
Othering the Higher Education Sector in Governance and Democratic Processes in Africa

Africa has made great strides in democracy and governance since the emergence of African Nationalism in the late 1930s. However, many African nations are still under dictatorial regimes, ravaged by poor management and bad governance and “state capture”. While the reasons for the continuous increase of poverty in Africa are diverse, some (Amar & Zghidi, 2016) have attributed it to bad governance, others (Fomunyam, 2017) to poor democratic processes and better still others (Dabalén, Etang, Mungai, Wambile, & Wane, 2016) to the lack of or poor utilization of data on these issues in Africa. Whatever the difference in their reasons, they all agree that growth, poverty, development, security and respect for human rights can all be improved through better democratic processes and good governance. However, governing mechanisms and democratic processes in Africa have been

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stifled because of the othering of the higher education sector. Its voice has been othered, giving room for state capture, poor governance and dictatorship. The higher education sector or universities and research institutions have three core responsibilities or missions: teaching and learning, research and community engagement. This means that academics are not only verse with theoretical

understandings of governance, governing mechanisms, and democratic processes, but also have a working knowledge of the society by reason of their community engagement, and the fact that they live in these communities. This paper therefore argues that by de-othering the higher education sector, room is created for strategic governance, enhanced democratic processes, responsible citizenry and human rights, both at the local and national or international level.

Almost 31 years have passed since the World Bank, in its report, *Financing Education in Developing Countries* recommended a sharp reduction in the number of higher education (henceforth, HE) institutions on the continent in the name of efficiency and the distribution of educational resources (Caffentzis, 2000). This recommendation was based on the flawed assumption that Africans were destined to remain unskilled, uncompetitive, and unemployable.

While the World Bank has moved beyond this notion of looking at African HE as an “unnecessary burden” on the fiscal possibilities of the continent, most government or politicians have not. They see the HE sector or the academics within the sector as a necessary evil that must constantly be kept under watch – the othering. There is need for the de-othering of the HE sector and the strengthening of the relationship between the and the developmental needs of African states regarding development, skills, and the theoretical and practical reflections around governance, citizenship and democracy.

There is a (rightful) suspicion and mistrust in the relationship between HE and the state in Africa, which has resulted in its othering. HE institutions in general and academics in particular, have always argued against the role of the state in being interventionist and undermining academic freedom and institutional autonomy. This steams from prior experiences in which the government sought to exercise extensive interference in the running of the HE institutions themselves, resulting in the universities being crippled and unable to offer critique, insight or reflection on the state, and its role in the international community. For instance, Aman Attieh, reports that since 1992, there has been an increase in serious violations of the freedom of speech and expression in Algeria in which the security forces, opposition parties and militant groups have sought to silence scholars and citizens as a whole (Teferra & Altbach, 2003). They further add that, the interventionist and at times authoritarian role of the state in HE was seen with the summary expulsion of over 40

university professors and lecturers from Addis Ababa University, in Ethiopia in the mid-1990s. This means HE in relation to the state should be understood beyond the domain of the market forces and the “employability” of the graduates, to critical questions such as the role of HE in producing a critical citizenry (or as wa Thiong’o terms it, “New Africans”), governance and democracy and its application in Africa (Wa Thiong’o, 1994).

The relationship between African states and HE dates back to the ancient history of the pyramids of Egypt, the obelisks of Ethiopia and the kingdom of Timbuktu (Teferra & Altbach, 2003; Teferra & Altbach, 2004). The oldest university still in existence is Egypt’s Al-Azhar (Teferra & Altbach, 2003), which was founded as a great seat of Islamic theological reflections and learning. Al-Azhar was particularly instrumental in the development of Islamic development society, which resulted in the institution conferring Islamic legitimacy on the state, and helping develop the social, moral and cultural spheres of Egypt (Al-Sayyid, 1993; Crecelius, 1966).

The power of HE to transform beyond the domains of the market forces and the “useful knowledge” of employability, as dictated by the neoliberal financial regimes need to be taken into consideration and given a voice to contribute to democratic processes and governance structures on the continent if the happenings on the continent as a whole are going to improve. This means that HE in Africa has always gone well beyond such narrow fiscal prisms and have sought to contribute to new ways of thinking and conceptualizing society. In other words, universities in Africa have not always being “adoring

darlings” of western neoliberal-fiscal regimes and have sought to reimagine society in new and different ways, often in counter-hegemonic attempts. This has often entailed going against the state with consequences on the institutions and academics themselves. This can be seen particularly in two case studies – at the University of Fort Hare in South Africa and Makerere University in Uganda. Fort Hare University became an interesting social experiment in African Pan Africanism, in which leading intellectuals and freedom fighters such as Robert Mugabe, ZK Matthews, Govan Mbeki, Yusuf Lule, Oliver Tambo, Nelson Mandela, Seretse Khama, Kenneth Kaunda, Julius Nyerere and others¹, attended the institution and intellectually developed there through critical engagements with other thinkers in the institutions.

Although founded in 1878, University of Fort Hare under the Apartheid regime was one of the central academic pillars against the fight for social justice, inclusivity and multi-racialism in South Africa. The institution was at the forefront in producing a new breed of African intellectuals and freedom fighters, who were committed to crippling the colonial and Apartheid regimes and their Manichean allegoric² conceptions of social reality. Leading intellectuals in the university advanced Pan Africanism as an attempt to transcend the narrow ethnic borders imposed on African identities through colonials and Apartheid and called upon transnational commitment to decolonisation and freedom from Apartheid. The connection between knowledge, student activism and social justice was critical to the fight against colonialism and Apartheid, and the re-humanising of Blackness. The university being incorporated into the National Party’s

(NP) education system in 1959/60,³ resulted in the institution losing its excellence and multi-ethnic focus. This led to what could be termed, the “tribalisation” of the institution, in how it was forced to re-look at its admission policy and only accept “Xhosa-speakers”.⁴ This policy achieved multiple purposes – firstly, it reduced Fort Hare from being a multiracial and multi-ethnic HE institution of higher learning to a “Xhosa” or “Bantu” college, relegated to only serving exclusively the needs of the local community. Secondly, it used Fort Hare to reinforce the Apartheid social construction of Blackness through crude tribal identities in the production of “useful Bantus” who serve well the needs of the Apartheid regime. Thirdly, what this policy did was to silence Fort Hare as an institution and marginalise it to the periphery of HE, through crippling de-funding, while reallocating the much-needed funds and resources to historically white HE institutions. Thus, the de-othering of Fort Hare University in South Africa, will create the necessary room for strategic governance, enhanced democratic processes, responsible citizenry and human rights both locally and internationally that the institution once was before the Apartheid regime crippled it.

Makerere University similarly offers illuminating insight on the interesting relationship between HE, social development and governance. Makerere University was founded in 1922 by the colonial government as a vocational college (Mamdani, 2016). The University, together with Dar Es Salaam University in Tanzania, rose up to become the bastion of anti-colonial and anti-imperial nationalism on the continent. However, it was the highly contested debate that occurred between Ali Mazrui

from Makerere University and Walter Rodney, from Dar Es Salaam University regarding the relationship between African public intellectuals and the then emerging postcolonial governments that were increasingly turning into one party states after the 1960s and 1970s (Mamdani, 2016, pp. 72-74), that led to the othering of this institution. Mazrui increasingly argued against left leaning intellectuals for “timidity” and “soft hands” (Mamdani, 2016, p. 73), in not being critical and oppositional to postcolonial African governments who were undermining democracy and good governance. Mazrui felt that African intellectuals betrayed their convictions on the importance for good governance and critical citizenry in embracing leaders such as Ghana’s Nkwame Nkrumah, Tanzania’s Julius Nyerere and others, who banned opposition parties and had begun undermining academic freedom in HE institutions. For Mazrui, the voice of African intellectuals in having the ability to hold the state accountable was very much in consolidating the democratic gains after colonialism. Rodney vehemently disagreed against Mazrui’s criticism and suggested that African intellectuals should join the struggle in consolidating national independence against the enduring patterns of imperialism. While Mazrui was preoccupied with the “internal” good governance and social justice imperatives of the new states, Rodney was largely concerned about the “external” impending dangers of imperialism which had replaced the barrel of the gun with new financial regimes. These debates show that HE in Africa has always been deeply implicated in issues of governance, citizenship and the role of HE in developing the state.

De-othering the HE sector is important in ensuring that African states have access to resources, networks and well established theoretical approaches that will help navigate and negotiate some of the challenges that plague the continent. HE institutions in Africa has always reimagined governance, citizens and giving voice beyond the domain of the neoliberal market forces. As seen in the case with Fort Hare, Makerere and Dar Es Salaam Universities, HE institutions have been at the leading front of consolidating democracy and being critical reflection spaces. This paper therefore argued that by de-othering the higher education sector, room is created for strategic governance, enhanced democratic processes, responsible citizenry and human rights.

Notes

1. Please see <http://www.ufh.ac.za/>
2. The Manichean Allegory mode of thinking was introduced during the colonial period, beginning with the story of Ham, that sought to introduce “binary” and separation as a mode of ruling. In other words, white/black; superior/inferior, civilized/barbarians etc. The central idea behind this was the (mis)use of the bible as a legitimating tool for colonization.
3. Please see <http://www.ufh.ac.za/>
4. IsiXhosa is one of South Africa’s 11 official languages and that it is a Bantu language spoken by Black South Africans.

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