taking into account its needs for future expansion.

The University flourished. It became a hotbed of radical nationalism where research was done to reclaim our history; where debates were conducted to debunk domination; where students demonstrated and protested against injustice and oppression, exploitation and discrimination, imperialism and apartheid. It mattered not whether the victims of injustices and oppression were white, black, brown, or yellow. Human liberation and human freedom are indivisible.

Faculty went out to villages to find out more about agricultural systems, land tenure, and social differentiation to understand our societies better. Publication of a new book was an event. It passed from hand to hand. Plays on the Paris Commune were staged. Artists like Ebrahim Hussein wrote Kinjeketile and Mashetani and Penina Mlama acted in her own play, Lina Ubani.

This was the time when knowledge was pursued not only for its own sake but to know the world better so as to make it better. ‘Learn to Struggle and Struggle to Learn’ was the battle cry of the militant student journal, Cheche (The Spark).

Through the university we, as a people, asserted our right to think, the essential core of the right to self-determination. Then came the crisis and the neo-liberal offensive. Imperialism and capitalism masquerading as globalization and free market set the rules of the game. Universities were dubbed white elephants. We did not need thinkers, asserted our erstwhile benefactors. We only needed store-keepers and bank tellers and computer operators and marketing managers, who could be trained in vocational schools. Universities are not cost-effective, decreed the Word Bank. Education and knowledge must be sold and bought on the market. The idea of providing "free" education, which really meant using citizens' money to educate their children rather than buy guns to suppress them, was Nyerere's bad joke.

The university was condemned. The nationalist project was aborted. The colonized mind resurfaced. The World Bank says, the bank of Africa echoes. 'Globalization', said Washington', … zation', echoed Africa; 'terrorism is the enemy', declared London, '..ism ..enemy' 'ism .. enemy', 'sim ..enemy', echoed African capitals.

Knowledge production must be privatized and knowledge products must be commoditized; naam! Bwana. Train entrepreneurs who can sell mandazi more profitably. Hewala! Bwana. Informatics and the virtual are real and your real world is supernatural. Ndio! Bwana. Times have changed. No doubt, our universities are transforming and are being transformed – from sites of knowledge production to sites of hotel construction; from building lecture halls to pre-fabricating shopping malls. From the culture of collegiality, which was the hallmark of a university, we are now in the thick of corporate vultures. Corporate managers manipulate balance sheets to show profits, academic entrepreneurs manipulate mark sheets to show passes. The analogy is not farfetched as colleges are being commercialized and courses are being marketized.

Since the emphasis is on the product and not on (knowledge) production, it is the means of certifying the product that matters. Therefore, we pay more attention to methods of examination rather than the methods of teaching and learning. We divide courses into bits and pieces called modules to enable students to pass examinations rather than devise ways and means of adding rigour to teaching and vigour to learning. We are told that we should test the students immediately after teaching a module so that their memories are

still fresh. Is the university education being transformed from the nurturing of minds to the training of memories?

While the East African academics agonized over the state of academic in Dar in February, some Asian scholars met in Penang, Malaysia, in November last year to reflect on the type of social sciences taught in Asian (and third world) universities. They arrived at the conclusion that we, in the third world, were teaching and being taught essentially European social sciences which we dutifully accept as universal. As Ward Churchill, a Native American, said several years ago, if you look at university catalogues you would find programmes called African Studies, Asian Studies, Islamic Studies, Latino Studies, etc. but you wouldn't find White Studies. The reason, he said, was of course that all higher education is White Studies.

This is the other, very fundamental, concern that African academics still have to address. The knowledge we impart is crafted based on the premises and within the paradigms of White Studies. It is Eurocentric through and through. What is European is universal; the non-European is at best multi-cultural and at worst parochial. The European is science, while the non-European is supernatural. The European is modern, while the non-European is traditional. The European is rational, the non-European emotional. So if you want to be a modern, scientific, rational, universal human being, you have to think, see, smell, act and feel like a European. Fanon called it 'Black Skins, White Masks' and kids in southern African call a Europeanized African 'cocunut'!

We have yet to critically challenge the content of the ideas that we impart as knowledge in our universities. The 'de-colonization of the mind', as Ngugi calls it, began during the nationalist period but that project has been rudely interrupted by the neo-liberal balderdash.

We need to reclaim the gains of nationalism and go beyond. It is a struggle. In this struggle we should not lose the centrally of the struggle of ideas and the university as the centre of ideas of struggle.

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