The African University

Mahmood Mamdani

It is striking, in the postcolonial era, how little the modern African university has to do with African institutions. It draws its inspiration from the colonial period and takes as its model the discipline-based, gated community that maintained a distinction between clearly defined groups: administrators, academics and fee-paying students. The origins of this arrangement lay in 19th-century Berlin, and Humboldt University, founded in 1810 in the aftermath of Napoleon's conquest of Prussia. The African university makes its appearance later in the 19th century. At the southern end of the continent, colleges were started from scratch – Stellenbosch, Cape Town, Witwatersrand. In the north, existing institutions such as al-Azhar in Cairo, a centre of Islamic scholarship, were 'modernised' and new disciplines introduced. The Humboldt model aimed to produce universal scholars, men and women who stood for excellence, regardless of context, and – in the colonies – could serve as a native vanguard of 'civilisation' without reservation or remorse. The African university, in other words, began as part of the European colonial mission, a precursor of the one-size-fits-all initiatives that we associate with the World Bank and the IMF. And so it continued, until decolonisation.

The first critical challenge came from the ranks of nationalist movements, where a different kind of product – the committed intellectual rather than the universal scholar – had begun to emerge following the Second World War. The new intellectuals were concerned with 'relevance' rather than excellence; their preoccupations were grounded in the politics and societies around them and in that sense no longer strictly 'universal'. During the 1960s, a reform movement gathered pace on two very different campuses: Makerere in Kampala, which was founded in 1922, forty years before Uganda's independence, and Dar-es-Salaam, founded in 1961, the year of Tanganyika's. Makerere was the paradigm of the European colonial university, with a conservative, universalist tradition. Dar-es-Salaam, which began life as an affiliate of the University of London, had an ambitious, nationalist sense of purpose. In 1963 a new arrangement affiliated three campuses, in Nairobi, Kampala and Dar, as the University of East Africa. With Portuguese and British settler colonies on Tanganyika's borders, Dar rapidly became the flag-bearer of anti-colonial nationalism and the home of the new, African public intellectual. Makerere, in the capital of an independent state whose neighbours – Sudan, Tanganyika and, in name at least, Congo and Rwanda – had also gained independence saw no reason to revise its universalist tradition. In the 1960s and early 1970s there were lively exchanges at conferences in Dar and Makerere, but each was proud of its reputation and stuck to its guns.

Two scholars embodied the difference of approach: Ali Mazrui and Walter Rodney. Mazrui was a child of colonial Kenya who graduated from Manchester and went on to become a professor at Makerere. He was a prolific writer and a towering public intellectual, whose taste for fierce debate was accompanied by a strong belief in the classical model of the university, as the home of the scholar 'fascinated by ideas'. Rodney was born in Guyana, first a Dutch and, later, a British colony on the Caribbean coast of Latin America. He graduated in history from Queen's, Guyana, and went on to Soas. By 1966 he was teaching in Dar, and regarded the university as a space of activism, in which knowledge was constituted in the here and now. His best known book, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (1972), broke colonialism down to a raw exercise of power relations and envisaged Africa's renewal within a socialist framework of which Mazrui was extremely wary.

In the course of their various encounters, in print and at conferences, the rival camps lined up on familiar ground, one side mobilising in defence of academic freedom, the other calling for engagement with the social and political issues of the day. There were early, impressive victories for the broadly nationalist 'relevance' camp which challenged the autonomy of the university, and of its various faculties, which they associated with racial privilege. Without a strong role in higher education for Africa's newly independent states it would not be possible to undermine 'disciplinary nationalism' – i.e. the highly patrolled borders of each discipline – and the institutional autonomy that propped up the authority of the expatriate staff. They also argued that the university should be national not only in name – Uganda, Tanzania, Kenya – but in terms of the curriculum. The imperative of academic freedom was nothing more, to their minds, than a defence of the status quo: they called for social justice, and a strong state to enforce it.

It was in this context that *Transition* magazine came into its own. It had been founded in Kampala on the eve of independence by Rajat Neogy, a Ugandan of Bengali origin; by the mid-1960s it enjoyed immense prestige for its roster of literary figures and its willingness to court controversy. Neogy cast all his writers as public intellectuals, whether or not they inclined to the universalist view of scholarship and letters. Contributors included James Baldwin, Langston Hughes, Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka and Ngugi wa Thiong'o, as well as a cohort of South African writers who were wrestling with apartheid, among them Nadine Gordimer, Ezekiel Mphelele, Dennis Brutus and Lewis Nkosi.

From the start, *Transition* had commissioned work from political figures. In the second issue, in 1961, Julius Nyerere published a defence of the one-party system that would soon exasperate so many of the magazine's writers: the following year he became president of Tanganyika and went on to outlaw all but his own political party. Tom Mboya, the Kenyan trade unionist, published a piece on the press and governments in Africa shortly before Kenyatta appointed him minister of justice; another, on 'African socialism', appeared a few issues later. Kenneth Kaunda published on the future of democracy in Africa at roughly the moment he became the first president of Zambia. By the mid-1960s, *Transition* was the locus of an ever-widening regional conversation, from Achebe on 'English and the African Writer', through Terence Ranger on Roger Casement, to Paul Theroux on Tarzan, a send-up of expatriate attitudes and an early example of cultural studies in Africa.

Shortly after Kwame Nkrumah was deposed in Ghana in 1966, Mazrui published 'Nkrumah: The Leninist Czar', which he followed up with a piece entitled 'Tanzaphilia': a withering critique of the regional and international left's infatuation with one-party rule in Tanzania, as Tanganyika became in 1964. Both essays were incendiary, reinforcing *Transition*'s prestige as a magazine that set no store by orthodoxies. At the same time they sharpened the differences between Mazrui and the left at the university in Dar. If Mazrui was the most important liberal critic of Nyerere's socialist model of the new African nationalism in power, Issa Shivji was its most important critic from the left. Two of his books, *The Silent Class Struggle* (1970) and *Class Struggles in Tanzania* (1976), proposed that Tanzania's socialism and the big public ownership programmes that went with it should be understood as a disguised form of accumulation by a new state-based class.

Despite this intellectual *brassage*, the two institutions – Makerere and Dar – continued along their distinctive paths. The main issue for reformers at Makerere was the deracialisation of the teaching body, whose leading lights were predominantly white. Newly qualified young academics were promoted under pressure from government-appointed senior administrators. Among them was the young Mazrui: fresh with a doctorate from Oxford, he rose like a helicopter from lecturer to professor in the space of a few years. At Dar, by contrast, the relevance of the curriculum itself was being called into question; there was also a growing demand for interdisciplinary scholarship, especially from faculty who thought 'disciplinary nationalism' was to blame for the growing irrelevance of higher education to the wider discussion of the country's social and political ills.

The discussion unfolded in the context of rapid political change, triggered by a student demonstration in October 1966, in protest against a decision to introduce compulsory national service for secondary school graduates. Nyerere's response was drastic: his government accused students of betraying the nation, withdrew fellowships from 334 of them and sent them home. The following year he issued the Arusha Declaration, a clarion call for socialism that nationalised key sectors of the economy. The university responded with a conference in March 1967 about the role it ought to play in 'a socialist Tanzania', which ended with an appeal for 'relevance' and recommended 'continuous curriculum review': isolated disciplines, it was said, were failing to engage with 'East Africa and particularly Tanzania's socio-economic

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development aspirations, concerns and problems'.

Three distinct positions emerged at Dar. A radical camp, mostly non-Tanzanian, wanted a complete transformation of the curriculum and the university's administrative structure; above all, they wanted to abolish discipline-based departments. A moderate majority, including most Tanzanian members of staff, agreed that there should be a radical review of the curriculum but no abolition of departments. A conservative minority resisted any change in the curriculum and argued for the separation of disciplines. The demand for an interdisciplinary approach, like the appeal to relevance, seemed to compromise the principles of scholarship. An astute review of the programme by a sub-committee of the university council, appointed at the end of 1970, suggested that interdisciplinarity was likely to focus on solving problems rather than understanding method, and went on to ask whether this wouldn't produce 'technocrats' rather than 'reasoning graduates'. Anyone who still thinks of interdisciplinarity as the key to a new world should consider that it has been a working principle for World Bank teams on the ground in Africa since the Bank's inception. The same goes for the concept of area studies – interdisciplinary scholarship focused on different regions of the world – which emerged in the US after 1945, with support from the Ford Foundation, and eventually spread across the Atlantic.

At Dar, the reform process was not confined to university structures. Students launched a radical socialist magazine, *Cheche*, and when it was banned, promptly relaunched it as *MajiMaji*. Activist students and academic staff came together in regular discussion groups. A group with an official imprimatur, known as the 'ideological class', met at 10 a.m. every Sunday, with the aim of offering participants an alternative to church. An informal but well organised range of after-class study groups also proliferated over the years. In 1975, I belonged to five university-based study groups, each with between two and eight members. Meeting once a week, each required background reading of around a hundred pages per session and dealt with a specific theme: *Das Kapital*; the three Internationals; the Russian and Chinese Revolutions; the 'agrarian question'.

We hoped to glimpse the outlines of a world beyond our own reality. It was a period of tremendous intellectual ferment, but still framed in terms of two opposing positions, epitomised by Mazrui and Rodney. *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* was a grand excursion in dependency theory,

At the Guggenheim Bilbao

Moishe Shagal, later known as Marc Chagall, was raised in the last years of the 19th century in Vitebsk, one of the shtetls in the Pale of Settlement, the part of the Russian Empire to which the Jewish population had been confined since the days of Catherine the Great. He is known as a storyteller in painting and a colourist, but in the early years of his career he was above all a Jewish artist, which means that his greatest achievement, coming from a background in which there was hardly any tradition of the visual arts, was becoming a painter at all.

Chagall was lucky: Vitebsk was home to the only art school in the Pale, run by the traditionalist Yuri Pen. But it was while studying at the progressive Zvantseva School in St Petersburg, where Léon Bakst was the drawing master, that he entered the avant garde. It was the only art school in St Petersburg 'animated by a breath of Europe', Chagall later wrote, thanks to Bakst and his knowledge of Post-Impressionist painting, and his work as a designer for Diaghilev. Bakst was Chagall's route to modern painting, to the work of Cézanne, Van Gogh and Gauguin with its new knowledge of unnatural colour and form. Small paintings made after he returned to Vitebsk hang at the outset of *Chagall: The Breakthrough Years* 1911-19 at the Guggenheim Bilbao (until 2 September). Balancing avant-garde discoveries with a sense of home, they capture the mystery of shtetl life. His colours are artificial but never arbitrary; they are always part of the fabric and meaning of the image, soaked in, as it were. In *The Yellow Room*, a woman, her head inverted, sits by a table on which stand a samovar and three teacups, while a faceless man makes for the door, which leads to a burning red moonlit scene; the room is otherwise occupied by a docile cow. It is a student painting, but a very good one; the dirty yellows and artificial green glow adhere to the scene, seeming to make sense of the dancing table and the upside-down head, a motif that became Chagall's signature.

'When I arrived in Paris I was the colour of a potato,' Chagall told an interviewer in 1967, meaning that he was still largely shaped by the murkiness of Russia and Central Europe. Nothing symbolised liberation more than the 'free' bright colour of Parisian painting. Chagall travelled to Paris in May 1911 and ended up living in a studio at La Ruche ('the beehive'), a dilapidated, circular establishment divided into wedge-shaped studios for artists and writers, wives and lovers, memorably described by the sculptor Ossip Zadkine as a 'sinister wheel of brie'. Chagall captures its bohemian atmosphere in his memoir:

> While an offended model sobbed in the Russian ateliers, the Italian studios ran with songs and the sound of guitars, the Jewish ones with discussions, I was alone in my studio in front of my oil lamp. A studio crammed with pictures, with canvases that were not really canvases, but my tablecloths, sheets and nightshirts torn into pieces.

He paints in the nude, and cuts a herring in two, reserving the upper part for the next day. Perhaps it reminded him of his father, a herring merchant; in any case he was still, in his mind, half in Russia. *Couple with a Goat*, a raucous fairy tale scene showing a woman diving across a table to insert her finger into her bearded husband's mouth, urged on for some reason by a pink-headed goat, is painted with red and black outlines, and looks more like Larionov than Picasso or the Cubist hangers-on who were exhibiting at the Salon.

It was at La Ruche that Chagall painted one of his first great works, *Half-Past Three (The Poet)*, a large canvas (the studios at La Ruche were double-height) showing the Russian poet Mazin sitting writing at a table, his green head on upside down. The picture is built from dynamic lines around which colours gather in a sort of explosion, ignored by the pink-bellied cat pawing the poet from the left, and shows Chagall balancing the fantastical and folkloric elements of Russian art with the breezy, weightless palette of Robert Delaunay, a key friend and supporter in his years at La Ruche. Yet the closer Chagall comes to a Parisian style, the more his colour seems detached, arbitrary, edging towards decoration. He paints with rich unmixed pigments, thinned to translucency, their combinations often garish. A pure dark blue – perhaps ultramarine – is particularly unpleasant, and particularly frequent on Chagall's palette. You long for him to mix in a smudge of white, knock the colour down, blend it in a little, make it less brash.

Even in these early years Chagall was drawn more to writers than painters (Robert Delaunay was his only real painter friend). His allegiance is recorded in the other great work from this time, the hommage to Apollinaire – that 'gentle Zeus' – painted in 1913. Against a Delaunay-ish coloured disc stands a geometrically defined figure, split into two upper bodies, one female and one male, enacting the biblical expulsion from paradise with a firm nod toward Masaccio's wall painting in the Brancacci Chapel. Numbers on one side of the disc reveal that it is in fact a large clock, the sort that might be found in a railway station, animated by Futurist swooshes and swirls of colour. The clock was ticking for Chagall – his fiancée, Bella Rosenfeld, wrote increasingly anguished letters from Vitebsk asking for news, wondering if he would ever come back. 'Another year, and everything might have been over between us,' Chagall later wrote. World events were rumbling. He left Paris early in 1914, stopping in Berlin in May for the first exhibition of his work, mounted by Herwarth Walden in his gallery *Der Sturm*, before returning to Russia. It was the last time he saw Apollinaire, who died four years later of the Spanish flu. It was also the last time he saw Paris in the glory days of La Ruche. War and revolution turned a three-month trip into eight years away.

Returning to small-town Vitebsk must have felt like a huge backwards step after working in a studio at the heart of the avant garde. Yet returning to the Pale was also a return to the subject that truly animated him – Jewish life – and somehow the imagined colours and the substance of the paintings reconnect. The colour begins

very much in line with the premises of the Arusha Declaration, while Mazrui's discourse emphasised the growing contradiction between the promise of Arusha and the reality of social and political developments in Tanzania. Rodney called on intellectuals to join the struggle for national independence: colonial rule might have ended, but imperialism had not. Mazrui reiterated his worries about the temptation of authoritarianism in newly independent states. He was by now the most important liberal critic of nationalism in power and his reservations soon extended to all left-wing intellectuals seduced by radical state nationalism. In his piece in *Transition* he had defined 'Tanzaphilia' as 'an opium of Afrophiles': Nyerere's Tanzania had cast a 'romantic spell' over the left; its effect was 'particularly marked among Western intellectuals', who were complicit in the drift to one-party rule. 'Many of the most prosaic Western pragmatists,' Mazrui wrote, 'have been known to acquire [a] dreamy look under the spell of Tanzania.' Mazrui had a worried eye on the radicals at Dar, but he singled out Colin Leys, then the principal of Kivukoni College, the ruling party's ideological school (also in Dar). Leys had lamented that besides the three obvious social ills – 'poverty, ignorance and disease' – Tanzania was also suffering from a fourth: empiricism. Mazrui was alarmed by the possibility that Dar, too, would become 'an ideological college' as a result of pressure from a 'superleft'.

Responding to figures like Leys – and presumably Rodney – for whom ideological orientation was everything, Mazrui invoked a deeper epistemological reality which he called the 'mode of reasoning'. Ideological orientations, he argued, are both superficial and malleable: 'Under a strong impulse one can change one's creed. But it is much more difficult to change the process of reasoning which one acquires from one's total educational background.' He gave the following example:

> French Marxists are still French in their intellectual style. Ideologically, they may have a lot in common with communist Chinese or communist North Koreans. But in style of reasoning and in the idiom of his thought, a French Marxist has more in common with a French liberal than with fellow communists in China and Korea. And that is why a French intellectual who is a Marxist can more easily cease to be a Marxist than he can cease to be a French intellectual.

Both formulations, 'ideological orientation' and 'mode of reasoning', appear in his essay in *Transition*, which came out in 1967, and if they evoke the work of Foucault it is surely because the two were thinking along similar lines about 'discursive formations':

to mean something again. In *The Newspaper Vendor* (1914) a newspaper seller, plying his wares against an acid orange sky, becomes an emblem of provincial gloom and poverty, the darkened greenish spires of the synagogue giving the impression of a forlorn town on the edge of a chemical works. The news is surely bad.

In the early years of the war the news certainly was bad for Jews living in the western part of the Pale, who were subject to mass expulsions. Chagall saw his post-1914 paintings of Vitebsk as documents of a world that was disappearing. He captured the 'very last days [of] small-town, pre-revolutionary Jewish-Russian existence', as Jackie Wullschlager puts it in her indispensable biography of Chagall.* Four large portraits of destitute old Jews dressed as rabbis are among his best paintings from the period (they have been brought together for the first time in Bilbao). The dark green face and yellow beard of *Jew in Green* is far from Parisian frivolity, but Chagall still uses to great effect the new vocabulary of painting, a flattened collage-like technique incorporating text, in this case Hebrew lettering. In *Over Vitebsk*, a figure with sack and stick drifts above the snowy town: the Wandering Jew of Chagall's dream world.

Chagall often painted his family, but most of all Bella, whom he married in the summer of 1915. He paints and draws her with the energy and curiosity of love rediscovered: standing by a large window, playing a violin, being kissed, posing for a portrait. They fly through the air over Vitebsk, he levitates and twists to kiss her on his birthday, or, in *Promenade* from 1917-18, holds her hand to stop her drifting off into the clouds. These are among Chagall's best known paintings, but not really his most successful. Parisian gaiety returns, and with it an overburdened palette and weak, overwrought compositions. In *Promenade*, Chagall depicts himself grinning self-consciously and made-up. He was by most accounts very vain; who else would make a painting such as *The Poet Reclining* (at Tate Modern, though not in Bilbao) on their honeymoon – an admiring self-portrait with no Bella in sight? He had a good-looking, if girlish face, Bella later wrote with twisting candour, 'but it was like bitter chocolate, and, like his own paintings, slightly repellent'.

*J. Hoberman wrote about *Chagall: Love and Exile* in the *LRB* of 9 April 2009.

Chagall was an unlikely revolutionary but he was caught up all the same by the events in the autumn of 1917. In September 1918 Anatoly Lunacharsky, the Soviet Commissar for Culture, appointed Chagall Commissar of the Arts in Vitebsk. All he knew of Marx, he later wrote, was that he was a Jew and had a long white beard. Chagall established an art school to which he recruited anybody and everybody who might be able to wield a brush. For the celebration of the first anniversary of the Revolution, he and his students decorated the town with Chagallian images – upside-down cows, flying peasants – in a large public display of his work that rightly confused hardline officials. But it required more than topsy-turvydom to create the image of revolution. When the far cooler, politically more austere and probably very irritating Malevich showed up at Chagall's school (he was brought by train from Moscow by El Lissitsky, already on the teaching staff), the students soon switched their allegiance. Left out in the cold, Chagall was obliged to leave.

He returned to Europe in 1922, first to Berlin, then to Paris, where he re-established himself. The postwar years were marred by bitterness; all the profits made from Herwarth Walden's exhibition were swallowed up by hyperinflation, and Walden refused to reveal where the paintings had gone, leaving Chagall unsure if they still survived. He made copies of earlier paintings, such as the wonderful *One Says: The Rabbi*, a painting of a seated rabbi taking a pinch of snuff. The second version, painted more than ten years later, reproduces the original closely – he was clearly working from a photograph – but loses much of the gravity and humour of the original. (The two are shown together in Bilbao.) It was a sign of the lesser work that was to come. The view that from the mid-1920s Chagall's work becomes awkward, illustrative, sentimental and garish can be quibbled with, but never entirely dismissed.

The elegant hang in Bilbao by the curator Lucia Aguirre, and the keen selection of works by Josef Helfenstein, who originated the exhibition in Basel, makes the strongest case possible for Chagall's greatness during these early years. But the *Breakthrough Years* of the title raises the obvious question – breakthrough to what? The answer is unquestionably the large paintings Chagall made in Moscow for the State Jewish Chamber Theatre, often described as his best work. He was first commissioned in late 1920 to design the

From left to right, 'Half-Past Three (The Poet)'; portrait of Chagall by Yehuda Pen (c.1910); detail from 'Introduction to the Jewish Theatre'.

set and costumes for three short plays by Sholem Aleichem, staged in a cramped auditorium in a Moscow mansion requisitioned by the Bolsheviks. Chagall decided to decorate the entire room, and produced, in a remarkably short period, eight large paintings on the walls and ceiling, dominated by the large frieze-like *Introduction to the Jewish Theatre* (all now in the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow, except the ceiling painting, which didn't survive). They were a culmination of the Jewish themes and weightless figures of the previous decade, but also, in their blanched palette, an acceptance that the Supremacists were at least in part right about colour: it was not just a decorative, but also a moral element of painting, and required control and restraint to be effective. On the wall opposite the stage hung one of the most intriguing images: a painting that is hardly commented on for being so unlike Chagall's other work. *Love on the Stage* seems at first sight entirely abstract, a large, squarish field of dynamic force lines and tonal gradations more like something Malevich might have painted. But then the faint flickering outline of a couple dancing a pas de deux emerges, watched by two small figures sitting around an oil lamp in the orchestra pit below. For once Chagall goes beyond his origins into a new mysterious world of painting, a poetry of form, rather than mere subject. But then he retreated.

John-Paul Stonard

L'archéologie du savoir was published two years later.

The spread of higher education in Africa is a post-independence phenomenon. Only in South Africa, Egypt and the Maghreb can the number of universities founded in the colonial period be counted on more than two hands. There was only one university in Nigeria with 1000 students at the end of the colonial period: by 1990, it boasted 31 universities with 141,000 students. East Africa had a single institution of higher learning, Makerere, during the colonial period. Today, it has more than thirty. Having a national university was considered as much a hallmark of independence as having a flag, an anthem, a central bank and a currency. The fortunes of the African university dipped at the end of the 1970s with the fiscal crisis that bedevilled African states and the intervention of the Bretton Woods institutions that bailed out countries in return for subjecting their public budgets to a strict disciplinary regime. In the era of structural adjustment, Makerere became another kind of model university.

By the late 1980s, the IMF had taken charge of the Ugandan treasury, and the World Bank was running Makerere's planning. The Bank proposed a threefold reform premised on the assumption that higher education is a private good. First, it argued, given that the benefit from higher education accrues to the individual, that individual should pay fees. Today, nearly 90 per cent of students at Makerere are fee-paying. Second, the university should be run by autonomous disciplinary departments and not by a centralised administration. This was achieved by means of a simple formula, requiring that 80 per cent of student fees go to his or her disciplinary department or faculty. The Bank had managed, very effectively, to starve the central administration of funds. Third, the curriculum should be revised to make it market-friendly and more professional: the geography department began to offer a BA in tourism, and the Institute of Linguistics a BA in secretarial studies.

Over the next decade the Makerere model was exported to other universities in the region and throughout the continent. This largely accounts for the fact that fees were rising around the same time as 'independence' – transition to majority rule – was coming into effect in South Africa. And it was no surprise that an expanded entry of black students into 'white' universities was followed by an expanded exit of more and more of the same students: either they were unable to keep up payments or they found it hard to get to grips with the disciplines in which they were enrolled. As these students looked for ways to explain their predicament, the only answers they could find seemed to lie in rising fees and a curriculum that bore little relationship to their life experiences, or family and community histories.

Is there an intellectual mode of reasoning we can describe as African, in the way Mazrui spoke of a 'French' or a 'Western' mode of reasoning? Not an ancestral or genetic mode, obviously, but one which weaves together a set of discourses communicated in a common language that presupposes – or suggests – an intellectual community with a long historical formation. Language is our first obstacle here. Most of those of us who have come out of colonialism speak more than one. The languages of colonialism are inevitably languages of science, scholarship and global affairs. Then there are the languages of colonised peoples – languages whose growth was truncated by colonialism. Our home languages remain folkloric, shut out of the world of science and learning, high culture, law and government. There are exceptions. In East Africa, Kiswahili is the language of popular interaction, culture, and official discourse, also the medium of primary and secondary schooling, but not of university education. At East African universities, it has the status of a foreign language, with departments of Kiswahili studies. It is not the bearer of a scientific or a universal philological tradition.

The fate of Afrikaans has been different, evolving from its lowly status as 'kitchen Dutch' to become the medium of a vigorous intellectual tradition in less than half a century: a change that would have been inconceivable without a vast institutional network – schools and universities, newspapers, magazines and publishing houses – funded by public money. This vast affirmative action programme, begun in 1948 and driven by apartheid, lifted Afrikaans from the 'kitchen' to the lecture theatre, the science journal, the law courts and the national media at remarkable speed. And it did so not by seeking to displace English, since the major English-language universities like Witts and Cape Town continued in their old way, but by creating major Afrikaans-language universities like Stellenbosch and Pretoria, in a project that called for inclusion rather than displacement. Afrikaans was the most successful decolonising linguistic initiative – in this case, against the British – in sub-Saharan Africa. Yet the new government of South Africa saw no reason to emulate it, perhaps because the weight of colonial linguistics bears down on Africa as a continent with 'too many' languages for its own good: anywhere between 700 – the tally reached by Malcolm Hailey in 1938 – and 2000 nowadays, depending on what we take to be a language or a dialect. The African university today is still very much what it was from the start: a colonial project with a monolingual medium of instruction, framed in terms of a European 'universalism' from which a large majority of the colonised were excluded.

What would it mean to decolonise a university in Africa? The East African experience suggests that one answer would be the opposite of what is happening in American and British universities: reducing the cost of a university education, by state grants and subsidies, to make it more inclusive. In the first place, therefore, fees would have to fall. I was at the University of Cape Town from 1996 to 1999; in the years that followed – the heyday of South Africa's independence – fees began rising. In the second place, there would have to be multilingual projects designed to provide Westernised education in several languages and to nurture non-Western intellectual traditions as living vehicles of public and scholarly discourse in those languages. This is not a demand for a revivalist project, but a call to include the languages of popular discourse, which in South Africa would mean centres for the study of the Nguni and Sotho languages and traditions (the opposite of area studies), and translation units, carrying the best academic literature – global, regional and South African – back and forth between the new linguistic centres and the older faculties. Broadening the referential world of African universities means competence in the languages which embody non-Western traditions.

In exporting theory from the Western academy, colonialism brought with it the assumption that theory is the product of Western tradition and that the aim of academies outside the West is to apply it. If the elaboration of theory was a creative act in the West, its application in the colonies became the reverse: a readymade, turnkey project that simply put itself at the disposal of academics and students. This was true on the left as well as on the right; whether Marx and Foucault were the object of study, or Weber and Huntington, students tended to learn theory as if learning a new language: some remarkably well, others less so. The latter give us an insight into what is wrong with the notion of the student as technician, whose learning begins and ends with the application of a theory produced elsewhere: too often it has produced caricatures, another group of mimic men and women for a new era. The alternative is to theorise our own reality, and to strike the right balance between the local and the global as we do so. The local production of knowledge unfolds in relation to a complex of social forces, and takes account of a society's needs and demands, its capacities and aspirations. The global conversation is an evolving debate between scholars, within and across disciplines, in which the play of geopolitical forces has less and less relevance. The local conversation gives rise to the committed intellectual, embroiled in public discourse, often highly sensitive to political boundaries in the society at large; the global conversation calls for a scholar who takes no account of boundaries. □

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