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The Politics of Historical and Social Science Research in Africa

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This paper, on the institutional, ideological, and intellectual politics of producing historical and social science knowledge in Africa, was prepared as the keynote address for the Conference on ‘Historical and Social Science Research in Malawi: Problems and Prospects’ held in Zomba in June 2000 from which the papers in this special issue of the Journal of Southern African Studies are drawn. It is reproduced here in the format in which it was presented.

Introduction

Rarely do I go to a conference filled with such personal emotions, so conscious of my own intellectual history, reflective of my politics. But this is the first time I am attending an academic conference in my homeland, at my alma mater, 23 years after I left for graduate study and a life of academic nomadism in distant lands. My story is similar to that of many Malawian academics – some of whom are here – and other African intellectuals who find themselves roaming foreign countries. Many are forced by politics into the unsettled lives of voluntary or involuntary exile, although the factors that perpetuate and sustain their migrant condition might be different. Politics, indeed, affects all our lives, our social relations and practices, as citizens and academics, as creators and consumers of cultures and commodities, as the producers, practitioners, and prey of power, as objects and subjects of knowledge. Each social and spatial sphere, of course, has its own politics, its own production, practices, and performances of power, from the family to the firm, the school to the state, the local neighbourhood to the United Nations, always filtered and enacted through the contexts, complexities, and contradictions of class, gender, ethnicity, nationality, religion, and other markers. In this presentation, I would like to examine the institutional, ideological, and intellectual politics of producing historical and social science knowledge in Africa.

I will argue that, in most African countries, the development of the universities and research has been firmly tied to the vagaries of state politics and policies, the shifting missions and mandates of international donor agencies, and the unpredictable demands and dislocations of civil society. Equally critical are the internal challenges, the cultures of the universities themselves, their goals and governance, management of resources and infrastructures, their capacities to pursue intellectual excellence and equity, political autonomy and public accountability, local relevance and international recognition. Specifically, African social scientists have been caught in the bind of addressing African realities in borrowed languages and paradigms, conversing with each other through publications and media controlled by foreign academic communities, and producing prescriptive knowledge for what Thandika Mkandawire calls the unfinished historical and humanistic tasks of
African nationalism: decolonisation, development, democracy, nation-building and regional integration.

The presentation is divided into three parts. First, I look at the role played by external forces in the development of African universities and the execution of social science research – principally the state, foreign donors and civil society. Secondly, I will try to analyse the internal conditions within the universities themselves that promote and paralyse social science research. The third section focuses on the challenges of knowledge dissemination and building vibrant and cohesive African research communities whose relations with other communities in the rest of the world are less dependent and mutually productive. If the rumours are to be believed that we have entered a new age of globalisation and the knowledge economy, where protection of national boundaries and production of raw materials are no longer critical for the wealth or poverty of nations, then higher education has to be seen as ‘basic education’ in today’s world, in which research and development, including historical and social science research, are more critical than ever.

Let me hasten to add that, as a historian, I do not think globalisation started the other day with CNN or yesterday with the Internet. I believe that the world has been ‘globalising’ for a long time, that the intensity and extent of international interactions across continents, countries, communities and cultures have been growing for centuries, although they progressively accelerated in the twentieth century. Africa has been an integral part of these processes, central to the construction of the modern world, in all its ramifications – economic, political, cultural and discursive – over the last half millennium. This is not to argue that Africa’s engagements with, and contributions to, globalisation have necessarily been beneficial to its peoples. On the contrary, Africans have paid a high price over the last 500 years in the construction of a more integrated world through the European slave trade, colonialism, and structural adjustment. The challenge for Africa’s intellectuals, leaders and assorted friends is to map out modes of integration into the unfolding global system that will maximise, not further marginalise, the interests of the continent’s peoples and polities, economies and environments, societies and cultures.

**External Challenges**

The educational achievements of independent Africa are as impressive as the challenges are intimidating. More schools and universities were established in the first 25 years after colonialism than in a century of imperial rule. In 1960, the putative year of African independence, only 9 per cent of the African population was literate, rising to about 50 per cent three decades later. Taking the sub-Saharan region alone, excluding North Africa, gross enrolment ratios rose from 45 per cent in 1965 to 74 per cent in 1995 for primary schools and 5 per cent to 35 per cent for secondary schools.¹ The rapid expansion of education not only led to a massive improvement in the African human capital stock, it also laid the institutional basis for the social production of African intellectual capacities, communities and commitments. But the constraints, contradictions and confusions of African education remained daunting; indeed, they deepened as one country after another faced the recessions of development and democracy, conditions exacerbated by the imposition of draconian structural adjustment programmes, which threatened to decompose the social fruits of uhuru. Today, Africa remains the least educated continent in the world, able to provide higher education to only 3.5 per cent of the college-age population, as compared with 60 per cent in the industrialised countries.

As with other social phenomena, the educational enterprise in Africa is, therefore, a tale of triumphs, trials and tribulations, a stirring and searing story of perpetual struggle punctuated by sporadic successes and setbacks. From the 1980s, the setbacks outweighed the successes, as the struggles for the reproduction, regulation and relevance of university education faced unprecedented challenges that were, simultaneously, institutional and intellectual, political and pecuniary, moral and managerial. Three powerful external forces set the conditions and contexts for African universities as sites and systems of knowledge production. They are: the state, civil society, and international donor agencies. All three have exerted, in various measures, pecuniary and political pressures that affect the operations of universities, including research.

The most obvious is the role of the state. The vast majority of African universities are public institutions created, financed, and controlled by the state. It was not until after the Second World War that the beleaguered colonial powers belatedly set up a few universities as a means of producing skilled professionals to serve a maturing colonial capitalism and save it from the dangerous agitation of the nationalist masses. Small in size, dominated by expatriates, and created in the curricula image of Oxbridge or the Sorbonne, these universities were seen more as teaching than research institutions. By design and default they were regional universities. After independence there was an explosion in the number of universities, which were seen by the post-colonial state as essential for nation-building and development. Accordingly, the mission of the universities expanded. But the role of the state remained the same, one of control rather than supervision. In short, governments sought to manage universities:

in the same way they managed roads, the army, or customs... The tendency of politicians to intervene in higher education left many institutions hostage to factional policies, with decisions on student selection, faculty appointments and promotions, curriculum design, and similar matters made on political grounds rather than on merit.2

Relations between the state and academics were originally cooperative for the latter shared and shaped many of the goals and aspirations of nationalist ideology. The quest for ‘national unity’, which was seen as essential for nation-building, was in turn regarded as a prerequisite for development, whether through capitalist modernisation or socialist revolution. Thus, in the heady years immediately after independence academics were as intoxicated as the nationalist leaders were by the totalising dreams of nation-building and development, and contributed, deliberately or not, to the construction of an authoritarian ideological edifice that would later consume them.3 However, many of them also believed in the importance of basic research as a means of not only writing Africa into the empirical and theoretical corpus of their specific disciplines, but of promoting scientific and technological development. The relations turned sour as the challenges of nation-building and development proved intractable, as authoritarianism grew, and as African studies became more radicalised. To be sure, traffic between the classroom and the cabinet continued. Indeed, it could be argued that the rising tensions in university–state relations reflected the narcissism of minor difference; an intra-class struggle by the elite for the hearts and minds of African peoples.

However, there were also structural forces at work. The missions of the political class

2 Ibid., p. 63.
and the intelligentsia began to diverge as the technocratic agenda assigned to the universities to produce skilled professionals and workers for the indigenisation of the state bureaucracy and the ‘formal’ economy was increasingly achieved given the small size of most African countries and economies and as economic growth slowed down from the mid-1970s. The university lost its mission, at least in the eyes of those who pulled the purse strings. Reinforcing the divergence was the nationalisation of the university labour market in the 1970s, as the inter-terriorial universities – such as the University of East Africa, the University of Botswana, Lesotho, and Swaziland and the regional university systems in Francophone Africa – were dissolved into national universities, which enabled the state to tighten its hold over universities. Subsequent expansion and ‘Africanisation’ of staff and the curricula did not halt the slide towards the parochialisation and politicisation of African universities, nor was it translated into the development of an organic intelligentsia: that is, intellectuals who were seen as critical to the articulation of the state project. Then, in the 1980s, structural adjustment programmes were imposed with neo-classical zeal by the World Bank and IMF, which forced or enabled states to reduce their fiscal responsibilities to the universities. The combined effect was to undermine the autonomy of academics and the capacities of universities to support basic research.

Besides the fact that the state was suspicious and dismissive of academics, often seeing them as purveyors of ‘foreign ideology’, repressive politics left little room for the latter to occupy public space or to engage openly in critical discourse. Moreover, the tendency by some African rulers to see themselves as philosopher kings reduced intellectual work to sycophancy. They underestimated the intellectual and political complexity of the processes of building and developing the political kingdom. For its part, much African academic research appeared to the state functionaries as ‘irrelevant’ either because it was not ‘applied’ research or because African academics were adversarial, especially those who expected imminent revolution, or because they blindly followed western research themes that did not address local conditions. In addition, African governments relied on foreign expatriates for development models and research. The relatively easy access to foreign expertise, bankrolled by the international financial institutions and donor agencies, enabled Africa’s repressive governments to lower the short-term costs of intellectual repression, and led to the ironic situation whereby these governments could only access their own academics through donor-contracted reports. These trends worsened in the ‘lost decade’ of the 1980s. Tendentious studies were produced questioning the cost-effectiveness of universities, arguing that higher education offered lower private and social returns than primary education, so that public interest in higher education was substantially lower than in primary education. So powerful did this misguided gospel become that at least one country ‘seriously contemplated closing its only university as a matter of policy and many others maintained an ambivalent attitude towards the tertiary sector’. The rate-of-return studies were based on narrow and dubious calcula-

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4 Among the few exceptions, according to Mkandawire in ‘African Intellectuals’ were Algeria where intellectuals were organic to the FLN movement and government, and South Africa where Afrikaner intellectuals were close to the apartheid state.
tions as is now acknowledged even by the World Bank itself. They ‘treat educated people’, to quote a recent report co-sponsored by the Bank and UNESCO:

as valuable only through their higher earnings and greater tax revenues extracted by society. But educated people clearly have many other effects on society; educated people are well positioned to be economic and social entrepreneurs, having a far-reaching impact on the economic and social well-being of their communities. They are also vital to creating an environment in which economic development is possible. Good governance, strong institutions, and a developed infrastructure are all needed if business is to thrive – and none of these is possible without highly educated people. Finally, rate-of-return analysis entirely misses the impact of university-based research on the economy – a far-reaching social benefit that is at the heart of any argument for developing strong higher education systems.7

If this critique is any indication, it appears that the World Bank’s fidelity to educational voodoo-economics might be changing, although, as Ms Olsson of the Swedish International Development Agency has observed, ‘a lot of damage has already been done’.8

Clearly, foreign donors have had a profound impact on African universities and research. Their role increased rapidly from the 1980s as state support diminished, for there were no other major alternative sources of research funds, not from industry, or alumni, as is common in the United States; foreign industry conducted the bulk of its research back home, while the African bourgeoisie was too mired in ‘primitive accumulation’ and had yet to develop the habits of public institutional charity. In many countries the ‘Link’, as Hirji calls relations with foreign donors, became indispensable for research funding, conferences, the provision of equipment, books, and much-needed income.9 Their relative freedom from domestic political constraints also enabled them to fund research themes that no local authority would consider. Moreover, because of their high standing and influence they sometimes shielded their research grantees from harassment and persecution by the local authorities. In certain circumstances they were even able ‘to offer support, haven or flight to beleaguered scholars.’10

The volume and value of support from the major foundations for African universities and research has been quite considerable. For example, the Ford Foundation alone made 259 grants, totalling $52.7 million between 1990 and 1999 in fifteen African countries, to universities and NGOs.11 According to Teboho Moja, these grants supported a wide range of research activities, teaching and curriculum innovation, university administrative reform, staff development, and community development. Much of the research was in the social sciences and was policy-oriented. It was disseminated through conferences, workshops and publications. While lauding the Foundation for its activities, Moja argues that ‘support to research in Africa has been mainly for applied research that addressed issues of concern to society. Africa has not been a significant contributor or beneficiary of the knowledge revolution. Countries in Africa like other developing countries have fallen behind in their

11 This is small when compared with funds raised by the average US research university. Johns Hopkins University, for example, the top institution in federal research-and-development expenditures raised $724.5 million in fiscal 1997, Iowa State University, which raised $52.9 million, compared with the $52.7 spent by the Ford Foundation over 10 years, ranked 86th among US universities. See The Chronicle of Higher Education at <http://chronicle.com/weekly/almanac/1999/facts/13money.htm> accessed 4/2/00.
ability to create or access knowledge needed for modernizing economies’. Specifically, she noted that knowledge developed with Foundation support ‘is seldom distributed through the electronic media’, and that ‘there is also limited interaction amongst grant recipients working in the same area to exchange ideas and improve the quality of their work’.

This critical assessment is echoed by David Court who, until recently, was the Rockefeller Foundation Representative in Nairobi. The Rockefeller Foundation spent $33.1 million in funding African research during the same period, much of it in the biomedical and agricultural sciences. He candidly admits that the relationship between the donor and the recipient is inherently unequal. ‘One has resources, the other would like them. In order to gain access the applicant can hardly avoid adjusting the manner of his approach to accord with the known or perceived preferences of the donor in a process of self-restriction and hence reduction of freedom’. Needless to say, ‘changes in donor interests are bound to provoke a corresponding response by scholars leading them to take on topics which are of lower personal or institutional priority than those on the external agendas’.

Thus, the donors frequently set the research agenda, often based on the research priorities and paradigms in their home countries. Despite periodic shifts in topics and emphasis, research supported by external donors has tended towards applied social science at the expense of basic research. The work of many African social scientists has been reduced to consultancy and short-term contract work, which ‘usually appears in reports that do not become part of the public domain or open to wider intellectual discourse’. Undoubtedly this has contributed to, to quote Mkandawire, ‘the creation of fragmented and non-cumulative social science… the executive summaries and reports replace articles and books’. In the process, the continent’s ability to define itself and the quality of African scholarship may have suffered. Donors have succeeded in turning many of Africa’s brightest social scientists into what James Petras calls, with reference to Latin American intellectuals, institutional intellectual entrepreneurs, who ‘live in an externally dependent world, sheltered by payments in hard currency and income derived independently of local circumstances… [and] write for and work within the confines of other institutional intellectuals, their overseas patrons [and] their international conferences’.

African academics cannot, of course, be entirely blamed for moonlighting in the worlds of consultancies and the informal sector, faced as they are by low pay and recruitment and reward structures marred by corruption, patronage and politicisation. I remember vividly, when I taught in Kenya in the 1980s, the juggling I had to do to cling to a rapidly evaporating middle-class lifestyle. In addition to my formal job at Kenyatta University, I also taught courses at the Catholic University of Eastern Africa 30 miles away, and learned to hustle my talents to foundations on projects that meant little to me as a historian. Needless to say, my research suffered. In the six years I was there I witnessed the research and teaching environment deteriorate at the same time as the university system, both public and private, was undergoing unbridled, unplanned, and often chaotic expansion. Classrooms

13 Ibid., p. 29.
15 Ibid., p. 10.
16 Ibid.
became overcrowded, teaching loads expanded, research funds virtually dried up, and political intervention intensified as the Moi regime was faced with an increasingly restive civil society and political opposition.

Besides coercive state control and growing donor dependency, African academics have also had to contend with the sanctions and sanctimoniousness of civil society. Forgetting for one minute the arcane debates on what is meant by civil society, African academics clearly are linked to various social groups whose interests and prejudices they often articulate. As knowledge workers, they are both connected to and divorced from working people; connected through their socialisation and representation of the various groups they identify with, and divorced because of the social distance engendered by the nature of academic work and the cultural distance generated by the use of European languages, which they share with the political class, but which are not the languages of ordinary people’s day-to-day social communication. As Ali Mazrui has reminded us, the concept of an African Marxist, economist, physicist, or any other scientist who does not speak a European language, or an academic conference conducted primarily in an African language is, for the time being ‘sociologically impossible’.\(^9\) Thus, despite their linkages to the state through employment and civil society through socialisation, African academics find themselves being ‘organic’ to neither. Where they are organic to the state, as they were in Algeria, they bore the wrath of radical social movements opposed to the state. In the 1990s, hundreds of academics, writers, journalists and other intellectuals were murdered in Algeria.

The case of Algeria demonstrates the complex interpenetration of the repressive capacities and propensities of both the state and civil society. It also shows how reactionary forces unleashed by struggles for democracy can appropriate the political space opened up if the democratic movement has no social project fundamentally different from that of the discredited regime. Secular intellectuals, as bearers of a contrary cultural formation, as masters of competing social meanings, endangered the hegemonic ambitions of the Islamicists and became their prime targets. But even in situations where they are not specifically targeted, academics have often found that their research is not immune from the social pressures and prejudices of various constituencies of civil society. Cultural groups and norms impose constraints on ‘permissible’ fields of study and discourse. For example, overt and covert limitations are often placed on research and discussion of women’s and gender issues. Despite the explosion of research on women in the last three decades due to the political impetus of the global, and African, women’s movements and the emergence of the women-in-development and gender-and-development paradigms and projects, restrictions on women’s and gender research remain widespread because of the historical, cultural, social, and institutional marginalisation of women in many African societies and academies. The restrictions can take various forms, such as the belittling of women researchers and of gender research, sexual harassment, and the use of physical intimidation and violence.\(^{10}\)

**Internal Challenges**

The academics, however, have not always been innocent bystanders in this saga of escalating assaults by the state and civil society against academic autonomy and research productivity. Authoritarian tendencies and practices are also evident in the universities themselves. This was expressed forcefully by women and younger scholars at


\(^{10}\) A. M. Imam, A. Mama and F. Sow (eds), *Engendering African Social Sciences* (Dakar, CODESRIA, 1997).
CODESRIA’s conference on academic freedom in Kampala in 1990. The late Claude Ake has written that state authoritarianism in Africa should not be exaggerated, for the coercive capacities of the postcolonial state are weakened by the limited ideological hegemony enjoyed by the political class. Academics themselves shoulder some of the blame for the erosion of academic freedom. Besetted by opportunism, careerism, parochialism, factionalism, and ideological intolerance, academics have often weakened their collective defence against state assaults and, by defining academic freedom in narrow and elitist terms as a professional right unencumbered by social responsibility, they forfeit popular support. The road to academic freedom and change must begin with honest self-criticism among the intellectuals themselves. It needs to be followed, Joseph Ki-Zerbo has argued, by a renewed commitment to social responsibility through the creation of vibrant and integrated intellectual associations, groups and communities on national, regional and continental levels which, in turn, must actively participate in wider struggles for democracy, not in the magisterial role of a revolutionary vanguard, but in ‘the ministerial one of facilitating the free flow of ideas by stripping problems of their mystifying disguises and creating fresh, functional and coherent patterns of perception and conception’.

Thus, African universities have been weighed down by their own institutional constraints. Governance structures often mirror those of the state, partly because, in many cases, senior university administrators are state appointees, who in turn appoint unit heads down the administrative hierarchy. The decision-making process tends to be discretionary and authoritarian, which is manifested through recruitment, screening, promotions, allocations of work loads, provision of leave and sabbaticals, scaling of staff, gate-keeping, policing and closures of campuses, surveillance, sexual harassment, and the administration of welfare facilities. Research is often enmeshed in patron–client networks, and it is employed as a weapon for punishing radicals, rewarding sycophants, and settling scores. Faculty is also sometimes humiliated and harassed through the use of accounting procedures. In short, authoritarianism, corruption and discrimination on ideological, intellectual, national, ethnic, religious and gender bases are quite widespread in institutions dominated by the academics themselves. This breeds censorship and encourages the ‘brain drain’ of those, usually younger scholars, able to find greener pastures elsewhere, locally or abroad.

All these forces, coming on top of the anti-university rhetoric and policies of structural adjustment, proved disastrous for many of Africa’s already battered universities, which were told to adjust through cuts in programmes, hikes in student fees, and financial diversification. Diminishing financial resources, combined with mounting state tyranny, led to the deterioration of research, teaching and physical infrastructures, the demoralisation of faculty and students, and the social devaluation of the status of academics and the scholarly enterprise. Many library shelves became empty of current journals, books and monographs, and lagged awfully behind in the acquisition of modern information technologies, or were filled with discarded miscellanea of western libraries, out-of-date texts, and unwanted publishers’ remainders. When I visited Chancellor College in 1996 I was shocked to see that the bookstore had been closed and the building was being turned into offices. In the DRC we are told ‘students have no textbooks, and professors must dictate their notes or copy them onto a blackboard’.

\[\text{21 Claude Ake, ‘Academic Freedom and Material Base,’ in Diouf and Mamdani (eds), Academic Freedom.}\]
\[\text{22 Joseph Ki-Zerbo, ‘The Need for Creative Organizational Approaches,’ in Diouf and Mamdani (eds), Academic Freedom, pp. 33–34.}\]
\[\text{24 The Task Force on Higher Education and Society, Higher Education, p. 25.}\]
littered with broken or incompatible and outdated equipment dumped by sympathetic international donors and western universities. Some of the continent’s once great research universities have become cruel caricatures of their proud pasts. This is a monumental crime against Africa’s development and future.

Academics have responded in several ways to these challenges. There was the ‘brain drain’ and ‘brain haemorrhage’ as academics fled from the universities to other sectors at home or to universities abroad, or turned into consultancy hustlers and informal sector hawks. The establishment by prematurely retired or part-time university academics of an intellectually vibrant and autonomous academic NGO sector, composed of continental, sub-regional, and national research networks and organisations was one of the most exciting developments on the African intellectual scene in the 1980s and 1990s. In the social sciences, such organisations as the Dakar-based Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA), the Addis Ababa-based Organisation of Social Science Research in Eastern Africa (OSSREA), the Harare-based Southern African Political Economy Series (SAPES) Trust, and the Centre for Basic Research (CBR) in Uganda were founded or expanded. Some of the best work in the African social sciences was increasingly produced by academics connected to these research networks.

The natural sciences were even better organised and funded. In addition to the numerous African branches of international research centres, including many sponsored by UN agencies, there were the centres founded by African scientists. Among them the International Centre for Research in Agroforestry (ICRAF) founded in 1977, the world-famous International Institute of Insect Physiology and Ecology (ICIPE) founded in 1970 but incorporated as an intergovernmental organisation in 1986, and the African Academy of Sciences established in 1985, all founded in Nairobi, the last two by the renowned Kenyan scientist, Thomas Odhiambo, a former professor at the University of Nairobi. Most of these institutes and centres, unlike the universities, have state-of-the-art equipment and are on the cutting edge of research in their respective fields.

Thus, the independent research centres have become central players on the African research landscape and in the production, dissemination, and consumption of scholarly knowledge. They are products of both the successes and failures of African universities. Undoubtedly, they have provided crucial support for basic and applied research, much of it conducted by, or sub-contracted to – especially in the social sciences – university-based academics. They have also offered training and internships to graduate students, particularly in the natural sciences. But their facilities for research and training are too limited to provide a realistic alternative to the universities. Moreover, most of these centres are largely dependent on foreign funding agencies. Thus, while they have helped expand intellectual and ideological spaces, they have substituted dependency on the state for dependency on foreign donors, which imposes its own constraints.

The ‘brain drain’ from the universities was not confined to the independent research centres, or other occupations in the private and public sectors. It also extended to increased academic mobility across countries. There are few reliable studies on academic mobility and exchanges within Africa, but plenty of circumstantial evidence that they are relatively widespread. Some of the movements follow the old trails of colonial regional universities and communities.25 In North Africa, Egyptian universities became the centre of academic exchanges and migrations,26 while Nigeria was the pole in West Africa during the oil boom

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25 Smallwood and Maliyamkono, ‘Regional Cooperation and Mobility’, p. 332.
years, and post-apartheid South Africa has become the hub in southern Africa. Many of the academics who move to universities in other African countries tend to do so of their own accord, as labour migrants fleeing repression or deteriorating economic conditions, rather than as part of structured schemes of short-term or long-term faculty mobility and research linkages that imply reciprocity. Not surprisingly, they are often subject to the hostility that is accorded to immigrants or refugees. In short, Africa as a whole lacks the highly structured and effective academic exchange programmes that have been established in the European Union since the mid-1980s.

Europe has, of course, always been the chosen destination of many Africans seeking higher education since the colonial period. African skilled and intellectual migrations to Europe persist and seem to have increased, although few become university professors. Perhaps even larger are the migrations of African students and academics to the United States in recent decades. These migrations are part of a complex tapestry of international academic relations between Africa and the United States, which I have examined in greater detail elsewhere.

The majority of African academics have, of course, remained in their countries and tried to fight for better working and living conditions. In the 1980s and 1990s strikes and other protests by both students and staff increased. The state responded with both the sticks of repression and the carrots of reform or co-optation. Many governments tried to buy time by turning to international scabs – development experts provided by bilateral and multilateral aid donors. According to some estimates, at any given time there are as many as 100,000 foreign experts working in the sub-Saharan region alone. None of these measures was sufficient to stem the rising tide of opposition to authoritarian rule. In short, universities became hotbeds of the struggles for democracy, for the ‘second independence’, that began rocking one African country after another.

The 1990s was a period of bewildering extremes for Africa. It saw the rise of mass movements and mass revolts driven by democratic and developmentalist ideals, as well as mass murder and mass poverty perpetrated by despotic regimes and discredited global agencies. A decade of unparalleled political change and epic victories against oppression, it was also one marked by stubborn continuities and unprecedented violence and genocide. The pace of change was so rapid, the cast of players and stakeholders so numerous that it is difficult to tell a coherent story, certainly not a single or simple story beloved by those who see Africa as one, either because they have no time for understanding its astonishing diversities or they wish to impose an emancipatory Pan-African solidarity. These struggles and changes paralleled, in their quantitative scope and qualitative dimension, those that occurred in the 1950s and 1960s when most African countries gained their independence from colonial rule. Representing the pluralisation of associational life and the expansion of political space, the democratic wave represented the latest moment of accelerated change.

29 They include ERASMUS (European Community Action Schemes for the Mobility of University Students), a student and faculty exchange programme which involves 1500 institutions and over 100,000 students annually; COMETT (Community Program for Education and Training in the Technology Field), established to support university-industry cooperation in training for technology; LINGUA (European Cooperation Programmes for Language Teacher Training), which is designed to boost foreign languages in various educational sectors and in the workplace; and TEMPUS (Trans-European Mobility Scheme for University Studies) established in 1990 to promote cooperation in higher education with Central and Eastern Europe.  
30 For details on the debates and dynamics of African skilled and academic migrations to Europe and North America see P. T. Zeleza, ‘African Labor and Intellectual Migrations to the North’ (Ford Foundation paper).  
31 P. T. Zeleza, Manufacturing African Studies, Chapter 17.
in a long history of struggles for freedom; an exceptionally complex moment often driven by unpredictable events and new social movements and visions, anchored in the specific histories and conditions of each country, in which national, regional, and international forces converged unevenly and inconsistently, and economic and political crises reinforced each other, altering the terrain of state–civil society relationships, the structures of governance, and the claims of citizenship.

While numerous studies have been produced on aspects associated with this moment, its full historical weight has yet, in my view, to be fully grasped. This is partly because the drama is still unfolding, although journalists and social scientists who suffer from the short attention span of channel-surfing intellectualism and hop from one crisis and continent through CNN and from one fancy theory to another have already declared that it is over. Historians are more patient; they will pronounce their verdict several decades from now after probing the dusty archives and foggy oral memories of the various protagonists. Clearly, the struggles for democracy have yielded both successes and failures, compromises with the past and concessions to the future. Numerous dictatorships have fallen and elections have become as frequent as coups once were. However, several transitions have been aborted, some are still tenuous, and several intransigent regimes remain, most sadly in our region, in Zimbabwe, and those who only a few years ago were seen as the ‘new generation of leaders’ have shown their true tyrannical colours. The regional wars they have been fighting, from the Horn and the Great Lakes region, to Liberia and Sierra Leone, mark the consummation of their autocracy and militarism that may finally consume them. These wars and conflicts are an integral part of Africa’s bumpy road to the future, of Africa’s renaissance, in which old and new visions compete to rename and redraw the political cartography and culture of Nkrumah’s kingdom.

What are the implications of this new moment for historical and social science research? As the winds of democratisation have blown away one dictatorship after another, the possibilities for free speech and inquiry, scholarly research and publishing have generally improved. The virtual explosion of newspapers, popular magazines and periodicals, and publishing houses testifies to this. But to what extent have academics responded to the political opportunities presented by the demise of the old autocratic order, where censorship created cultures of silence? A full answer will have to await the passage of time and the analytical advantages of hindsight. Indications are that the results so far have been mixed; there are signs of both intellectual revitalisation and continued stagnation, depending on the country and the discipline.

Before the current democratic dispensation, in the worst affected countries, such as Malawi under Banda or Kenya in the 1980s, many academics and writers, if they did not flee abroad, often learned the survival arts of self-censorship and intellectual apathy, and publishers kept their distance from potentially troublesome and unrewarding scholarly publishing and concentrated on the safer and more lucrative school textbook market. Even publishing or travelling abroad for a conference required official permission. Whole areas of historical and social science research became taboo. As Owen Kalinga, one of Malawi’s leading historians has shown, the Banda regime profoundly affected the production of history in Malawi, from the adoption of the name Malawi itself as a correction of a colonial designation, Nyasaland, and a gesture of territorial claims in the region. Critical to the propagation of a new version of Malawi history was the Cabinet Crisis of 1964. Mentioning the names of the Cabinet ‘rebels’ was ‘illegal’ and could ‘lead to one’s detention in one of the notorious camps that were mushrooming in the country. Their role in the anti-colonial struggle was being deliberately obliterated from the memories of Malawians’.

32 O. J. M. Kalinga, ‘The Production of History in Malawi in the 1960s: the Legacy of Sir Harry Johnston, the
Consequently, in re-enactments of the country’s history in the media and at public rallies, Malawi’s recent political history was distorted and Banda’s role exaggerated. This resulted in the strange spectacle in which, for example, during Martyrs’ Day celebrations, on 3 March, references ‘would be made to the anti-colonial struggles, but no mention would be made of the people and activities of the 1950s which had directly contributed to independence’. The Banda regime did not hesitate to manufacture pre-colonial versions of history as well to manipulate contemporary politics, most glaringly in the deposition of Chief Mwase, who had fallen out of favour with Banda. ‘The President justified his action on the basis that people had misunderstood Chewa history… Banda’s version won the day and henceforth was expected to be taught in schools and colleges’. Besides threats of incarceration and the public performances of history, the Banda regime tried to control the production of history through strict control of access to the National Archives.

The fact that Kalinga was able to write and publish this paper is a testimony to the political changes that have taken place in this country. Indeed, this conference would not have been held ten years ago and some of us would not have been here. An even more dramatic confrontation with history, involving the repudiation of histories of repression and reaffirmation of histories of liberation, underpinned by moral and material demands for restitution and reparations, has been enacted in the last decade in South Africa in the transformations and transmissions of public memory in school curricular and social conversations, all captured in the poignant, if incomplete purgations, of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. But moments of political transition have not always been conducive to unburdening historical memories, to confronting the pains of the past with the possibilities of the future. Rwanda is a painful reminder of the incendiary powers of selective remembering and forgetting. It is one of the supreme ironies of contemporary African history that the most memorable events in Africa in the 1990s occurred in South Africa and Rwanda in 1994. In one there was the triumph of change, and the other the tragedy of carnage.

In both countries history played a key role. In South Africa, memories of repression and resistance were mobilised against organised state terror on behalf of a racial minority, while Rwanda’s incipient democratic movement was thwarted by murderous attacks unleashed by a crumbling state against its unarmed citizenry. In a forthcoming documentary on the Rwanda genocide, Laurent Nkusi, a history professor at the University of Rwanda, who lost his family in the genocide, laments the role played by his departmental colleague and chairman, Nahimana, who was ‘among those people teaching hatred on the radio’. Following the genocide, the narrator continues, ‘the teaching of Rwandan history was suspended in 1996 by the government. A group at the university had decided to probe to see if they could map out a new future for their country’. History was used to stoke memories of hate and fear of mutual annihilation among the Tutsi and Hutu who share more commonalities than differences: they speak the same language, have similar religious traditions, occupy the same geographical space and have been governed for centuries by the same aristocracy. The authoritarian Rwandan state, dominated by a narrow-minded ethnic elite, felt threatened by popular insurgent democratic forces, and so it cynically and desperately abused the past, unleashing the pathology of genocidal violence.

Lest I be accused of singling out historians, let me hasten to add that the African intelligentsia as a whole has played a crucial role in articulating visions for the postcolonial state and social order, although there have been different, and sometimes conflicting.

33 Ibid., p. 541.
34 Ibid., p. 544.
35 Hopes on the Horizon Film Project, Script, 16 May 2000, p. 21.
visions and agendas. Needless to say, this order and its projects have not been confined to the middle class intelligentsia; they have been anchored in the lives, experiences, and struggles of specific social classes. This is merely to emphasise that historical and social science research have real consequences on real peoples’ lives. Research is the lifeblood of the intellectual enterprise, the process through which ideas and insights, technologies and techniques, old and new, are nurtured and nourished, tried and tested, developed and discarded. In the ‘new knowledge economy’, research is even more important than ever, allowing a country not only to generate new knowledge, but also effectively process knowledge produced elsewhere, and engage in productive scholarly and scientific commerce and competition with other nations.

Conclusions: Developing Research Capacities

Only the future will tell whether the recent economic and political changes that have taken place in African countries will strengthen African universities and research capacities. In most countries, the universities have yet to recover from the debilitating deprivations of the 1980s. In fact, political democratisation riding on the coattails of economic liberalisation has often meant less, not more, resources for the universities. Encouraged to acquire a new corporatist ethos and sharpen their entrepreneurial skills, universities are expected to raise additional funds from hiking fees and performing applied research for the private sector. This, added to the persistent teaching pressures, threatens to erode even further the universities’ mission for basic research. While the problems of declining funding and increasing corporatisation also afflict universities in the North, in Africa the effects are much worse for universities lacking long histories and traditions of scholarly production and the protective networks of generations of generous alumni.

If unchecked, the current trends will reinforce the international intellectual division of labour, whereby African universities and social scientists will continue to import appropriate packages of ‘universal’ theory and, at best, export empirical data; to be consumers of advanced research conducted in the universities of the North. The African academic enterprise has long suffered from a culture of imported scientific consumerism. This culture established during the colonial era spread after independence despite rhetorical protestations to the contrary and ritual obeisance to local cognitive needs. African academics continue to exhibit strong tendencies of what Paulin Hountodji has called ‘theoretical extroversion’, the feverish importation of paradigms, problematics, and perspectives and the search for legitimation and respectability from the intellectual establishments of the North. The high premium placed on publishing abroad is a sad commentary on the persistence of the external-gazing structures and ideologies of colonialism. It is not a sign of the African academics’ confident universalism but of their insecure provincialism, reflecting a desperate search for intellectual legitimation from academic systems and epistemological traditions that have historically dismissed and infantalised them. It becomes a vicious circle: weak journals and monograph series attract weak contributions, which makes the journals and series even weaker.

Thus, the questions of intellectual autonomy and authority are critical to the construc-

36 Zeleza, ‘Imagining and Inventing’.
tion of vibrant research communities and cultures. The struggle for academic freedom and research productivity for African social scientists is also an epistemological one against-paradigms, theories, and methodologies that trivialise, misrepresent, and oversimplify African experiences, conditions and realities. All the major social science and humanities disciplines have a propensity for universalising often highly idealised western experiences into metatheoretical constructs to analyse other societies. The result is that the latter are seen in terms of lack of absences, as caricatures of the West. The most enlightened critiques eschew the Afrocentric fantasies of what Kwame Appiah, calls ‘nativist handwav[ing]’, 40 sentiments shared by V. Y. Mudimbe, 41 who has done much to unravel the invention of Africa through the social imaginary of the western epistemological order. According to Archie Mafeje, 42 the struggle for academic freedom in Africa and African studies entails jettisoning Eurocentric theories and paradigms and developing authentic African intellectual discourses, without falling into the trap of an essentialising cultural revivalism that homogenises Africa’s diverse cultures and histories and poses them in binary opposition to other cultures and histories.

What, then, should the research agenda of African historians and social scientists be? I would not of course dare suggest a laundry list even if space permitted, which thankfully it does not. If I can venture a prediction, both the empirical subject matter and theoretical paradigms will continue to be as diverse as the disciplines and the locations and ideologies of the researchers. But I would hope that African social science scholarship will be inspired by a burning desire to address the pressing issues of the times, to deepen our understanding of our economies, politics, cultures, societies, ecologies, legal systems, moral orders, gender relations – the list is endless – in order to bring about progressive and sustainable change. As for historians, they must continue expanding the temporal and spatial horizons of African histories, to tell large and small stories of our multiple pasts. We must try to resist the seductions of post-something sophistries parading in some sections of the western academy and being propagated by the likes of Achille Mbembe, CODESRIA’s discredited executive secretary. 43 In this endeavour, African migrant academics could play a positive role. Much has been written about Africa’s ‘brain drain’ to the North, which is regarded as an unmitigated disaster. Whatever the moralities and motivations of their migrations, the migrants can assist in the revitalisation of African universities. Africa and its diaspora have not always effectively mobilised to serve and advance each other’s interests, as has been the case, for example, between the Jewish diaspora and Israel, or increasingly the Chinese diaspora and China. The contemporary revolution in telecommunications and travel has compressed the spatial and temporal distances between home and abroad, thus offering migrants unprecedented opportunities to be transnational, to be at home and abroad. The rising migration of Africa’s professional elites and intellectuals may, indeed, be a curse if dismissed and ignored, but it can be turned into a blessing if embraced and utilised. It is generated by, and inserts Africa into, contemporary processes of transnationalisation and globalisation, which follow and reinforce the old trails of Pan-Africanism. The challenge for Africa, then, is how to rebuild the historic Pan-African project, spawned by the global dispersal and exploitation of African peoples over the centuries, by creatively using the current migratory flows of African peoples, cultures, capacities, and visions. It is an old

issue in a new age that requires responses and solutions that are both old and new. Besides the African migrant intellectuals, African universities and researchers also need to make better coordinated linkages to, and use of, their other ‘natural’ allies in the academies of the North, including the Africanist programmes, associations, and lobby groups, as well as historically black colleges and universities, many of which are interested in linking up with African institutions. Building new foreign partnerships, mediated by Africa’s potential allies, will go a long way to improve and strengthen the visibility of African research, both on the continent itself and globally. It is, in short, essential for the globalisation of African scholarship and Africanisation of global scholarship. Within Africa itself, greater coordination is needed beyond the unorganised and individual migrations to promote a vibrant culture of intra-African academic exchanges, which is indispensable for the development of strong African research capacities and effective linkages with other regions.

Little will, of course, be achieved if African states do not take the lead in re-investing in African higher education. They have a crucial role to play in mobilising national and international efforts. It would be a good idea if part of the funds saved from any debt forgiveness were earmarked specifically for the universities and strategic research initiatives. Managers of African universities also have critical responsibilities, to address the issues of accountability and corruption, to promote teaching and research excellence, to devise creative ways of diversifying sources of funding, and to be keenly aware of new trends in international education and forge partnerships that promote both capacity-building and capacity-utilisation, effectively utilising African capacities wherever they may be located, in independent research centres, neighbouring countries, or outside the continent. At stake is our survival and well-being as a global people.

Let me close with a reminder from Thandika Mkandawire, a keen observer of the global and African intellectual scenes, that:

there are at least two possible wrong ways of reacting to [globalisation] – either by escaping into xenophobic ‘fundamentalism,’ or ‘nativist,’ positions or by engaging in blind celebration of the ‘universal’ by an uncritical embrace of globalisation. Both reactions would constitute two ways of being lost, and both responses are, alas, evident in Africa. Another approach is to acknowledge these processes and rethink how to strategically engage with them in order to shield or further one’s own agenda.  

This agenda, he insists — and I agree — must be rooted in the unfinished tasks of progressive African nationalism, revised to reflect the changed times. In the current wave of globalisation, Africa is intimately involved but more as a passenger than the driver. Without strong, well-funded universities and research programmes we will continue being passengers. We owe it to our history, in which weakness condemned our ancestors to slavery and colonisation, and our future, in which our offspring will be condemned to similar fates of exploitation if we remain weak, to becoming drivers as well.

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