Reflections on the University in Africa: the Role of the Past in Education

Alinah K. Segobye

The colonial and postcolonial experiences of Africans reflect the myriad changes which African societies have undergone over the last few centuries. These include cultural, political, and economic transformations mainly carried through formal education and the entrenching of western knowledge and technologies. The material and ideological changes were facilitated by a number of factors which varied over time and place. Formal education via religious missions became one of the tools for accelerated cultural transformation. It instilled new values and cultural aspirations for Africans caught in the complexities of colonial life. Education became the main vehicle for many forms of liberation from poverty, oppression, and the inequities of life. It offered an escape from what was perceived as the inadequacies of African knowledge systems creating new classes and voices within African societies. University education, as and when it became accessible to Africans, was invariably laden with multiple expectations for those who gained entry from their families and the wider communities within which they lived. The university thus became a complex landscape steeped in often contradictory aspirations including the transformation of individual and collective ideas. For some, it marked the attainment of a position of superiority, elite status, and often new forms of power, whilst for others it was a place of learning and enlightenment, associated with the creation of new liberties, and tools for realising broader freedoms. The idea of transformation in the university in Africa can thus be situated in the contradictions and opportunities that university education in Africa has come to represent.

The 20th century and Africa's struggles for liberation focused on the university as a site for intellectual growth and as a core institution in the post-independence projects aimed at building new nations and realising development. These projects involved the wresting of power from different claimants and transfer of wealth and knowledge to new recipients. They

also marked the redefinition of citizenship and identity beyond the narrow scopes of familiar geographies. As new movements emerged, including Pan-African movements, the transformation process became more intimately linked with the need to generate and regenerate ideas through intellectual discourse. Therefore, the last 50 years of Africa's roads to independence and expansion of university education, including the creation of new classes of leaders on the continent, have also been marked by the turbulent economic and political changes which affected the lives of ordinary African citizenry (Mkandawire, 2005: 1-5). This notwithstanding, there is continuing optimism about the potential for Africa's re-awakening and reaffirmation premised on the wealth of its cultural heritage through its universities and new curricula based on African heritage education (Segobye, 2005a).

Today, with the crisis of the nation state and shattered dreams of economic growth, young Africans face many barriers in accessing university education in the forms and quality enjoyed by the first generation of post-liberation Africans. The failure to deliver the dreams of an improved quality of life, intellectual liberties, and jobs that many university entrants and their families and communities had reflects the current challenges faced by the African university in contemporary society. The challenges of Structural Adjustment Programmes and other programmes which negatively impacted on institutional ability to deliver free or state subsidised education are examples in point. The African university can no longer afford to be perceived as a place of higher culture, elite learning, or as an ivory tower divorced from the needs of the African citizenry. The young African university entrant should receive an education that not only develops an intellectual but also prepares him or her for responsible citizenship with the capacity to apply knowledge within a broad range of development contexts including creating the platform for self-employment. This process involves the interrogation of what it means to be African in a globalising world and to stay focused on the needs of the local context despite the allure of Western forms of knowledge and technologies.

The African university in the 21st century needs to position itself as a hub for generating solutions to major development challenges facing the continent today. The pervasive and persistent problems of poverty and public health epidemics including TB, malaria, and HIV/AIDS challenge the African university to situate its research agendas in very specific areas

including research targeting the innovation of technologies for empowering communities. The African researcher who finds himself or herself operating in contexts of extreme poverty and/or insecurity as a result of conflict is challenged to be part of the solution-seeking process in addition to the task of stimulating intellectual growth. They cannot ignore their setting lest they are rendered irrelevant to the very process they strive to add value to (Leach, Scoones and Wynne, 2005; Olukoshi and Zeleza, 2004; Campbell, 2003).

Across the continent, research and researchers have begun to respond to the challenges faced by communities including the delivery of basic education through distance and open education means. The harnessing of new information communication technologies (ICT) to develop indigenous knowledge resources is one such area where a partnership between the African university and African societies is noted. Given the emphasis on knowledge production and ownership, it is critical that such partnerships accelerate the opportunities to learn for the vast number of people still burdened by lack of access to learning opportunities. The concept of life-long learning when interfaced with ICT could enhance literacy, particularly for learners unable to enjoy the route of formal education such as out-of-school youth, the elderly, and home-based care givers.

The diversity of African cultures and environments suggests that there is an immense wealth which can be tapped as part of the regeneration of African universities. The people and diverse environments of Africa are yet to be harnessed for revitalising global knowledge and science. The African university in the 21st century has the potential to generate a wealth of information and human capital but is faced with inadequate resources including misdirected policies and weak leadership. The challenge of lack of resources remains one of poor distribution and lack of strategic management of human resources and finance to optimise the benefits of investments in higher education. As a result, even where they exist, the good lessons of Africa's universities and innovations have not been sufficiently scaled up from local to global solutions. Instead what has happened is the creation of new diasporas of African intellectuals whose knowledge is better valued and rewarded in the Western world (Zeleza, 2005). This situation has led to some calling for more urgent focus on the question of integration of Africa and the diaspora to facilitate the harnessing of this 'lost' wealth or brain drain (Hall, this volume).

A closer look at the African universities' programmes in heritage and cultural studies indicates that there are still challenges in the way the construction and dissemination of knowledge about the African past has been carried out. Africa is unique in that it is a continent with some of the oldest innovations in human culture and development including science and technology. The Egyptian and Nubian civilisations have left legacies of architecture still enjoyed as world heritage today. The evidence of human origins in East and Southern Africa continues to inspire students of early human development. However, Africa's illiterate millions are often unaware of the richness of the continent's heritage and lack opportunities to use this knowledge in affirming their Africanity (Segobye, 2005b). This would seem to have been one of the obvious niches for African universities to develop heritage education and histories which boost the knowledge resources of people, inspiring, along the way, new innovations and transforming their livelihoods. It is interesting that African cultures continue to be popularised in the West through the arts and culture in ways which are often absent or excluded locally. As countries attempt to diversify their economies to new areas such as heritage tourism, this failure to ground African education on robust historical research into the African past raises concern about the long-term sustainability of these ventures of heritage development.

Further to the above point, an example can be drawn from the ongoing debates on the role of archaeology in the development of decolonising methodologies in the study of culture and society. The debate over indigeneity in Africa has overshadowed other issues which need to be interrogated, like the attrition of the cultural heritage of African societies such as the San. Their rich knowledge systems fail to inform Africa's contemporary development in meaningful ways as leaders struggle over whether they are indigenous or not (Ouzman, 2005). Small projects often led by non-government organisations such as the Kuru Family of NGOs in Botswana have taken the lead in demonstrating how commitment to partnerships with San communities can benefit communities, including the unlocking of communities' capacities to innovate in arts education, biotechnology, and heritage conservation.

Equally, the delivery of HIV/AIDS education and treatment has been enriched by tapping into local knowledge resources and use of non-conventional means of education in rural settings. Arguably, heritage education in Africa has the potential to unleash a wealth of knowledge

hitherto suppressed and excluded by colonial experiences. Postcolonial Africa needs to reclaim the past and reaffirm Africa's position as the continent of creative knowledge and experience for the 21st century. The African university should be poised to play an expanding role in world heritage and development studies. The opportunity to demonstrate how world heritage can be developed in a sustainable way is one of the key observations of the World Summit on Sustainable Development. From the viewpoint of heritage management, UNESCO, through its Conventions on the protection and valorisation of world heritage, recognises the wealth of Africa in terms of heritage resources diversity and has in recent years expanded efforts to empower African states and their citizenry to enhance heritage management in the context of sustainable development.

If indeed a case can be made for opportunities for new and transformed roles for the African university, what then are the barriers? The answer to this question lies in part in interrogating the crisis of identity in Africa today. Commenting on the rise of xenophobia in Southern Africa in recent decades, Nyamnjoh (2006) notes that the paradoxes of globalisation have been in part manifested in the growth of anxieties against African others in the modernising states of Southern Africa, including Botswana. These anxieties are not only played out in the public lives of the uneducated masses but also in the public and private lives of Africa's elites, particularly in intellectual discourses. This phenomenon is also evident in the South African experience in higher education as the country attracts African intellectuals to its previously white-dominated campuses. The contestations for identity and belonging result in the stifling of academic freedoms, particularly as African intellectuals find themselves pitted against each other in faction-riddled political environments. Therefore, a necessary prelude to realising positive transformation in African universities lies in part in honest interrogation of the question of identity within the continent.

In addressing the question of whether the African university has the capacity to transform itself one can hazard an answer in the affirmative. Even though many African universities function in conditions of adversity with limitations in human and other resources as mentioned above, there is still great respect for university education in Africa. The problems of constraints on academic freedom, bad governance, and lack of leadership and political will to drive intellectual development in the universities are

not insurmountable. African intellectuals have not exhausted the limits of an enabling environment in their universities. The academy through time and space has witnessed greater horrors against intellectual thought and these are lessons from which we can learn as African intellectuals. African universities are still some of the few which provide free or subsidised tertiary education including job security and social privileges for academic scholars and their products.

The African intellectual is still viewed as a pillar of society with immense esteem and community affirmation. As part of academic service at the University of Botswana, for example, academics are expected to provide community service which includes sitting on the boards of major public and private institutions. This creates opportunities for new forms of partnerships such as public-private partnerships which can link the resource-constrained public universities with private and public sectors as joint ventures in academic development. The sharing of research and knowledge production can mitigate some of the existing suspicions between governments (public sectors) and academic institutions around the process of knowledge production and management. As academics, oftentimes we fail to communicate our research agendas to our support bases including governments, private sector stakeholders, and communities within which our institutions are located.

The transformation of university research and knowledge management departments should prioritise public-focused communication strategies to ensure that the public is meaningfully engaged in the development of tertiary education. The transformation of the African university is therefore a challenge not only to the academic and to management but to the citizenry and policy makers who are also critical stakeholders. With respect to global stakeholders, the dependence on funding resources from international agencies calls for the African university to forge partnerships with international funding partners. From donor and grant-making bodies to universities involved in staff and student exchanges, the African university has the responsibility to be a key conduit for information exchange on the African landscape to its global partners. This can only add value to partnerships and enhance governance. By looking internally and externally and reprioritising, the African university can revitalise itself, anchoring

its vision, mission, and values in the African community and producing intellectuals relevant to its contexts.

To conclude, it can be argued that the African university has the human capital to deliver on Africa being at the centre of innovative research and dynamic growth in intellectual resources. However, the current mismatch between resources distribution (financial, infrastructure, and human) needs to be revisited with a view to prioritising intellectual development in Africa. Recent global gatherings exploring the future of African intellectuals, such as the 1st and 2nd conferences of Intellectuals of Africa and the Diaspora (CIAD I & CIAD II) held in Dakar, Senegal, in 2004 and Salvador de Bahia in Brazil in 2006 respectively, recognised the need for African leadership to shift their paradigms to place the African intellectual at the centre of the development agenda with consummate resources, freedoms, and strategic engagement of Africans in the diaspora. It is indeed timely that such discussions should move from roundtable discussions to strategic action.

Alinah Segobye is Senior Lecturer in Archaeology at the University of Botswana.

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