

Realising the Vision: The Discursive and Institutional Challenges of Becoming an African University

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1. Introduction

At the 1992 General Assembly of CODESRIA,¹ Archie Mafeje, the South African social scientist, presented a paper with the sub-title: ‘Breaking bread with my fellow-travellers’. The paper itself was vintage Mafeje: an eloquently written *tour de force*, which took no prisoners; but (and this is my point of departure) it was a discourse defined by its sub-title. It was ‘breaking bread’ with people with whom, as academic and public intellectuals, he shared common cause and aspirations about the continent and its peoples. I could well sub-title my presentation ‘Breaking bread with my fellow-travellers’ but that would not be quite original. If not as subtitle, at least as sub-text, I would like to engage in breaking bread with fellow-travellers. Breaking bread with one’s fellow-travellers may suggest different entry-points and takes on a subject but there is a shared concern with nourishing all those who partake in the meal. Like a Bedouin evening meal, it is also not something to be rushed.

Thinking through the future of Rhodes University and breaking bread with fellow-travellers around the subject will not suggest a singularity of perspective, objective or entry-point. Ultimately it is about a contested terrain of aspirations, hopes, and means of realising both. My entry-point is the Vision Statement of the University, which includes:

Rhodes University’s vision is to be an outstanding internationally-respected academic institution which proudly affirms its African identity and which is committed to democratic ideals, academic freedom, rigorous scholarship, sound moral values and social responsibility.

The emphasis of my discussion will be on the segment of the statement that speaks of Rhodes University *proudly affirming its African identity*. This is for two reasons. First, it was not always so. The commitment to proudly affirming its identity as an African institution was published in 2001² for the first time. It was only in 1991, its 87th year of existence, that Rhodes University first affirmed a ‘recogni[tion of its southern African setting’ – which lasted until 2000. The critical change in the 2000 Vision Statement is primarily about commitment to affirming the African identity.

Second, Rhodes had, much earlier than 1991 or 2001, affirmed ‘values’ that were premised on its having ‘a history of high achievement and [being] an institution committed to meeting the challenges of the present and the future’.³ Much earlier in 1983, the Academic Freedom Committee had ‘re-affirmed [its] belief in academic freedom’ involving access to the university without regard to creed or colour; the university’s obligation ‘to guarantee the rights of participants in the opportunities and privileges made available by belonging to a university’. It was also premised on the acknowledgment that ‘free universities cannot exist in an unfree society’. Again, it was not always so!

These shifts and moves from collusion with regimes of race-based oppression and privilege were themselves the results of rapidly changing environments (internal and external to the university) in which the university was operating. The philosophical discourses on the nature of questions, alternative moral dilemmas, and ethics of resistance in comfortable disengagement from active commitment to the side of the oppressed and disposed, must come across as sterile when 15 and 16 year-olds in South Africa’s townships were willing to defend their own freedom and right to dignity with their lives. The walk to becoming what Neville Alexander called a normal society was long and arduous.

Rhodes’s vision of affirming its ‘African identity’ raises two complementary questions: What does it mean to affirm one’s African identity? And in the case of a university, what does it mean to be an African university? A Vision Statement is *aspirational*. As in such efforts, realising a *vision* requires a clear understanding of (a) the ‘current state’, (b) the ‘desired state’, and (c) the trajectory or path of moving from current to desirable state. Path-dependency is something easily recognised in Development Studies generally, and Development Economics specifically. It is equally true that the essence of identifying the possible problem of path-dependency is precisely to help shift the trajectory or development path. Breaking bread with fellow-travellers, committed to the institutional Vision, requires that we open up the space for a critical reflection on the nature of not only the current state but the possible trajectories of arriving at the desired state.

Venturing into the space of ‘breaking bread’ is appropriate because not only is the possibility of change available, so too is *institutional* will. Nothing highlights this better than the recent acknowledgment, when raised by a few members of staff, that Rhodes’s 12 September ‘Founders’ Day’ had more to do with the hoisting of the settler imperial flag in what became Rhodesia than with anything that happened in Grahamstown in 1904 or after. The swift response of the Vice-Chancellor, Senate, and Council to the complaint and the subsequent change of the Founders’ Day is an eloquent testimony to the institutional will.

For the purposes of my discussion of *realising the vision*, I will limit myself to two sets of challenges: the discursive and institutional. I do this in the context of answering the two questions I highlighted earlier: What does it mean to

affirm one's African identity? And what does it mean to be an African University? What are the prevailing discursive and institutional challenges that need to be overcome in facilitating the realisation of the vision?

2. Africinity, African Identity and African University

Given the racial classificatory system that underscored settler colonial and Apartheid systems, and the retention of race classification in post-1994 South Africa, the word 'African' may have specific and limited effectivity. While collective self-description by non-Europeans as 'Black' was a distinct legacy of the Black Consciousness Movement, 'African', 'black' or 'Black African' have more restrictive meanings. They aim to refer to the 'indigenous' peoples of the current geographical space that makes up South Africa. This is, obviously, not the intention of the Vision Statement, and it is far from my understanding of Africinity and becoming an African University.

2.1. Africinity and African Identity

Against the vicissitudes of race-speak and classification, I will suggest a specific tradition of Africinity which arose from a 'historically-determined rebellion against the domination of others'.⁴ What is significant, especially for 20th century Africa and its Diaspora, is the double-logic of its formation and expression. On the one hand, across the continent – from Tunis to Cape Town; from Cape Verde to Mauritius – was a forging of bonds of shared identity defined by opposition to the imperial order. What is important is that skin tone and pigmentation have very little to do with this forging of shared Africinity and African identity. It was a heritage that defined, as icons of African revolution and liberation, a host of individuals from Ahmed Ben Bella to Patrice Lumumba; where Kwame Nkrumah and Gamal Nasser will share common cause. It mattered little that neither of the pair could have been defined as belonging to the same racial category. As Mafeje reminds us, when Patrice Lumumba was murdered, his family found home in Egypt. Lest this be seen a romanticised misconception of an episodic instance in the national liberation project in Africa, I would like to draw attention to Africa's continental organisation of social scientists, CODESRIA. People of 'Arab-descent' or 'Asiatic descent' are no less 'African' than someone from the Congo. When Mahmood Mamdani was elected the President of CODESRIA in 1998, the idea that his candidacy could be questioned on the ground that his progenitors were Punjabi immigrants to Uganda would have been considered as preposterous. It was not 'political-correctness'. We simply knew him as a Ugandan colleague (and I dare say, comrade). Issa Shivji is as much ours as Babu Mohammed – both Tanzanians. Nor is this a case of of a 'black African' accommodative 'instinct'.⁵ Frantz Fanon, a 'black' Martinique person, was considered as much Algerian by the FLN leadership and the Algerian people as a 'native' Bedouin.

On the other hand, there is the globally-shared affinity to Africa. Africanity will refer as much to people whose ancestral home is Africa, be they on the African continent, Latin America, the Caribbean, and North America, and so on. From W.E.B. Du Bois to Jean-Bertrand Aristide, we have people who regardless of the tone of their skins defined themselves as *Africans*.

To put the issue in perspective, the premise for the shared sense of Africanity – hence, African identity – is not purely a matter of progenitors, descent, pigmentation or morphological differences. Ruth First did not enter Mozambique as a European; she did as an African! Africanity crosses a host of other fault lines. You are as likely to find Jews and Gentiles among Ethiopian Amharic as anywhere else in the world. To reiterate the point, being African is not a matter of pigmentation or location: it is about being *self-referentially* ‘African’ – it is *a commitment to Africa*. It is possible to be physically located in Africa but not be of Africa; it is possible to be physically located outside Africa but be self-referentially *African*. This is what defined the global notion of Pan-Africanism.

Further, to speak of African identity is not to speak of a single identity but as something spatially bound and defined by commitment to Africa – although highly differentiated. Again, while one can speak of a spatially-bound context, there will be differentiated lines of such engagement and commitment. This has implications for the scholarship, intellectual vocation, and the university. While scholarship committed to the poor is desirable this cannot be the only measure of it. Intellectual vocation committed to the poor and the powerless may be a preference but that in itself is not what defines the nature of African scholarship or a university. Antonio Gramsci’s idea of ‘organic intellectuals’ is hardly compatible with a singularity of intellectual commitment and practice. What then defines a university within this context as African? I will address this issue at two levels – one is a matter of drawing lessons from similar ventures in Africa and elsewhere: where colonial universities became ‘national’ universities. I use the term ‘national universities’ not in the sense of narrow nationalism but seeking relevance in its locale without disconnecting from the universal idea of university, as an academe. The other is conceptual, in helping to make sense of what is essential and immanent in the notion of universities and what are the mutable aspects derived from specificity sociational life (or better still lives).

It is important to remind ourselves that before Oxford and Cambridge, there was Timbuktu – on the banks of what is now called River Niger, in West Africa. Although ‘not as centralized as al-Karawiyyin of Fez (Morocco) or Al-Azhar of Cairo’, Timbuktu consisted of a number of independent schools (‘of transmission’). The most famous of these schools and widely recognised as a centre of higher learning was Sankore (Sankara). By the 14th century, these were fully functioning institutions ‘where the courses of study offered were essentially open to all students who could qualify’.⁶

2.2. *The Idea of African University as Practice*

Since a Centenary celebration (such as Rhodes University's) invites nostalgia about history, I will draw from the field of history to illustrate three separate but related forms of scholarship that defined the idea of an African university. Here I draw short examples from Ibadan (Nigeria), Dakar (Senegal), and Dar-es-salaam (Tanzania). In 1958, two years before political independence, Nigeria had one university affiliated to the University of London. In a population of about 45 million, the total student population was less than 600. Since its inception 10 years earlier, it had offered History as a degree course but it was History as it would have been taught at the University of London, Oxford or Cambridge.

Central to the colonial historiographic project was not so much that it was difficult to do African History as that Africa (and Africans) had no history before its encounter with mercantilist Europe. In 1960, the year of Nigeria's formal independence, Professor Kenneth Onwuka Dike (1917-1983) was appointed Vice-Chancellor of Ibadan: the first African vice-chancellor of what was meant to be a small, elitist, Oxbridge institution. The challenge for Dike was fundamentally about the content of scholarship and relevance to national rather than imperial aspirations. It was national aspiration driven by the scholars themselves not the State. History, which was Dike's own discipline, became a major focus for recruiting and training new staff and students and fundamentally transforming the teaching and practice of the discipline. What emerged was the Ibadan School of History. It was one that saw oral sources not as an obstacle but a constraint in contexts where there were no written sources. The idea of African history was born out of this passion for scholarship that connects local needs with a boundless spirit of excellence and international comparability – rigour, intense peer scrutiny, and output.

I have argued elsewhere⁷ that while the Ibadan School of History displaced and discredited racist colonial historiography, it did not transcend received historiography: it did history as the history of great men, and sometimes great women. Its enduring contribution, contrary to my earlier critique of it, was not merely methodological (oral sources as a means of doing history) but in the *will* to give an African content and focus to the discipline. It went on to produce history from other sources, especially the Sahel and North and East Africa. What it did, however, was to give second generation, postcolonial students like me a sense of connection: connecting the scholarly vocation in secondary and post-secondary education with my sense of my cultural and sociational space in the global arena. Its publications, such as *Tariq*, became the staple that made me fall in love with history. The 'stories' I read were my stories, told by my people for my people! I did not encounter history as something alienating and disconnecting from my pre-school self and self-worth. University was an inspiring continuation of what I learnt on the knees of my grandmother. The venture in Ibadan was not only in relation to history. The whole spectrum of its offerings –

from chemistry to political studies – was animated by this ferment. Remarkably, all these happened when the state had very little to do or say about who taught what, to whom, and in what manner.

The Dar-es-salaam School of History took historiography beyond history as the stories of great men and sometimes great women. In historiographic terms, the problematic that the Dar School contended with was, to paraphrase it: Who built the pyramids? Surely it was not the Pharaohs! Who writes the stories of the thousands of labourers, the architects, and so on who put up the structures? It was a search for history not simply as the stories of great men/women but of ordinary people as well. Dar-es-salaam was a haven of vociferous left wing activism. If nothing else, it sought to write history in a counter-hegemonic manner. The Dar School reflected the ferment of the late 1960s and the 1970s in Africa and the brimming enthusiasm for the emancipatory project. If its historiography was at the other end of the class spectrum from that of the Ibadan School, it nevertheless shared a common commitment: the passion for an engagement with its African context. The Dar School was historiography with a class attitude, but a class attitude with an afrocentric mindset.⁸

Cheikh Anta Diop (1923-1986), and the ferment of his version of Egyptology, was what defined the University of Dakar. Diop's Africanness was shaped by what he considered the falsification of Egyptian history. Egypt was nowhere near Senegal. So what makes this a venture in the construction of the African university concern? The reaction to imperial racist historiography that drove the Ibadan and the Dar Schools also drove Diop. The effect of such racist historiography was indivisible, Diop would have argued. Diop's argument was that Egyptian civilisation was an African civilisation, in contrast to the claims of European Egyptologists. As Director of the Radiocarbon Laboratory at the Institut Fondamental d'Afrique Noire (IFAN) at the University of Dakar, his concern was to apply the tools of science to valorise this and similar claims; it was putting science at the disposal of a people. IFAN and history remain central to the University of Dakar's self-identity. It is a measure of the national prestige of Professor Diop that the university where he worked most of his life would be renamed Cheikh Anta Diop University in his memory and honour.

Three clusters, three methodological and epistemic foci; but all driven by a shared commitment to their locales. For each, Africa was the locale. I wish to argue that local relevance is never at odds with global and rigorous scholarship and being internationally reputable: a debate around such an idea is essentially a false debate. The assumption that a preference for the local undermines the global is a false dichotomy. Oxford and Cambridge will define themselves as English universities; much the same way as Harvard will define itself as American. It is inconceivable that anyone will argue that Oxford's fundamental Englishness (albeit with aristocratic pretensions) is a negation of its global reputation. No one will consider calling Oxford an English university an anathema; why would Rhodes becoming an African university be inherently

so? I am less concerned at this stage as to whether this commitment is to the poor and the powerless or the rich and the powerful. History with a bias for the poor and the powerless but driven by a regurgitation of received paradigms will still be problematic for me.

3. Realising the Vision: Discursive and Institutional Challenges

What has all this got to do with discursive and institutional challenges at Rhodes? Let me return to my premise of ‘breaking bread with my fellow travellers’. This is not a matter of career hedge-betting; issues concerning university education are, systemically, more serious than life and death. The implications of an educational system that damages the inner self of students may not produce body counts but are fundamentally damaging nonetheless. Get things right and the harvests are enormous for everyone. For the remaining part of this presentation, I will highlight a few discursive and institutional challenges for realising the vision. Many of these are drawn, analytically and anecdotally, from my experience at Rhodes.

3.1. Challenge One: the Liberal English Tradition

A lot of stock has been put on the reputation of Rhodes University as a liberal, English-speaking university. As Paul Maylam reminds us, there is little doubt that when Rhodes University was established it was as an integral aspect of a much wider imperial project. Whatever might have been the political dominance that conquest of the colonies might have wrought the ascendance of Afrikaner nationalism and the National Party would seem to have reduced the political space available for English-speaking South Africans. Much of what has come to be defined as the liberal critique of nationalism might present itself as occupying a moral high-ground from which to condemn Apartheid, but it does so in the context of the loss of that political space and influence. It is important to make a distinction between three ideational strands that were highlighted at the Critical Traditions Colloquium at Rhodes University in August 2004. One is radical socialist, the second social democratic, and the third liberal. Much of what was presented as liberalism at the Colloquium (in much of the discussion of liberal tradition) is more appropriately activism of a *social democratic*, not liberal, strand. Liberal tradition, especially Classical English Liberalism that continues to be presented as a worthy tradition at Rhodes University constitutes a discursive challenge for realising the vision. Frederick von Hayek⁹ highlighted two strands in liberalism: the Continental and Classical English Liberalism. ‘Continental or constructivist’ strands of Liberalism were defined by:

Not so much a definite political doctrine as a general mental attitude, a demand for an emancipation from all prejudice and all beliefs which could not be rationally justified, and for an escape from the authority of ‘priests and kings’ (p.119).

Hayek, as one would expect, was quite sceptical about those strands of liberalism that ‘profess a belief in individual freedom of action and in some sort of equality of all men’. However, ‘this agreement was in part only verbal’, since individual freedom and equality have different meanings from those in the Classical English tradition. The latter has a far more pernicious focus and intentionality, and was more attuned to Hayek’s:

The liberal demand for freedom is... a demand for the removal of all manmade obstacles to individual efforts, not a claim that the community or the state should supply particular goods. It does not preclude such collective action... but regards this as a matter of expediency and as such limited by the basic principle of equal freedom under the law.¹⁰

This individual freedom, Sally¹¹ reminded us, ‘is the bedrock of the free market economy’. The idea of a minimal government is immanent in classical liberalism. What is important for our discussion here is that it is not only Constructivist or Continental Liberalism that emerged in opposition to the absolutism of the feudal order; Classical Liberalism did as well. The opposition to absolutism signified the contention between the emergent bourgeois/petty bourgeois classes and the old feudal order. The difference, I will argue, is in the reach of the rights that were argued for. In spite of the protestations to the contrary Classical (English/Scottish) Liberalism won rights for no-one outside the class forces that it represented. From the rights to vote (either adult-male suffrage for men or universal suffrage, which included women) to the rights of workers to organise and bargain collectively, these rights have been won when radical social forces contested the terrain of public life and wrested for themselves these rights. What is unique about liberalism, generally, is how easily liberals acquiesced with the horrendous deprivation and violence done to the *Insignificant Other* around them. The defence of class, gender or race-based privileges in the colonies was couched in the language of freedom, and equality rather than equity. The two blocs of liberalism that I mentioned above have coalesced around two major contemporary political forces. Classical English Liberalism is the progenitor of *Neoliberalism*. By contrast the tradition and the discourse of Constructivist Liberalism is carried on in *Social Democracy*.

The idea that you must oppose a government simply because it is government carries a peculiarly counterproductive Hegelian mindset that sometimes comes through as nostalgia for the ‘good old days’. Its source is in Classical English Liberalism, and much of what counts for liberalism in South Africa today derives from this tradition.¹² In the face of Afrikaner nationalism and monopoly of the political space, oppositional discourse derived from Classical Liberalism would seem to occupy a higher moral ground. I will argue that the continued adherence to this tradition has the tendency, inherently, to justify, rationalise, and acquiesce with injustice and inequity; and for continued defence of class/race/gender privileges. Often, the defence of these privileges is couched in the language of *individual* freedom and liberty and against

government encroachment. In the university setting, this will be presented as academic/intellectual freedom.

In contrast to the liberal idea of academic or intellectual freedom, I would like to posit the 1990 *Kampala Declaration on Intellectual Freedom and Social Responsibility*.¹³ The Declaration, which was adopted by an assembly of African intellectuals, not only affirmed the autonomy of institutions, (Section B, Articles 11 and 12) but the obligations of the state to the institutions (Articles 13-18). It not only affirmed the rights of the intellectuals to pursue knowledge and disseminate it but the social responsibility of intellectuals and the rights to education and participation in intellectual activity, and so on.

To insist on minimalist government, as Classical Liberalism does, is to hinder the possibility of leveraging resources for validating the rights of hundreds of thousands of young men and women to receive education – the type of education that is dignifying to the person(s).

3.2. *Challenge Two: Curriculum Transformation and Euro-gaze*

As my discussion of the experiences of history at Ibadan, Dar-es-salaam and Dakar indicate, central to a proud affirmation of institutional African identity is the question of what to do with inherited modes of knowledge production and their content. When they encounter the colonial ‘natives’, colonial epistemology and pedagogy demand of them to ascend to the colonial metropolitan culture – or more appropriately, the invented cultural practices of the dominant segments of the metropolis. This is in spite of the fact that the pedagogy itself is underscored by the assumption that the colonial ‘natives’ may parody but could never be on equal footing with the natives of the metropolis.

I will suggest that this project of encountering the ‘natives’ produces schizophrenia in those invited to do so. The disconnection between pre-school collective memory and what is considered valuable enough to be taught in the school produces an alienating education – and here I speak largely of the humanities. The schizophrenia that results, in its worst forms, swings from acute self-loathing to intense anger against the educators and what they may represent. I can point to examples of the former in what currently goes under the banner of postmodern, postcolonial literature on and in Africa.

Let me pose the question more starkly in terms of the content of our curriculum. We may not be responsible for what St. Andrews College or Victoria Primary School (in Grahamstown) teach, but is there a shared awareness that much of our curriculum reproduces the fixation on Europe and the disconnection with the collective memories of the non-European (by descent) segments of our student body. To draw examples from the disciplines – and I am firmly committed to discipline-based education¹⁴ – that are most important for me: Philosophy, Sociology, Politics, and History. Economics is another matter entirely.

What, for instance, is it about the philosophy we do that minimally acknowledges that we are surrounded by a sea of Xhosa ontological discourses and narratives? The same could be said for the others, not only in regurgitating received epistemic frameworks, but in seeking to derive nomothetic (the universal explanatory) from idiographic (cultural, specific) narratives of our locale. How is it that very little is known among anthropologists and sociologists about the works of Archie Mafeje and Bernard Magubane, to mention but two? We have all heard so much about Steve Biko, but how many of our colleagues and students have ever read Biko? When we talk about our Eastern Cape anthropology, how many of us and our students know of or has ever read anything Govan Mbeki wrote about the 'peasantry' in the Province? At the 2004 Congress of the South African Sociological Association, we had Professor Magubane as the Keynote speaker. It was the first time several of our colleagues seen, met or read him. It was the first time many of our younger colleagues had ever heard of him. The encounter was extremely mutually beneficial for those present: sociologists, young and the not-so-young. Given the resurgence of the so-called Two-Economy argument, I am not sure many people in the policy-making arena in our country have read him or Mafeje, considering that the definitive critique of the Dualist argument was written by Archie Mafeje in 1969, when he was Head of the Department of Sociology in the University of Dar-es-salaam.

The point here is not simply one of lack of access; it is the reproduction of a disposition that places very little value on and often refuses to engage with alternative modes of knowledge production and outcome. I have encountered course outlines after course outlines in our social sciences and humanities where scant reference is ever made to African scholarship and social thought north of the Limpopo. In a recent example, a graduate-level course was offered in *Social Transition* in a department to which I was the External Examiner. If the course had been offered in North America or Europe one would not have been any wiser. There was a lot about Foucault and Derrida but not a single reference to anything written on the subject by any African, Asian or Latin American scholar that I could identify. Considering that South Africa's transition itself is one of the more exciting examples of the late 20th century, the 'oversight' was all the more confounding.

Yet, my experience is that many of our students are incredibly eager to interact with these alternative sources of making sense of the world or intellectual narratives. Dr Greg Ruiters (Rhodes Politics Department) introduced an offering in *African Politics and Government* last Term to the 3rd Year Political Studies students. The effect was incredible. I can attest to similar responses from my sociology students (undergraduate and honours-levels) who tell you that this was the first time anyone ever taught them about Africa. When our scholarship jumps from a restricted notion of South African scholarship (without engaging the knowledge production of the 'natives') to Europe or

Brazil, etc., our students and ourselves are the poorer for it. The issue, I should emphasise, is not European contra African. To repeat an argument made about sociology, we cannot speak of Global Sociology when what comes through as sociology is the ‘globalisation’ of specific European idiographic discourses – on the back of an imperial colonial project. Two years ago, I was discussing with a colleague (not at Rhodes) the issue of *African Sociology* as against *sociology in Africa*. His reaction after a few moments of reflection was ‘but that can’t be sociology’. When I asked why, his answer was, but what about Marx, Weber, and Durkheim? To do sociology was to do Weber, Marx and Durkheim! Note that Marx, for instance, was never self-consciously a sociologist, and Weber never held a chair in sociology. Indeed, as Ha-Joon Chang reminds us, Weber ‘was in fact a professor of economics in the Universities of Freiburg and Heidelberg’.¹⁵ Anthony Giddens invented the Trinity of Sociology – all male, all European – and we cannot seem to get out of the framework. If I say that I wish to present a course or a paper on German or French Sociology, for instance, there will be no angst or suspicion of drumming down standards. It is an entirely different response if I raise the issue of a course in African Sociology. Yet as Arthur Lewis claimed he was advised by Frederick von Hayek, when he was asked to teach “‘what happened between the wars” [WWI and WWII] at the London School of Economics: the best way to learning a subject was to teach it’!¹⁶ In other words, not knowing should be no hindrance to engaging with a subject in the transformation of our curriculum.

Is this a request for some cultural-nationalism? My answer is firmly ‘No’, but is sociology about an approach to the study of society or what some dead sociologists said? You need a shift in the mindset to make the venture of exploring possible. The essential thing about paradigms is not that they shift. It is that they are blinkers. They define the horizon of sight and cut out some others. The same will apply to other disciplines, not just philosophy or sociology.

Proudly affirming our African identity requires that we add to our scholarship (of nomothetic) ventures a desire to engage with the ideographical discourses of our locale and get our students and ourselves not only reading ourselves but becoming familiar with a huge body of African scholarship. The alternative is to offer alienating education to those that a Eurocentric discourse offers no immediate affinity.

3.3. *Challenge Three: ‘Institutional culture’*

A critical obstacle in institutional transformation is the manner in which we understand the amorphous, yet palpable entity that we refer to as ‘institutional culture’. Often because of the tendency to confuse the tendentious and ephemeral with the substantive, certain institutional practices are considered so essential that an attempt to change them will provoke considerable resistance. For the purpose of this paper I wish to make a distinction between two aspects

of what we often refer to as institutional culture. I will suggest that central to what we often refer to as 'institutional' or 'organisational culture' are two distinct elements. The first aspect concerns organisational and behavioural values that derive from the core mandate of an organisation. These are activities essential to the mission and identity of the genre of institutions to which the specific organisation belongs; these activities and values define the *raison d'être* (the reason for existence). Take away those values and activities and the organisation ceases to belong to that genre.

The second aspect concerns what one will consider as the 'sociational' aspects of organisational life and group dynamics. Borrowing from Imre Lakatos, these sociational aspects of organisational life constitute the 'protective belt' around the core aspects of an institution's culture. Being products of sociational dynamics, these practices and values may mark the organisation out *within* its genre but are mutable and are products of group dynamics within specific contexts, spatial and temporal. While we refer to the 'protective belt' as defined by the 'sociational aspects of organisational life', it is important to keep in mind that the definition of the 'core' is the product of human agency in patterns of social interaction, and that both aspects exist in a dynamic relationship. What is significant about the outer, protective belt is that it is the more mutable, more situationally specific dimension of 'institutional culture', but is often confused with what is immanent about an organisation.

This distinction between the core values and mission, on the one hand, and the peripheral, sociational dynamics, on the other hand, is important in understanding what needs to be protected and what could easily change in the transformation of an organisation without undermining its core values and mandate. They are also important for what one will refer to as the appropriateness of transformation models in addressing the challenge of transformation.

Applied to a university, one will argue that central to its *raison d'être* are the production and dissemination of knowledge. A university will be different from other institutions within the further and higher education sector, for instance, in the centrality of knowledge production to its very reason for existence. Knowledge production comes not only from the work of the research staff, but from their students as well. A doctoral degree work, for example, is normally required to be a substantive contribution to knowledge. The dissemination of knowledge may take different forms: from training of students¹⁷ to applying the knowledge produced in different aspects of life. It is, perhaps in the extension of the latter that the question of 'community service' comes, but it is of value, and essential to a university's core values, when it involves the dissemination of knowledge produced. A university's *raison d'être* is defined by its function of training of students, in addition to the core function of knowledge production. Arising from these are a set of values (norms) that are essential for the fulfilling these core mandates. For instance, the idea of *academic freedom* rather than being an esoteric idea is valued because it is

essential for knowledge production; it facilitates the performance of this core mandate. External adjudication or scrutiny of one's work is valued because it serves the function of quality assurance in the framework of knowledge production. So it is not enough to claim that one has discovered something, the process and the discovery are opened up for external adjudication. The same applies to a candidate's doctoral thesis being subject to external adjudication and scrutiny (to the knowledge producer). And this is where the distinction between the 'core' and 'peripheral' comes in.

To take the example of external adjudication, while we accept that a knowledge producer's work needs to be subject to peer-scrutiny, how we actually go about doing this may differ across institutions and/or countries. A doctoral thesis may be externally scrutinised by a panel of assessors internal to the institution (as in the US) or by external examiners. In the case of the latter, the actual process can vary from cases where theses are sent to the external adjudicators without an oral examination (*viva voce*) being required (as in South Africa), or with a *viva voce*. The latter can take place in a room (as in the UK) or in a town hall (as in Sweden). While these forms can give distinct colourations to the specific requirement of external scrutiny (the core value), the forms that they take is a matter of sociational dynamics that developed over time and in given circumstances. It is possible to change the latter without vitiating the former. Indeed the value of changing the more mutable (outer protective layer) aspects of organisational life is in the extent to which it enhances compliance with the core requirement of external adjudication.

The importance of this model is that it allows us to make a distinction between two sets of existing practices: those that in essence are dimensions of sociational dynamics but are no more than that and those that are *essential* to the realisation of the core mandates of an institution. The corollary of this is that it alerts us to issues relating to 'appropriateness of model'. In other words, whether the model of change is appropriate to what is essential about an organisation. The spectres of 'corporatisation' and 'managerialism', for instance, have drawn the displeasure of many academics not because they may not work but that they tend to undermine the core mandate and functions of the university as an institution. The collegiality essential to the process of knowledge production is often undermined by transposing the model of change that is derived from an environment of commodity production. The latter is driven by a sense of market share, profit margin, and proprietary hold on what knowledge is produced. It may (and does) contribute to knowledge production, but it undermines the dissemination process which is vital for the accelerated process of sharing, critiquing, and reassessment; all essential to the essential value of knowledge production.

The relevance for Rhodes University in the quest for realising the vision it sets for itself is to make a distinction between those practices and norms that are products of specific location, history, and sociational dynamics; and those

which are *essential* to the fulfilment of the university's *raison d'être*. The implications for the vision of a university that proudly affirms its African identity help to focus our gaze on those practices and norms that are non-essential to the core mandate of a university *and* the university's sense of Africanity. By the same token, it alerts us to the importance of taking our *locale* seriously in fulfilling the core mandates of a university, and asking the question: What are the specifics of positioning the university to take advantage of these locales? Knowledge production and dissemination is local and global; specific and generic. The issue is not a pursuit of either or but a dynamic interplay of the two.

5. Concluding Remarks

In this paper I have concerned myself with a specific aspect of a much wider issue of institutional transformation; in this context the vision declared by Rhodes University of *proudly affirming its African identity*. I have sought to highlight the journey to that decision. I have sought to provide some answers to the questions: What does it mean to affirm one's African identity? What does it take to realise the vision? What does it mean to be an African university? Because all these are quite vexing issues I have sought to provide a sociological framework for separating the essential from the transient in what we understand as *institutional culture*. Given the manner in which Africanity and African Identity resonates within the South African scholarly setting, I have focused on what I consider the pan-African ideas of Africanity. Further, I have flagged the examples of three universities that followed distinct epistemic paths for affirming their Africanity *without* undermining what is essential to the university: its *raison d'être*. I believe this is important, when taken together with the model of what we often call institutional culture. While these issues derive from the specific experience of Rhodes University, I will argue that they are more generic to South African universities generally, and the more privileged ones, in particular. Each of the three universities that I used to illustrate the epistemic shifts in doing history (historiography) faced the challenge of shifting from colonial institutions to national institutions sensitive to their *locales* and actively embracing these locales. Yet it was in doing this that they enhanced the quality of their contributions to the global spheres of knowledge production. A lot of the specific sociational practices and ethos that derived from the colonial reference points,¹⁸ our 'protective belt', fell away without undermining the central mandate and values of an institution like Ibadan, are a case in point. If anything, it was in defining themselves in the context of their locales and relevance in a postcolonial context that they gained global recognition as centres of excellence in knowledge production and dissemination.¹⁹ The three cases cited also draw attention to how we understand state/university relations or the impetus of transformation from colonial institutions to postcolonial national imperatives. The most critical periods of contribution

came when academics themselves recognised the needs to embrace their locales; these processes were driven autonomously of the state. This is crucial because we are often in danger of defining *academic freedom* so narrowly and in a profoundly self-serving manner that we fail to recognise its corollary: *the social responsibility of intellectuals*. It does not need state (or extra-university) intervention to stimulate the latter.

I have flagged curriculum transformation as critical to a demonstration of how we embrace and assert our African identity. These are often not issues that can be forced into the classrooms unless the academics, quite self-consciously, take the step to retrain themselves and overcome the preponderance of *euro-gaze*. This is no idle concern. If in the practice of our vocations we promote the schizophrenia in many of our students; fail to pay attention to the ontological discourses and collective memories from where they come, much less validate these, then we fail in our primary task of enlightening and giving our students wings so they can fly. Ultimately, it is about critical self-interrogation.

Notes

1. Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA). Archie Mafeje. 1995. 'Theory of Democracy and the African Discourse: breaking bread with my fellow-travellers', in Eshetu Chole and Jibrin Ibrahim (eds.) *Democratisation Processes in Africa*. Dakar: CODESRIA Books.
2. Rhodes University. 2001. *Rhodes University Calendar 2001*. Grahamstown: Rhodes University.
3. Rhodes University. 1991. *Rhodes University Calendar 1991*. Grahamstown: Rhodes University.
4. Archie Mafeje. 2001. 'Africanity: a commentary by way of conclusion', *CODESRIA Bulletin* Nos. 3 & 4, p.16.
5. Bakare-Yusuf (2004) followed a tradition of writers who explain synthesis in many African contexts in existential terms: in her case, what she calls 'polyrhythmic powers of accommodation' of external-derived cultural symbols and ideas. Cf. Bibi Bakare-Yusuf. 2004. "'Yoruba's Don't Do Gender": a critical review of Oyeronke Oyewumi's *The Invention of Women: making an African sense of Western gender discourses*', in CODESRIA. 2004. *African Gender Scholarship: concepts, methodologies and paradigms*. CODESRIA Gender Series 1. Dakar: CODESRIA.
6. Cf. J.F. Ade Ajayi, Lemeck K.H., Goma & G. Ampah Johnson. 1996. *The African Experience with Higher Education*. (The Association of African Universities, Accra in association with) James Currey: London. (pp.10-11).
7. J. Adesina. 2001. 'Sociology and Yoruba Studies: epistemic intervention or doing sociology in the vernacular?', *Annals of the Social Science Academy of Nigeria*, No.13. A shorter version was published in *African Sociological Review*, Vol. 6. No.1 (2002).

8. I use 'afrocentric' to refer to the scholarship that takes the African condition 'as the central problematic and object of the production of knowledge' (Adesina op cit, p.60). As Kwesi Prah noted, this should not be confused with ethnocentrism or being a xenophobe (K.K. Prah. 1997, 'Africanism and the South African Transition', *Social Dynamics*, Vol. 23, No.2.
9. Frederich von Hayek. 1982. *New Studies in Philosophy, Politics, Economic and the History of Ideas*. London and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, (pp. 119-120).
10. Hayek, op. cit., p.132.
11. Razeen Sally, 'What is liberalism?', *ama-gi*, Vol. 1 No. 2. (<http://www.lse.as.uk/clubs/hayek/1-2/sally.htm>.)
12. An icon of South African 'liberal' opposition to Apartheid was reported by a Port Elizabeth newspaper to have claimed that the quality of debate in the South African National Assembly was higher under Apartheid than it is now. Yet this was the parliament from which about 90 percent of the population was denied access! What, one might ask, is the moral premise of such a claim?
13. See Mamadou Diouf and Mahmood Mamdani (eds.) 1994. *Academic Freedom in Africa*. Dakar. CODESRIA Books Series. (Appendix B).
14. I think that the argument around discipline and inter-disciplinarity derives from conflating two separate but related processes: one research and policy advice; the other, training. Research is inherently inter- or multi-disciplinary. However, one should not confuse that with foundational training of a conceptual and methodological nature. Interdisciplinarity works only because different disciplines bring to the table (of research and policy advice) their specific strengths.
15. Ha-Joon Chang. 2002. *Kicking Away the Ladder: development strategy in historical perspective*. London: Anthem Press, p.6.
16. Sir Arthur Lewis. 1979. 'Autobiography', (on occasion of his being awarded The Bank of Sweden Prize in Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel 1979). (www.nobel.se/economics/laureates/1979/lewis-autobio.html) Accessed 18 August 2004. To quote Lewis in full: 'I got into the history of the world economy because Frederich Hayek, then Acting Chairman of the LSE Department of Economics suggested that I teach a course on "what happened between the wars" to give concreteness to the massive doses of trade cycle theory which then dominated the curriculum. I replied to Hayek that I did not know what happened between the wars; to which he replied that the best way of learning a subject was to teach it'.
17. I use 'student' rather than 'learner' because, beyond finding new and 'sexier' words for describing what we have always done, I am not sure what the value of the latter is as a description of a group of people who are trained in the university. We are all learning and students of something: from the professor to the rookie Freshman/woman.
18. 'This is how it is done at Oxford' being one such reference point.
19. The cynic may ask why the decline over the last two-and-half decades. The discussion of this belongs to a different context. For further discussion see the two volumes by Zeleza, Paul Tiyambe and Adebayo Olukoshi (eds.) 2004a, *African*

Universities in the twenty-first century. Volume I: Liberalisation and Internationalisation. Dakar: CODESRIA. And 2004b *Volume II: Knowledge and Society.* Dakar: CODESRIA. See also Ade Ajayi, Goma and Johnson, op.cit.