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The Importance of Research in a University

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The Importance of Research in a University

My remarks will be more critical than congratulatory. I will focus more on the challenge we face rather than the progress we have made. My focus will also be limited, to the Humanities and the Social Sciences rather than to the Sciences, to postgraduate education and research rather than to underdgraduate education.

I would like to begin with a biographical comment. I did my 'O 'Levels at Old Kampala Secondary School in 1962, the year of independence. The US government gave an independence gift to the Uganda government. It included 24 scholarships. I was one among those who was airlifted to the US, getting several degrees over 10 years, BA, MA, PhD – and returned in 1972.

Those who came with me divided into two groups. There were those who never returned, and then those who did, but were soon frustrated by the fact that the conditions under which they were supposed to work were far removed from the conditions under which they were trained. In a matter of years, sometimes months, they looked for jobs overseas, or moved out of academia into government or business or elsewhere.

The lesson I draw from my experience was that the old model does not work . We have no choice but to train postgraduate students in the very institutions in which they will have to work. We have no choice but to train the next generation of African scholars at home. This means tackling the question of institutional reform alongside that of postgraduate education. Postgraduate education, research and institution building will have to be part of a single effort.

I would like to put this in the context of the history of higher education in Africa. I do not mean to suggest that there is a single African history. I speak particularly of those parts of Africa colonized after the Berlin Conference in late 19th century. There is a contrast between older colonies like South Africa or Egypt where Britain embarked on a civilizing mission – building schools and universities – and newer colonies like Uganda where they tended to regard products of modern education as subversive of the existing order.

History of Higher Education in Africa

You can write a history of higher education in Africa that begins a millennium ago. It is now well known that there existed centers of learning in different parts of Africa—such as Al-

Azhar in Egypt, Al-Zaytuna in Morocco, and Sankore in Mali—prior to Western domination of the continent. And yet, this historical fact is of marginal significance for contemporary African higher education. This is for one reason. The organization of knowledge production in the contemporary African university is everywhere based on a disciplinary mode developed in Western universities over the 19th and 20th centuries.

The first colonial universities few and far between: Makerere in East Africa, Ibadan and Legon in West Africa, and so on. Lord Lugard, Britain's leading colonial administrator in Africa, used to say that Britain must avoid the Indian disease in Africa. The Indian Disease referred to the development of an educated middle class, a group most likely to carry the virus of nationalism.

This is why the development of higher education in Africa between the Sahara and the Limpopo was mainly a post-colonial development. To give but one example, there was 1 university in Nigeria with 1,000 students at independence. Three decades later, in 1991, there were 41 universities with 131,000 students. Nigeria not an exception.

Everywhere, the development of universities was a key nationalist demand. At independence, every country needed to show its flag, national anthem, national currency and national university as proof that the country had indeed become independent.

We can identify two different post-independent visions of the role of higher education. One was state-driven. I spent six years teaching at the University of Dar es Salaam in the 1970s. The downside of the Dar experience was that governments tended to treat universities as parastatals, undermining academic freedom. The great achievement of Dar was the creation of a historically-informed, inter-disciplinary, curriculum.

A later post-independence vision was market-driven. Makerere University came to be its prime example. I spent nearly two decades at Makerere, from 1980 to 1996. During the 1990s, Makerere combined the entry of fee-paying students **[privatization]** with the introduction of a market-driven curriculum **[commercialization].** The effects were contradictory: payment of fees showed that it was possible to broaden the financial base of higher education; commercialization opened the door to a galloping consultancy culture.

The two models had a common failing. Neither developed a graduate program. Everyone assumed that post-graduate education would happen overseas through staff development programs. I do not recall a single discussion on post-graduate education at either Dar or Makerere.

A Pervasive Consultancy Culture

Today, the market-driven model is dominant in African universities. The consultancy culture it has nurtured has had negative consequences for postgraduate education and research. Consultants presume that research is all about finding answers to problems defined by a client. They think of research as finding answers, not as formulating a problem. The consultancy culture is institutionalized through short courses in research methodology, courses that teach students a set of tools to gather and process quantitative information, from which to cull answers.

Today, intellectual life in universities has been reduced to bare-bones classroom activity. Extra-curricular seminars and workshops have migrated to hotels. Workshop attendance goes with transport allowances and per diem. All this is part of a larger process, the NGO-ization of the university. Academic papers have turned into coporate-style power point presentations. Academics read less and less. A chorus of buzz words have taken the place of lively debates.

If you sit in a research institution as I do, then the problem can be summed up in a single phrase: the spread of a corrosive consultancy culture. Why is the consultancy mentality such a problem? Let me give you an example from the natural sciences.

In 2007, the Bill and Malinda Gates Foundation decided to make eradicating malaria its top priority. Over the next 4 years, it spent $150 million on this campaign.

Even more important were the consequences of its advocacy program, which was so successful that it ended up shaping priorities of others in the field of health. According to a recent study on the subject, WHO expenditure on eradicating malaria sky rocketed from $ 100 million in 1998 to $2 billion in 2009.

The rush to a solution was at the expense of thinking through the problem from an epidemiological point of view, there are two kinds of diseases: those you can eradicate, like sleeping sickness or smallpox, and those you cannot – like yellow fever – because it lives on a host, in this case monkeys, which means you would have to eradicate monkeys to eradicate yellow fever.

The two types of diseases call for entirely different solutions: for a disease you cannot eradicate, you must figure out how to live with it

Last year, a team of scientists from Gabon and France found that malaria too has a wild host – monkeys – which means you cannot eradicate it. To learn to live with it calls for an entirely different solution. Eradication calls for a laboratory-based strategy. You look for isolated human communities, like islands with small populations and invest all your resources in it –

which is what the Gates Foundation and WHO did. But living with malaria requires you to spend your monies in communities with large, representative populations.

The Gates Foundation and WHO money was spent mostly on small islands. A WHO expert called it 'a public health disaster'. The moral of the story is that diagnosis is more important than prescription. Research is diagnosis.

Creating an anti-dote to a Consultancy Culture

How do we counter the spread of consultancy culture? Through an intellectual environment strong enough to sustain a meaningful intellectual culture. To my knowledge, there is no model for this on the African continent today. It is something we will have to create.

The old model looked for answers outside the problem. It was utopian because it imposed externally formulated answers. A new model must look for answers within the parameters of the problem. This is why the starting point must go beyond an understanding of the problem, to identifying initiatives that seek to cope with the problem. In the rest of this talk, I will seek to give an analysis of the problem and outline one initiative that seeks to come to grips with it. This is the initiative at the Makerere Institute of Social Research.]

The Consultancy Problem.

Let me return to my own experience, this time at MISR, where I have learnt to identify key manifestations of the consultancy culture.

I took over the directorship of MISR in June of 2010. When I got there, MISR had 7 researchers, including myself. We began by meeting each for an hour: what research do you do? What research have you done since you came here? The answers were a revelation: everyone seemed to do everything, or rather anything, at one time primary education, the next primary health, then roads, then HIV/AIDS, whatever was on demand! This is when I learnt to recognize the first manifestation of consultancy: A consultant has no expertise. His or her claim is only to a way of doing things, of gathering data and writing reports. He or she is a Jack or a Jane of all, a master of none. This is the first manifestation.

Even though consultancy was the main work, there was also some research at MISR. But it was all externally-driven, the result of demands of European donor agencies that European universities doing research on Africa must partner with African universities. The result was not institutional partnerships but the incorporation of individual local researchers into an externally-driven project. It resembled more an outreach from UK or France rather than a partnership between relative equals.

Next I suggested to my colleagues that our first priority should be to build up the library. I noticed that the size of our library had actually been reduced over the past 10 years. I understood the reason for this when I looked at MISR's 10-year strategic plan. The plan called for purchasing around 100 books for the library over 10 years. In other words, the library was not a priority. The second manifestation of a consultancy culture is that consultant don't read, not because they cannot read, or are not interested in reading – but because reading becomes a luxury, an after-work activity. Because consultancies do not require you to read anything more than field data and notes.

My colleagues and I discussed the problem of consultancy in meeting after meeting, and came up with a two-fold response. Our short-term response was to begin a program of seminars, two a month, requiring that every person begin with a research proposal, one that surveys the literature in their field, identifies key debates and located their query within those debates; second, also twice a month, we agreed to meet as a study group, prepare a list of key texts in the social sciences and humanities over the past 40 years, and read and discuss them.

Over the long-term, we decided to create a multi-disciplinary, coursework-based, PhD program to train a new generation of researchers. To brain-storming the outlines of this program, we held a two-day workshop in January with scholars from University of Western Cape in South Africa and Addis Ababa University. I would like to share with you some of the deliberations at that workshop.

Reflections on Postgraduate Education in the Humanities and the Social Sciences

The central question facing higher education in Africa today is what it means to teach the humanities and social sciences in the current historical context and, in particular, in the post-colonial African context. What does it mean to teach humanities and social sciences in a location where the dominant intellectual paradigms are products not of Africa's own experience, but of a particular Western experience? Where dominant paradigms theorize a specific Western history and are concerned in large part to extol the virtues of the enlightenment or to expound critiques of that same enlightenment? As a result, when these theories expand to other parts of the world—they do so mainly by submerging particular origins and specific concerns through describing these in the universal terms of scientific objectivity and neutrality?

I want to make sure I am not misunderstood: there is no problem with the reading texts from the Enlightenment – in fact, it is vital – the problem is this: if the Enlightenment is said to be an exclusively European phenomenon, then the story of the Enlightenment is one that excludes Africa as it does most of the world. Can it then be the foundation on which we can build university education in Africa?

The assumption that there is a single model derived from the dominant Western experience reduces research to no more than a demonstration that societies around the world either conform to that model or deviate from it. The tendency is to dehistoricize and decontextualise discordant experiences, whether Western or non-Western. The effect is to devalue original research or intellectual production in Africa. The global market tends to relegate Africa to providing raw material ("data") to outside academics who process it and then re-export their theories back to Africa. Research proposals are increasingly descriptive accounts of data collection and the methods used to collate data, collaboration is reduced to assistance, and there is a general impoverishment of theory and debate.

The expansion and entrenchment of intellectual paradigms that stress quantification above all has led to a peculiar intellectual dispensation in Africa today: the dominant trend is increasingly for research to be positivist and primarily quantitative, carried out to answer questions that have been formulated outside of the continent, not only in terms of location but also in terms of historical perspective. This trend either occurs directly, through the "consultancy" model, or indirectly, through research funding and other forms of intellectual disciplining. In my view, the proliferation of "short courses" on methodology that aim to teach students and academic staff quantitative methods necessary to gathering and processing empirical data are ushering a new generation of native informers. But the collection of data to answer pre-packaged questions is not a substantive form of research if it displaces the fundamental research practice of formulating the questions that are to be addressed. If that happens, then researchers will become managers whose real work is to supervise data collection.

But this challenge to autonomous scholarship is not unprecedented—indeed, autonomous scholarship was also denigrated in the early post-colonial state, when universities were conceived of as providing the "manpower" necessary for national development, and original knowledge production was seen as a luxury. Even when scholars saw themselves as critical of the state, such as during the 1970s at University of Dar es Salaam, intellectual work ended up being too wedded to a political program, even when it was critical of the state. The strength of Dar was that it nurtured a generation of pubic intellectuals. Its weakness was that this generation failed to reproduce itself. This is a fate that will repeat in the future if research is not put back into teaching and PhD program in Africa are not conceived of as training the next generation of African scholars.

Someone told me yesterday that Makerere requires every Ph D thesis to end with a set of recommendations. If true, this indicates a problem. A university is not a think tank. A university may house think tanks, even several, but a university cannot itself be a think tank. Think tanks are policy-oriented centers, centers where the point of research is to make recommendations. In a university, there needs to be room for both applied research, meaning policy-oriented research, and basic research. The distinction is this: unlike applied research

which is preoccupied with making recommendations, the point of basic research is to identify and question assumptions that drive the very process of knowledge production.

The Postgraduate Initiative at MISR

I believe one of the biggest mistakes made in the establishment of MISR as a research institute was to detach research from postgraduate education. The formation of the new College of Humanities that has brought the Faculties of Arts and Social Sciences and MISR under a single administrative roof gives us a historic opportunity to correct this mistake. MISR will aim to offer a multi-disciplinary Doctoral program in the qualitative social sciences and the Humanities.

The initiative at the Makerere Institute of Social Research (MISR) is driven by multiple convictions. One, key to research is the formulation of the problem of research. Two, the definition of the research problem should stem from a dual engagement: on the one hand, a critical engagement with the society at large and, on the other, a critical grasp of disciplinary literature, world-wide, so as to identify key debates within the literature and locate specific queries within those debates.

Faced with a context where the model is the consultant and not the independent researcher, we at MISR think the way forward is to create a PhD program based on significant preparatory coursework, to create among students the capacity to both re-think old questions and formulate new

Our ambition is also to challenge the foundations of the prevailing intellectual paradigm which has turned the dominant Western experience into a model which conceives of research as no more than a demonstration that societies around the world either conform or deviate from that model. This dominant paradigm dehistoricizes and decontextualises other experiences, whether Western or non-Western. The effect is to devalue original research in Africa. The global market tends to relegate Africa to providing raw material ("data") to outside academics who process it and then re-export their theories back to Africa. Research proposals are increasingly descriptive accounts of data collection and the methods used to collate data, collaboration is reduced to assistance, and there is a general impoverishment of theory and debate. If we are to treat every experience with intellectual dignity, then we must treat treat it as the basis for theorization. This means to historicize and contextualize not only phenomena and processes that we observe but also the intellectual apparatus used to analyze these.

Finally, MISR will seek to combine a commitment to local [indeed, regional] knowledge production, rooted in relevant linguistic and disciplinary terms, with a critical and disciplined reflection on the globalization of modern forms of knowledge and modern instruments of power. Rather than oppose the local to the global, it will seek to understand the global from

the vantage point of the local. The doctoral program will seek to understand alternative forms of aesthetic, intellectual, ethical, and political traditions, both contemporary and historical, the objective being not just to learn about these forms, but also to learn from them. Over time, we hope this project will nurture a scholarly community that is equipped to rethink—in both intellectual and institutional terms—the very nature of the university and of the function it is meant to serve locally and globally.

Coursework

Coursework during the first two years will be organized around a single set of core courses taken by all students, supplemented by electives grouped in four thematic clusters:

1. **Genealogies of the Political**, being discursive and institutional histories of political practices;
2. **Disciplinary and Popular Histories**, ranging from academic and professional modes of history writing to popular forms of retelling the past in vernaculars;
3. **Political Economy**, global, regional and local; and
4. **Literary and Aesthetic Studies**, consisting of fiction, the visual and performing arts and cinema studies.

Translated into a curricular perspective, the objective is for an individual student's course of study to be driven forward by debates and not by orthodoxy. This approach would give primacy to the importance of reading key texts in related disciplines. In practical terms, students would spend the first two years building a bibliography and coming to grips with the literature that constituted it. In the third year they would write a critical essay on the bibliography, embark on their own research in the fourth year, and finally write it up in the fifth.

Inter-disciplinarity

Over the 19th century, European universities developed three different domains of knowledge production—natural sciences, humanities, and social sciences—based on the notion of "three cultures". Each of these domains was then subdivided into "disciplines." Over the century from 1850 to the Second World War, this became the dominant pattern as it got institutionalized through three different organizational forms: a) within the universities, as chairs, departments, curricula, and academic degrees for students; b) between and outside universities at the national and international level, as discipline-based associations of scholars and journals; c) in the great libraries of the world, as the basis for classification of scholarly works.

This intellectual consensus began to break down after the 1960s, partly because of the growing overlap between disciplines and partly because of a shared problematique. For example, the line dividing the humanities from the social sciences got blurred with the increasing "historicization" and hence "contextualization" of knowledge in the humanities and the social sciences. The development was best captured in the report of the Gulbenkian Commission chaired by Immanuel Wallerstein. As inter-disciplinarity began to make inroads into disciplinary specialization, the division between the humanities and the social sciences paled in the face of a growing division between quantitative and qualitative perspectives in the study of social, political and cultural life.

But these intellectual developments were not matched by comparable organizational changes, precisely because it is not easy to move strongly entrenched organizations. Though the number of interdisciplinary and regional institutes multiplied, collaboration rarely cut across the humanities/social science divide.

The challenge of postgraduate studies in the African university is how to produce a truly inter-disciplinary knowledge without giving up the ground gained in the disciplines. The challenge of MISR is how to reproduce a generation of researchers by joining research to postgraduate education. Our incorporation into the new College of Humanities and Social Sciences, and thereby an end to our standalone status, has created this opening for us – one we hope to seize with both hands.

List of Working Papers

1. Mahmood Mamdani, *The South Sudan Referendum,* March 2011
2. Adam Branch, *The Politics of Urban Displacement in Gulu Town, Uganda,* March 2011
3. Mahmood Mamdani, *The Importance of Research in a University,* April 2011
4. Antonio Tomas, *Preliminary Thoughts on the Legacy of Amilcar Cabral,* August 2011
5. Mahmood Mamdani, *Okugenda Mu Maaso: The Link Between Tradition, Reform and Development,* November 2011
6. Pamela Khanakwa, *Inter-Communal Violence and Land Rights: Bugisu-Bugwere Territorial Boundary Conflict,* July 2012
7. Adam Branch, *The Violence of Peace in Northern Uganda,* August 2012
8. Okello Ogwang, *Colonial Library, National Literature and the Post-Colonial Question: Between Uganda Journal and Transition,* August 2012
9. Mahmood Mamdani, *Graduate Education: Money Alone Will Not Solve the Problem,* August 2012
10. Mahmood Mamdani, *Reading Ibn Khaldun in Kampala,* August 2012
11. Suren Pillay, *Critique and the Decolonizing Nation,* January 2013
12. Giuliano Martiniello, *Accumulation by Dispossession: Agrarian Change and Resistance in Uganda and Mali,* January 2013
13. Mahmood Mamdani, *The Contemporary Ugandan Discourse on Customary Tenure: Some Theoretical Considerations,* January 2013
14. Stella Nyanzi, *Alienating Citizens: Exploring the Poetics and Polemics of Foreign Influence over Homosexualities in Uganda,* March 2013
15. A Panel Discussion, *Kenya Elections*, March 2013

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