

Debates

Trends and Issues in the Social Sciences and Humanities in Africa

Keynote Lecture delivered at the National Dissertations Workshop Organised by the National Institute of Humanities and Social Sciences (NIHSS) of South Africa Johannesburg, 29-30 July 2015

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- Professor Sitas and Dear Brother
- My Brother Professor Adam Habib
- Professor Nhlanhla Mkhize, Chairperson of SAHUDA
- My Friends Profs Gillian Hart, David Dzanton, Fred Hendricks, Jide Oloyode, Hennie Kotze, and Darlene Miller
- NIHSS Programme Directors Nthabiseng Motseme and Yolanda Davids
- Colleagues,

I would like to begin by congratulating Prof. Sitas and Dr Motsoetsa for not only having done the excellent job of leading the consultations that led to the adoption of the Charter for Humanities and Social Sciences, but also for the establishment of NIHSS, which is a direct result of the earlier work on the Charter.

I would also like to thank you for inviting CODESRIA to be a partner in the African Pathways Project. This workshop is another important milestone in the advancement of the social sciences and humanities in our continent, and in the collaboration between NIHSS, CODESRIA and SAHUDA.

It is therefore both an honour and a privilege for me to be here today, and to speak to this important gathering.

The topic that was chosen for me is: *The State of the Social Sciences and Humanities in Africa*. That is a very broad topic. So, I asked myself what would be the best way of speaking about the state of the social sciences and humanities in Africa to an audience of great scholars, and hundreds of doctoral students who are aspiring to become great scholars in the social sciences and humanities.

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The SSH: Trends and Issues

Fifteen years ago, I wrote a working paper on *The Social Sciences in Africa: Trends, Issues, Capacities and Constraints* that was published by the New York Based *Social Science Research Council* (SSRC). The paper was my contribution to an ambitious project aimed at "*Mapping Human Capital Globally*", which was, in fact, an attempt to review the state of the social sciences around the world through a series of studies on Asia, Europe, the Middle East, the Americas, etc. and I did the review of the social sciences in Africa.

In that working paper, I looked at four sets of issues; and will look at the same issues in this presentation, because they still are among the key issues to consider in any serious review of the state of the social sciences and humanities. The issues are the following:

- i) The institutional base for knowledge production in Africa and how it has been evolving, with different generations of institutions and the diversification of institutional types and modes (from what were in the early sixties just a few 'traditional' universities that were almost all public universities, and almost all contact universities—the main exception being UNISA), to the many hundreds – that are now thousands – of public and private higher education institutions (HEIs) of all shapes and kinds, many of which are engaged in mixed modes of delivery, and have not only contact students, but also distance learners; etc. particularly

with the revolution in the ICTs, and the formidable advancement of internationalisation: virtual universities, off-shore campuses; public and private institutes, centres and laboratories; etc. The diversification of sites of knowledge production was just overwhelming. Today, barely 15 years after I completed the study, the complexity of the institutional landscape has become much greater than anybody could imagine at the time. What Zeleza called the "six Cs" – corporatisation of management, collectivisation of access, commercialisation of learning, commodification of knowledge, computerisation of education, and connectivity of institutions – have reached enormous levels (Zeleza 2004). Many of these changes are global, but with a particular meaning for scholarship in Africa that we need to fully understand.

- ii) The second set of issues had to do with the social science disciplines: those considered to be the core disciplines of the social sciences and humanities (sociology, political science, anthropology, history, economics, etc.), as well as the multidisciplinary fields of study: cultural studies, human rights studies, conflict and peace studies, gender studies, development studies, etc. The modes of institutionalisation of these disciplines in the academy are interesting to note. The fragmentation of the disciplines and fields into sub-disciplines and sub-fields in the name of specialisation is also fascinating; under the dominant neoliberal context – neoliberal globalisation – the development of a market logic in the social sciences (some call it the "marketization of the social sciences"; see Burawoy's review of the Gulbenkian Commission report

Opening the Social Sciences; Burawoy XXX), has both increased the fragmentation of the social sciences and humanities, and brought about changes in the ranking of the disciplines and fields of study, and changes in the criteria for determining even what is HE, or SSH research of high quality, and what is not. The Gulbenkian Commission, set up by a Portuguese foundation, the Calyxte Gulbenkian Foundation, was led by Immanuel Wallerstein, and had among its members a linguist (Valentin Mudimbe, a physics Nobel laureate (Ilya Prigogine), etc. was truly multidisciplinary and its task was to review the social sciences globally and identify trends. In its report the Commission argued that the future of the social sciences is in their further opening. This was in the mid-nineties of the last century. Ten years later, Burawoy, in his review argued that what actually happened was not the further opening of the social sciences, but their increased fragmentation as a result of their marketization: in the name of specialization, many new fields, sub-fields and sub-disciplines have emerged, thus increasing the boundaries and what I would call 'enclosures' within the social sciences. These days, 'relevance' – market, or policy-relevance – is often used to determine 'quality', and set priorities. The major trends also include the rise to prominence of the disciplines that seem to have greater market value and produce more marketable skills, students and other kinds of products, such as the STEM/STEAM; and MODE II (Giddens) type knowledges, and the neglect of the "public good" in HE and research (Singh; Sawyerr). Disciplines like history experienced great difficulties – CODESRIA actually launched an "SOS African History" initiative to support the discipline. These changes are also global, but with a particular meaning for scholarship in Africa that we need to fully understand.

iii) The third set of issues I looked at was related to the scholars themselves, particularly those in the human and social sciences. In a paper published in CODESRIA Bulletin in 1995, Thandika Mkandawire, a former executive secretary of CODESRIA, identified "Three Generations of

African Scholars" (see Mkandawire 1995; Mkandawire 1997). I think we can now talk about four or five generations. From the generations that studied or did their research under conditions of colonialism, or the Cold War, or apartheid, to the generations of the age of the internet and of neoliberal globalisation, there are great differences: the historical experiences are different; the worldviews are different; the issues facing the societies in which they are evolving are different; the ways data collection and research, teaching, publishing, even conferencing are done have all changed (NB we now have not only Skype conferences, but also "webinars", etc.). The MOOCS are another good example of the changed ways; these changes are global, but with a particular meaning for scholarship in Africa that we need to fully understand.

iv) The fourth and last set of issues I looked at are the research themes that we have been taking up, and the debates in the social sciences and humanities that we have been having in Africa. I give a few examples:

a. Decolonizing the social sciences and humanities; i.e. the need to transform what Mudimbe calls the "colonial library" – that has not only African, but also Oriental and Latin American variants (see the Said's *Orientalism*; and Dussel's *The Invention of the Americas*, published 12 years before Said's *Orientalism* but dealing with the very same issues). The colonial library side-lined the other libraries that preceded it (Kane). As was noted in a conference that CODESRIA organised with Point Sud in January 2013, the 'colonial library' also covered many more aspects of life than texts and ways of knowing. It was in fact pervasive, for it shaped African music, dances, bodily expressions, etc. The colonial library, I would argue, has also metamorphosed into a larger 'imperial' library that lives to this day. The transformation of the colonial library is therefore just a first step towards the transformation of the larger "imperial library", and the transformation of the global epistemological order (Zezeza 2004). The great African leader Amilcar

Cabral used to say that "we need to think with our own heads, in the context of our own realities". Put differently, we need to look at social reality in our own societies and in the world around us with our own eyes, using our own lenses, rather than using the conceptual and theoretical frameworks or lenses we borrowed from Europe. We need to look at the world from where we are, rather than trying to look at the world from where other people are.

b. The challenge of autonomy has been and still is a major challenge for the social sciences and humanities in Africa (Adesina xxx; Sall and Ouedraogo 2012); the independence of the mind is a pre-condition for the independence of the nation and the continent. Thabo Mbeki, former president of South Africa, in his attempts to promote African Renaissance, called for the rebuilding of Carthage which, he argued, was a metaphor for African independence. I think we must also rebuild Timbuktu, the metaphor of African intellectual triumph. The parallels between Carthage and Timbuktu are interesting to note. As Mbeki reminded us, for 150 years, every Roman emperor set himself as a primary task the conquest of Carthage, in what is present day Tunisia; because Carthage was flourishing and competing Rome for 'global' prominence. In the end, one of the Roman emperors succeeded in conquering Carthage. Timbuktu, in the 15th and 16th centuries, i.e. several centuries after the fall of Carthage, also became a prominent centre of scholarship that attracted scholars from far and near, until it was invaded by Morocco and its greatest intellectuals like Ahmed Baba were deported to Morocco (see *The Meanings of Timbuktu* edited by Jeppie and Diagne; and Kane's *Non-Europhone Intellectuals*).

c. Our own identity and our history – the debates about ethnicity and nationhood, and those on 'Africanity' involving Mafeje and others, and those about "African modes of self-writing" (Mbembe), are good illustrations. So are the debates on ethnic and national identities, and the attempts to re-write our histories (as part of the decolonisation of our past.

The need to re-write history was also felt after the Rwandan genocide, and after apartheid). There is a "General History of Senegal" that is also currently being written, following the UNESCO General History of Africa. Dominant historical paradigms are being challenged in many of these cases, using and recognising as legitimate a whole range of new sources and methods of inquiry, and re-framing dominant narratives. This struggle over identities and for the reclaiming of our pasts and futures has actually been going on for a long time, and have been central to the work of almost all the great pan African intellectuals such as Cheikh Anta Diop.

Other themes and issues explored include the following:

- i) The emancipation and independence of Africa, and liberation from apartheid
- ii) The transformation and development of African economies and societies
- iii) Crises and structural adjustment
- iv) Politics and Governance in Africa, and the challenges of building inclusive, democratic and developmental states and governance systems on our continent
- v) Regional integration
- vi) Environmental change
- vii) The Health challenges – maternal and infant mortality; HIV/AIDs, malaria; today we also talk about EVD (Ebola)
- viii) Education, and HE
- ix) Youth and youth cultures
- x) Gender
- xi) Globalisation; the BRICS; etc.

And so forth and so on. The list is long. Colleagues, and friends, I can take each one of these sets of issues and demonstrate that most of the trends I observed 15 years ago are still unfolding. If anything, they have become more complex, but they still exist.

The points I want to make are the following:

- i) The factors that have a role in determining the state of the social sciences and humanities in Africa are many and varied.
- ii) The criteria for assessing the social sciences and humanities to determine

whether they are 'healthy' or not are also of different kinds; one can use the bibliometric data, or the citation indexes, most of which are developed in the North, to count the number of articles in what are considered to be the only "international peer reviewed / referred journals" (a category from which journals produced by scholars in Africa are often excluded); etc. etc. and come to the obvious conclusion that in global terms, Africa hosts very few international journals, produces very little, all disciplines combined; and among the disciplines, the SSH produce even less; African universities are not ranked very highly, whether it is in the Shanghai rankings or in other global rankings. Our think tanks are also not ranked very highly (see the annual GOTO Global Think Tank Reports published by the Think Tanks and Civil Society Program of the University of Pennsylvania). Within Africa, the real 'scientific countries' are South Africa, followed by Nigeria, Egypt, and Kenya. There is certainly great value in these rankings and citation indexes. But the stories they tell are very partial. They also tend to mirror the inequalities of power at the global level (see WSSR 2010, on "Knowledge Divides").

- iii) More important: the exercise itself, i.e. determining the state of the social sciences and humanities, whether it is in Africa or elsewhere, is not a neutral or value free exercise. For instance, African scholars have demonstrated through our research that SAP was very problematic and was not likely to lead to the positive transformation of African economies, societies or politics, and came up with serious criticisms of the Structural adjustment policies imposed by the Bretton Woods institutions (WB and IMF) on the world 20 years before former senior officials of the Bank came round to admitting that there were problems with SAP. Africans continued debating SAP and its effects long after SAP had ceased to be seen by scholars else-where as an important subject of scholarly debates. As a matter of fact, for many mainstream economists and political scientists, there was nothing wrong with the Bank's policies or those of

the IMF: the problems were said to be with us and with our economies. I don't think that today the Greeks would agree with such views that are also expressed by social scientists, including African social scientists. These days, the scholars who dare to challenge the dominant discourses about the private sector or about the market, or about globalisation are in the minority.

Therefore the epistemological issues and the methodological issues are as important in the assessment of the state of the social sciences in Africa as they are to the research and writing of the doctoral dissertations that you are working on or about to embark upon.

These are some of the reasons that led to the creation of a pan African social science research council called CODESRIA, so as to promote social science research and research based publishing in Africa.

CODESRIA is also interested in developing an African indexation system. The reasons are the same as those that made CODESRIA engage in publishing journals, including a journal of social science methodology (with Ouedraogo and Hendricks as editors), and an Africa Review of Books, an African Sociological Review (Jide and Fred present here have been lead editors of that review), etc.

That is also why CODESRIA is investing in the nurturing of new generations of scholars and collaborating with NIHSS in a great project like the African pathways Project.

Therefore, what I would do in what is left of the time allocated to me is to review some of the major trends and issues in the social sciences and humanities in today's Africa, with particular reference to the CODESRIA experience.

As we speak, CODESRIA itself is engaged in two processes:

- i) a comprehensive internal review that includes a review of its intellectual agenda and
- ii) preparations for a meeting to review and plan for the further advancement of the CODESRIA African Humanities Programme to be held in Accra on 28-29 August.

CODESRIA and Where the Social Sciences Seem to be Going

A good way of getting to know where the social sciences and humanities (SSH) in Africa are is to look at Africa's problems and the problems of today's world and see how the SSH are addressing them. The SSH are concerned with society and social relations. The major challenges facing our societies, our continent, and our world at each given moment therefore tend to become the subjects of research and debates in the SSH. Colonialism, decolonisation, nation/state building, pan Africanism; apartheid, post-apartheid transformation, development, democratisation; climate change, globalisation, conflict, what Wole Soyinka calls the 'new imperialisms' (Soyinka 2009), or the "liberated zones and spaces" (Micere Mugo); or the ITCs revolution, and so forth and so on.

One major complicating factor is the fact that the world and the societies we live in are unequal, and those inequalities have found their way into the world of knowledge production itself. The social and global divides are mirrored by knowledge divides. The power relations at the global and country levels tend to shape and be shaped by knowledges of various kinds, produced in different locations. Euro-American domination of Africa and other regions of the world goes hand – in – hand with the dominant position that the Euro-American academy occupies in the global intellectual community. Put differently, the global epistemological order tends to mirror the global order. The transformation of the epistemological order is therefore seen by many as an integral part, if not a pre-condition for the transformation of the global order.

It is therefore not by mere chance that the theme chosen for the third World Social Science Forum in Durban (to be jointly hosted by HSRC, CODESRIA and the ISSC, in September 2015) is: "Transforming Global Relations for a Just World".

The SSH in Africa have been and still are engaged in that battle, a battle that was at first aimed at decolonising the SSH and transforming what Mudimbe calls the colonial library, that is similar to the battle against what Edward Said called 'orientalism' – and we know from a recent article by Farid Alatas of the National University of Singapore that orientalism is still a

major problem in Asian scholarship, as indigenous and endogenous intellectual production is still largely overlooked as scholars tend to give pre-eminence to Western scholars and scholarship (Alatas 2015).

Indeed, as the mechanisms of domination reproduce themselves and metamorphose into new forms, so do the concepts and theories that inform them. The question is whether we in Africa in particular, and in the global South, have been keeping up with the evolution of not only the forms and mechanisms of foreign domination, but also other forms of domination within our own societies, and whether we have been able to interrogate the concepts and theories that we use to produce knowledge. My good brother Professor Vusi Gumede put it nicely in one of his interventions at a recent conference he co-hosted at UNISA: "have we been able to look at our societies and the world around us from where we are and not from where other people are"? (Gumede 2015 – paraphrasing Cabral's famous quote: We must "think with our own heads, in the context of our own realities".

I go back to the first question I asked: how have the SSH been addressing the problems of Africa and the world of today?

I think it no longer is a question of whether or not we are, in Africa, researching the issues that are high on the national, regional and global policy agendas, such as poverty, inequality, global warming, regional integration, post-apartheid transformation etc. Because there is a lot of work being done on all those issues.

There are, however, a few exceptions; a couple of issues that we are yet to take up as fully as we ought to be doing, such as the study of representations of the future in our continent (e.g. the whole debate about the African Union's *Agenda 2063*). At the 14th General Assembly of CODESRIA – and the scientific conference of the CODESRIA General Assembly is a good barometer for getting a sense of where the SSH are in Africa, particularly with regard to issues related to the theme of the conference – some of the most highly respected scholars of this continent argued that the business of social science is not to engage in what one of them called 'star-gazing'; i.e. trying to predict what the future holds. The best thing we could do, it was further argued, is to "historicize the present". Now, these

colleagues for whom we have enormous respect, obviously do not consider futures studies as a field in which the social sciences should venture.

Yet prospective or futures studies is a whole field of study that is well recognised as a legitimate field of study that is now well – institutionalised in universities in Europe and North America. But that is a very under-developed field in Africa where the African Futures Institute of UNISA is among the very few such institutes in Africa (Al Ahran Strategic Studies Centre also has a focus on futures).

In this year's edition of the annual CODESRIA Governance Institute that began in Dakar two days ago, the director, Abdallah Cisse, who is a lawyer by training and has been dean of the law faculty of Gaston Berger University for many years, is working hard to introduce participants to prospective analysis. The theme is "Cybersecurity, Sovereignty, and Governance in Africa". His argument is that in matters related to cybersecurity, the books and journal articles on those issues are often outdated by the time they are published, because the changes are extremely rapid. More fundamentally, he argued, a society that is not capable of imagining a future for itself is a society that has no future. Or at best it will have its future determined for it by others. And we have many people and institutions that may or may not be well – meaning who are offering us 'advice' about how to understand China's role in Africa, how to manage our economies etc.

The time of politics, as Aminata Diaw Cisse, a colleague of mine often argues, is not the present but the future, because it is about anticipating what could happen, and planning where that is possible. Part of the problem we have in Africa is that managing emergencies seem to occupy the best part of the time of our policy makers. Souleymane Bachir Diagne has also argued that a prospective approach and what he calls a "political culture of time" are indispensable for development (see Diagne 2005; Diagne 2013 Diagne 2014; and Diagne 2015). Diagne is a philosopher who has been a member of the EC of CODESRIA for six years, after which he became the chair of the scientific committee for five years, part of which time Archie Mafeje was a member of the same Scientific Committee.

It is however important to note that there is a major difference between the Social sciences and the humanities when it comes to discourses on, and representations of the future. Just one illustration: in the early nineties, Ama Ata Aidoo, a great writer from Ghana, wrote a story titled "*She-Who-Would-Be-King*", that is about a ten-year old girl who said she would like to be the president of her country when she grows old, but was told that the men won't allow that. 50 years later, her daughter was elected the first president of the newly formed Confederation of African States – sort of realization of Nkrumah's United States of Africa. This is in 2026. The men, who were amazed, said the president of the whole of Africa cannot be a woman, it must be a king. And because it is a woman who has been elected president of Africa, then she must be a "She-King" (see Adam et al.). Kofi Anyidoho argues in an article on Ghanaian literature and pan Africanism that Ama Ata Aidoo is among many other writers discussing the future.

The social sciences in Africa are therefore far behind the humanities in that regard.

Another area where the SSH in Africa are also not really engaged is area studies in Africa; i.e. in the study of other regions – not "African studies", but the study of other regions of the world from where we are in Africa: there are extremely few research centers and institutes in Africa that specialize in the study of other regions of the world. We therefore are not producing knowledge on or about the trade and other partners and competitors of Africa. At a conference on China-Africa relations that CODESRIA in 2011 in Nairobi, one colleague presented a review of 900 more or less recent publications on China-Africa relations and the review showed that only 7 per cent of the publications were produced in Africa! This means that the bulk of the knowledge informing policies on China-Africa relations are produced outside of Africa. The situation is changing, but very slowly, as more Chinese studies centers and programmes are being established, and Asian studies in Africa are beginning to get organised (there will be an Asian Studies in Africa conference in Accra in September 2015). However, until today, we have almost serious no French studies, British studies, European studies, American studies, or Latin American and Caribbean studies centers in Africa (Sall 2013).

Therefore if, with a few exceptions, we now are researching and debating almost all issues, the key question then really is that of the extent to which our work is driven by conceptual frameworks that speak to African concerns and to African agency (the concepts of 'afrocentricity' and of 'epistemologies of the South' are to be examined in respect to these concerns). Also important is the extent to which our scholarship speaks to the class and equity issues.

The notion of epistemologies of the South raises the issue of the transformative nature of our scholarship, particularly in the social sciences and humanities. What we have called "Command science" (*la science du commandement*; Sall and Ouedraogo 2012), should not be allowed to completely side-line the science that problematizes conventional wisdom or echoes and amplifies the voices or the voiceless.

Furthermore, it has now become extremely difficult to differentiate agency literature from academic literature, both because the big agencies (development banks and organizations, etc) are producing so much and effectively disseminating their production and pushing hard for the adoption of their perspectives on issues, but also because they employ scholars to write many of their reports.

All this underscores the significance of consultations that led to the adoption of the Charter for the Humanities and Social Sciences, and the creation of the NIHSS that brought us here today.

It is in that regard also that we, in the SSH, must continue to interrogate the dominant narratives about Africa: the negative and the seemingly positive narratives; right up and including the narratives about the BRCIS; 'Africa awakening'; Africa resurgence (Zezeza's latest book); and 'economic emergence' in Africa (18 countries have plans for economic emergence); and *the Africa We Want* that the AU is now at the fore front of, with its Agenda 2063, and the narrative framed in terms of the *World We Want* (title of the Rio +20 Outcome document).

There are many efforts to reclaim our history, and our future, and part of that necessarily involves efforts to reframe the narratives about Africa or frame counter or new narratives.

But we must also interrogate the counter-narratives and the alternative narratives, including the seemingly progressive, or even revolutionary ones among them.

To conclude, I would like to say that social science, dear colleagues, is facing challenges everywhere in the world. The World Social Science Reports of 2010 and 2013 bring this out very clearly. But the challenges we face in Africa appear to be particularly daunting, for three reasons:

- i) We are at the receiving end of the global power relations, including the power relations in the scholarly community and in the larger knowledge production world where big institutions established to promote or sustain the global order also, pose as serious "knowledge institutions" that 'only disseminate, but also get their production and views adopted. This has a direct bearing on what goes for 'good' social science or humanities research and production, and what gets side-lined.
- ii) We still have a long way to go in our efforts to look at the world from where we are, given the great influence that external factors still play in our scholarship (Mudimbe; Zezeza).
- iii) Very few of our policy makers are really convinced that the SSH are of vital importance, and that it is important to provide adequate resources for them. The fascination for the STEM is just too high. In Senegal, a national dialogue on the future of HE in the country, led by a great African philosopher, one of our greatest, recommended to the government to prioritise the STEM as the best way of ensuring that Senegal becomes an emerging power in 25 or so years. One reason for doing that, it was argued, is the fact that student enrolments in the SSH are far bigger than enrolments in the STEM. But also because the STEM are seen as the key to solutions to unemployment, and under-development. Yet even in the USA, a report of the American Academy of Social Sciences and Humanities titled *The Heart of the Matter* released in 2013 argued very strongly that if the US wants to preserve its dominant role in world affairs it must invest in the humanities and social sciences.

There are, however, great opportunities as well. As noted in WSSR 2013 on global



environmental change, we live in a new age: the age of the Anthropocene, one in which the human factor is more determining than ever. Which means that the social sciences and humanities are more relevant than ever, and that relevance is now more and more acknowledged. If climate change was provoked by human beings more than anything else, then obviously human beings must be at the source of the solutions to it. This points to the importance of the SSH.

In reality, the humanities are entering into new areas and fields, which has led to the construction of new sub-fields of study such as the 'medical humanities' and 'digital humanities'. The range of disciplines represented here is a good illustration of the expansion of the fields covered by the SSH.

This makes the case for multi-disciplinarity, inter-disciplinarity, and trans-disciplinarity even more important.

The SSH, the WSSR 2013 concludes, must therefore be bolder, and better.

That is a conclusion that we must take for ourselves in Africa. As you work on your doctoral dissertations, you must say to yourselves that the ground-breaking theories will come from you. After all, that is what every PhD thesis should be about: bringing something new from a theoretical or other point of view. Theory building is where we are probably weakest, but it is where we must make great advances, and you have opportunities for making important theoretical contributions.

Remember, research in the SSH is not so much about inventing formulae for resolving this, or that problem—which does not mean that we should not try to find answers and solutions to our perennial problems of development etc. – it is, as Mahmood Mamdani rightly argued, about asking the good questions, i.e. about how we think!

And that is what made all the great scholars great.

I thank you for your attention, and I wish you well!

Reference

Zezeza, P.T., 2002, "African Universities and Globalisation" http://agi.ac.za/sites/agi.ac.za/files/fa_1_feature_article_3.pdf