



Leading an Academic Staff Union as a Middle-level Academic (2003–2013)

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Abstract

This article examines the emergence of the author as a leader of the Universities Academic Staff Union at a university in East Africa. Using the role, resource and constraint-based theories as well as autoethnography, which is a sub-category of qualitative research, the author traces the intellectual and political ferment that enabled him to become a unionist. From the discussion that emanated from the data he collected, from memos, newspaper articles and personal memories, it became increasingly clear that as a unionist his story demonstrates tensions, contestations and in some cases expensive trade-offs. Overall, there were actions that he performed well and others that he would implement differently were he given a second chance to lead the union.

Keywords: autoethnography, Universities Academic Staff Union, protest literature.

Résumé

Cet article examine l'émergence de l'auteur en tant que leader du syndicat du personnel enseignant d'une université d'Afrique de l'Est. En utilisant les théories basées sur le rôle, les ressources et les contraintes ainsi que l'auto-ethnographie, qui est une sous-catégorie de la recherche qualitative, l'auteur retrace le ferment intellectuel et politique qui lui a permis de devenir un syndicaliste. À partir de la discussion qui a émané des données qu'il a recueillies, des mémos, des articles de journaux et des souvenirs personnels, il est devenu de plus en plus clair qu'en tant que syndicaliste, son histoire témoigne de tensions, de contestations et, dans certains cas, de compromis ruineux. Dans l'ensemble, il y a des actions qu'il a bien menées et d'autres qu'il mettrait en œuvre différemment, si on lui donnait une seconde chance de diriger le syndicat.

Mots-clés : auto-ethnographie, syndicat du personnel enseignant d'université, littérature de manifestation estudiantine.

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Introduction

Personal experience as a way of generating, documenting and disseminating knowledge has existed from time immemorial. Even then, until very recently, it has not been legitimated in the academy as an acceptable method of harnessing objective knowledge. Experience which has a knowledge constructing element to it is what has come to be called autoethnography (Bochner 2016).

Purpose

The purpose of this article is to document and analyse my journey as a middle-level academic leader with a view to demonstrating how I negotiated the various knotty situations as Secretary General of the Universities Academic Staff Union (UASU). I served in this position from 2003 to 2013. According to the Constitution of the union, one can offer oneself for election for two terms, each of which lasted five years. I was elected unopposed for both terms, not because I was the best candidate but because unionism is a dangerous activity in my part of the world, and it needed some tact and bravery to get involved in it. The constituents of the university I served imagined that I was invested with both. Little did they know the contradictions and compromises I had to negotiate in the course of executing my duties. My intention is to show that as a middle-level leader one has to be focused, fair, flexible, be open to negotiation and seek the guidance of the Muse and fellow human beings in decision-making.

Scope

I have undertaken many responsibilities in my capacity as an academic and a private citizen. For the purposes of this study, I will focus on only one, namely when I was Secretary General of the UASU at one branch. This role required specific skills for its successful enactment, which sometimes were contradictory and at other times in harmony with one another. I have elected to write about the role I played in the union because it is the most dramatic and evocative period in my life. Not only did it provide an opportunity for me to interact with human beings in a direct and immediate way, and a window that enabled me to understand and appreciate their unique characteristics, but it also impacted my fortunes in profound ways.

Theoretical Framework

Three theoretical perspectives will be used to describe and analyse my roles relative to the various roles I played from 2003 to 2013.

Role Theory

Role theory appears to be more relevant in elucidating how I assumed leadership in the Universities Academic Staff Union. My background as an undergraduate student in a Kenyan university in the 1980s shaped my view of life and attitude. Role theory refers to behaviour in general and in particular to spontaneous deeply felt behaviour (Leghan, Buda and Eisner 2007). The significant fact about role theory in relation to this study is that it attempts to explain the position or status of roles in the family as well as informal ways in which one has to stand up. The theory will enable me to explain activities and behaviour I exhibited during my active union days.

Resource-based Theory

A central tenet of resource-based theory is that organisations compete based on available resources and capabilities (Peteraf and Bergen 2003). Resource-based theorists look within an organisation and down to the market factors that the organisation must contend with. Moreover, they search for possible causes of sustainable competitive advantages that hold the environmental factors constant (ibid). This inward-looking approach is useful in analysing strategic issues (Pankaj 2010). Among them are conditions for sustained competitive advantage and diversification. I have used resource-based theory to link the role I played relative to the available resources that were at the disposal of the organisation I was responsible for heading.

This theory is appropriate because I started leading the union just as it had been formed and registered. At the time of registration, the resource base of the union was weak because members had not contributed enough money to enable the union to run its programmes. As the spokesperson, I relied on impromptu fundraising from members and well-wishers, and improvised ways of handling financial difficulties. I would, for instance, hop on a *matatu* to attend National Executive Committee meetings in the city. As the union finances gradually improved through members' subscription and by writing proposals to more established unions such as the Central Organisation of Trade Unions and American Solidarity, the Universities Academic Staff Union was able to carry out its training programmes. However, resources remained a headache especially during lockouts when union members whose salaries had been stopped would deplete the coffers.

Constraints-based Theory

This theory is based on a systematic way of solving organisational problems. The theory states that systems have constraints that they have to overcome through developing simple solutions to address complex problems (Kim, Mabin and Davies 2008). This theory has been a useful orienting framework to explain the various constraints I encountered while I was trying to accomplish my duties and how I went about solving them. A union official negotiates among uncomfortable zones. On the one hand he has to satisfy his often impatient members. Any signs of letting up on the union's declared goal is deemed as a betrayal to the cause of the union. Members are suspicious of an official who is congenial with the employer and at the same time determines to negotiate their welfare in good faith and with a free heart. On the other hand, the employer lacks trust in the union official, seeing him as a pursuer of unreasonable demands, untrustworthy and erratic. The union official is always torn between these camps of irreconcilable personalities and social forces.

Methodology

The methodology I applied in collecting, collating and conflating the main ideas with regard to the role I played in the service of the community at various intervals of my life was qualitative. There are many and varied qualitative methods of research. For the purpose of this specific research, I engaged autoethnography because of its appropriateness for the task at hand. Autoethnography enabled the researcher to tease out information about his professional life. Moreover, autoethnography enabled me to connect my personal experiences to the larger community.

Autoethnography

According to Ellis (2004), autoethnography is a genre of writing in which authors draw on their own lived experiences, connect the personal and place the self and others within a social context. In this case, it involves telling my own story through what I saw and heard during my tenure as secretary general of the union, through critically reading memos and various documents such as appointment letters, warning letters, sacking letters in the context of my role as a leader at a specific time. Personal experiences also embellished and refurbished the discussion and situated it within my scholarly orientation. An indispensable attribute of autoethnography is that personal narration is as important to the person writing it as it is to the community to which that person belongs (Ilo 2018). *Facing Mount Kenya*

(Kenyatta 1938) is among the first autoethnographic works to be written in East Africa. In that monograph, the author, Jomo Kenyatta, reports research findings on his peoples' political, economic and social way of life. In the course of the discussion and narrative, the disinterested voice of the analyst is intertwined with the voice of the participant-observer of the activities of his people. Kenyatta's publication typifies the earliest form of autoethnography. It is along the same lines and in the same spirit that this discussion is undertaken.

The move away from the text as a self-contained, self-referential whole was a reading technique initiated in literary scholarship in the 1920s by the American New Critics. This method of textual engagement reached its zenith in 1967 when Barthes (1993) declared 'The Death of the Author'. The composer was dead because as soon as she or he accomplished the task of composing, the product of composition attained a self-sustaining life independent of its creator. Roland Barthes did not agree with the New Critics on many counts but on this particular one, they coincidentally concurred.

Contrary to the stance advanced by the New Critics, postmodernists view the subjectivity of the author as important in mediating the meaning of the text. The author's subject position is not necessarily in-built in the text but in the setting outside of the text. Therefore, an understanding that ascribes the origination of the text to the author enables readers to some large degree to apprehend and appreciate the author. This constitutes contemporary discursive practices. As Hirsch (2003) argues:

Hermeneutics must stress a reconstruction of the author's aims and attitudes in order to evolve guides and norms for construing the meaning of his text. ... For even though verbal meaning must conform to public norms, no mere sequence of words can represent an actual verbal meaning with reference to public norms alone. ... the array of possibilities only begins to become a more selective system of probabilities when, instead of confronting merely a word sequence, we also posit a speaker who very likely means something (Hirsch 2003: 18–19).

With these words, Hirsch, in typical postmodern mould, debunks the position held by the New Critics and, to some extent, the structuralists. I agree with Hirsch when he argues that the originator of the verbal symbol should be resurrected in the act of interpreting the text.

In this article, the author coded and analysed autoethnographic data as is done through the techniques of critical discourse analysis, especially on the role of discourse in the reproduction and challenge of dominance as Van Dijk (1993) says. I envisaged the functions I performed as strategic

acts of challenging dominance or complying with dominant authority. At every point in my role, I was keenly aware of my position as an actor among authority figures who would not necessarily agree with me. The conscious positioning of myself within my writing opened possibilities for evocative and creative ways in which I represented my realities and my research participants in the texts.

Objections to the Methodology and How to Avoid Biases

While positionality is a viable technique of generating knowledge about the self, biases could be produced and propagated instead of reliable and valid information. In fact, some scholars have objected to the use of autoethnography to generate knowledge because of its inherent subjectivity. Hufford (1995) criticises autoethnography because he envisions it as a self-indulgent and self-limiting technique for human inquiry due to its over-reliance on subjectivity. I have, however, guarded against absolute subjectivity by analysing knowledge of the self through dialectical self-questioning. Secondly, through engaging with interlocutors in my area of study, I have been sensitised as to the possible areas of encroachment of bias. On embarking on this writing, the major challenge I faced was how to deal with what I perceived as my weaknesses. It took some serious introspection before I concluded that it would benefit my readers and myself if I told the story as it was. My interlocutors were basically advisors whose views and opinions I would agree or disagree with, depending on the exigencies of time. This usually came at the time when the strike needed to be called off. Many arguments would be mounted before reaching the resolution.

Review of the Literature

I will examine scholars such as Al-Alamin Mazrui, Willy Mutunga and Irungu Munene, who lived through the turbulent times at Kenya's universities during the struggle for self-determination by academic staff. Reference to people who have used their own stories, their biographies and autobiographies to construct their service to the societies they come from will be of use in weaving my own tale. Moreover, I will emphasise the criticism that has been written about them and how it contributes to the understanding of my role. Apart from Kenyatta (1938), many writers on the African continent have used part of their autobiographical work and revelations in their biographies by others to show how they have determined or influenced their professional life. Among these authors are Kaunda (1962), Mandela (2002) and Sicherman (1990).

Mazrui and Mutunga (1995) analyse the story of the Universities Academic Staff Union (UASU) from its founding and demonstrate how the Kenyan state, as an employer of academic staff, crippled its operations. At the time of the agitation for the registration of UASU, Kenya was led by an absolutist government that was intolerant of challenge and dissent, especially when the challenge came from employees who were regarded as the custodians of the state's interests. The two scholars place the struggle for the survival of UASU in historical perspective and assist the reader to grasp an understanding of the hurdles the actors in the union had to overcome before they were able to register it. Mazrui and Mutunga also assist me to vividly capture those evocative days.

Munene's burden (1997) is to dramatise the evolution of the Universities Academic Staff Union (UASU) from the University Staff Union (USU). This evolution was confronted all the way by an increasingly autocratic regime, which determined the roadmap of the union actors at the universities. Munene's critical narration is detailed and rich in factual findings and forms a firm background to my own narration.

There are also some artists on the African continent, such as Ousmane (1972) of Senegal, Alex La Guma (1972) of South Africa, Said Ahmed Mohamed (1980) of Tanzania, Abdilatif Abdalla (1973) and Al-Amin Mazrui (1981) of Kenya, who contributed in indirect ways to how the researcher negotiated his knotty circumstances. These works introduced me to socialist literature and modes of thinking that were not only revolutionary but were in vogue as the only fundamental way of implementing the African revolution. Finally, in my formative years at the university, I had intense interactions with Amilcar Cabral's *Unity and Struggle* (1980) and *The Wretched of the Earth* by Frantz Fanon (1963) respectively, which had lasting impressions on me. There is no doubt that college education opened up my realisation that the problems that human beings face are not willed by the inevitable necessity by which events must occur. On the contrary, they are caused knowingly or unknowingly by the desire of some human beings to impose disorderly processes of life on others. For me to come to that realisation, the works I read had a profound effect on my views of the world and my attitude towards life. Perhaps it was not college education alone but the momentous events unfolding around me that pushed me towards my particular outlook. While on the one hand most African countries that had gained political independence had regressed and embraced kleptocratic and totalitarian tendencies, other countries, which had not got their freedom, were struggling to be freed. In certain profound ways the literature that inspired a change of leadership in independent Africa was the same as the literature that was energising the fight for freedom in southern Africa, Angola, Mozambique, Namibia and Guinea-Bissau.

The works I interacted with influenced me directly and indirectly to participate in the effort that initiated the Universities Academic Staff Union and its activities. The reading of Abdalla (1973) exposed me to the contradictions between capital and labour in Kenya – that some members of society contribute to the creation of wealth yet they don't participate in it. I admired Kaunda's empathy and sympathy with the condition of the colonised and the degraded condition of the African. In particular, I was touched by his narrative of prisoners in Zambia and Zimbabwe during colonial days:

In prison, one goes about not knowing what to expect and this is worse when one is moved to a new prison. In Lusaka prison, we were exempt from the terrible habit of being made to strip naked and then disgracefully jumping up and down by raising one of your legs to show you were carrying nothing between your legs (Abdalla 1973: 129).

Such are the writings that jolted me until I began thinking of modest ways through which I could contribute to making the world a worthier place to live in. My interaction with my lecturers through their lectures and writings, personalities such as Austin Bukenya, Al-Amin Mazrui, Gitahi Gititi and Osotsi Mtaali Ramenga, shaped my thinking. Mazrui's play, *Kilio cha Haki* (1980) is about the exploitation of farm workers and their determination to reverse their situation. Although the workers do not succeed, the play ends on an optimistic note.

A Bird's Eye's View of my Life

My life spans beyond my professional role as a unionist and a middle-level administrator at a university in Kenya. It begins slightly over thirty years earlier. I was told by my parents that I was born on 1 January 1960 at Khalumuli village in the present day Webuye West Sub-County in Bungoma. They did not know the exact date of my birth but my uncle, who was going to school at that time, recorded in a hardcover black book that I was born on Friday 1 January 1960.

Primary School and High School Years

In 1962, Kenyan leaders had successfully agitated for political independence and were about to head for the Lancaster House Conference in England. As independence was being ushered in, other plans regarding the Kenyanisation of land, which had hitherto been alienated by the British colonial government, were afoot. Four years after I was born, my parents, Nicholas Makhanu and Rezpah Naliaka, migrated from their

ancestral home to the Settlement Scheme in Kabisi. They started a new life on land that was virgin, fertile, inhabited by wild game and bearing wild fruits. In hindsight, this was reminiscent of the Adamic Garden of Eden. Between 1967 and 1973 I attended Mbakalo Primary School. Apart from the fact that it was the time when I learned basic literacy and writing skills, I cannot remember any dramatic events that could have guided me to my future role as a trade unionist.

In high school, I was introduced to science and arts subjects. My interest in science subjects evaporated instantaneously because I was irredeemably poor in mathematics. However, I attempted to read biology with some measure of success. English literature was my favourite subject. In forms five and six, I settled for literature in English, religious studies and Kiswahili. After examinations in sixth form, I had a long vacation at Mbakalo from December 1979 to August 1980, during which time Mukhisa Kituyi introduced me to the writings of leftist authors. I was not aware at that time that Kituyi had been expelled from the University of Nairobi. When he was staying at home he exuded intellectual robustness, displayed somewhat iconoclastic habits, was a role model and shared freely his views and books. In particular, Rodney's (1972) *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* was transformational to my callow mind. I read the book avidly with a view to obtaining an accurate conception of the role of Europe in the impoverishment of the continent.

At that time Kituyi also introduced me to prison literature (Soyinka 1972). It was prolix, with long-winded prose but not as abstruse as the Soyinka (1984) I was to read later at university. I read *The Man Died* many times and committed some of its passages to memory. I still remember the words of Professor George Mangakis vividly and evocatively: 'the man dies who keeps silent in the face of tranny'. Whenever I encounter a situation that I deem to be repressive, these words ring and echo in my mind as if to admonish me not to be silent. Sometime in the mid-1980s, I again interacted with Kituyi at Mautuma Secondary School, just before he was admitted at Makerere University. There he gave a memorable lecture on the struggle for independence in southern Africa. At the university I was introduced to more protest literature, including, but not limited to, South African writers Alex La Guma, Brutus (1973) and the Jamaican-born South African, Peter Abrahams (1946).

The Kenyan and Tanzanian literary scenes reflected some of the experiences that the inhabitants of the East African region were actually going through. Books such as *Sauti ya Dhiki* (The Voice of Agony), *Chembe Cha Moyo*, *Dunia Mti Mkavu* (The World is a Desiccated Tree) assisted me

to shape my thinking in a definite direction. Notwithstanding reading these works, I was cowardly and never attempted to implement what I quietly thought was the right action to take. I read and analysed these books as an academic exercise. I was very sensitive to my background, being the first-born child, and believed that if I made the necessary sacrifice, some of my family members would be broken-hearted forever. Because the characters in these works pricked my conscience, I burned and agonised within at my inaction but continually believed that one day I would surely pay the price. I lived under these conditions for the rest of my undergraduate and postgraduate studies. Looking back, I abhor my inaction and my cowardice, knowing what I had to do yet doing nothing for fear of incarceration. I feel ashamed too. What makes it particularly harrowing is that I absconded responsibility consciously.

I completed my first degree in 1984, and taught literature and Kiswahili studies for three years at North Eastern Province Girls' High School in present-day Garissa County. At that time the region was plagued by a rebel movement called Shifta, which wanted to hive off part of Kenya to Somalia. The fear of being attacked at any time and of being very far from home made many people who had been posted to teach in the region seek transfer on the very day they landed there. Incidentally, I had matured a bit and never sought to move away until I got admission to the University of Nairobi to study for a Master of Arts degree in Literature.

In Garissa, I interacted with local and expatriate teachers and made good friends with them. I was deeply touched by the lack of infrastructure and other basic amenities, including medical staff and trained teachers. This was the one reason that motivated me to stay there longer than other workers did. I completed my Master of Arts degree in 1989 and was appointed to teach Kiswahili literature at university level in October of the same year. I taught as a tutorial fellow from 1989 to 1992, when I was promoted to lecturer. At that time, Kenya was at the high-water mark of repression. There was agitation for democratic governance. Gradually, I came out of my shell and began speaking out about aspects of Kenyan life that were not right. I realised that if I did not take part in making change, I would not be at peace with my conscience.

I spoke with my family members to explain my position, a position which I had held for long and yet had not come forward to implement it. When I finally made this conscious decision, I was in harmony with all the literature of commitment I had read. It was time to come out in the open at whatever cost. Failure to do so would render all my reading and experience of suffering and oppression in vain. At the village, I joined a

progressive opposition party headed by a veteran oppositionist. I assisted in mobilising, educating and conscientising citizens to understand why the party was formed. I realised that the same fears that had bedevilled me initially were gnawing at their bones as well. I shared with them my experience and gradually, they began to understand what it meant to fight for one's rights.

The First Strike: The Making of a Union Leader

On 29 November 1993, a meeting was held at Kenyatta University to explore the possibilities of registering a university staff union. Such an effort had been initiated in the 1980s but had been nipped in the bud by the then government. Similar meetings were held at the University of Nairobi, Moi University and Egerton University. Other universities were university colleges. Of these, three had not been inaugurated altogether. As happens in such first meetings, the first agenda was to nominate interim officials as a prelude to proper elections. I was nominated by the Kenyatta University fraternity as interim Assistant Secretary of the Universities Academic Staff Union, Kenyatta University Chapter. I took the responsibility cautiously, as I was aware, through experience, of what risks I was undertaking.

At the same time as the meeting took place, the interim officials launched a nationwide strike with the aim of compelling the government to register the lecturer's union, or UASU. The timing of the meeting and strike was ill-fated, for as soon as the strike was called it was dubbed illegal by government agencies and university chief administrators were directed to deal with striking lecturers accordingly. In any case it was against the law for any unregistered organisation to hold a meeting. In line with that directive, the vice-chancellor of Kenyatta University offered the 'fatherly advice' that whoever went back to work would earn her or his November 1993 salary without any reprisals. Just as Fanon says in *The Wretched of the Earth*, that the police are used in the colonial hinterland to suppress any resistance or quest for alternative sources of empowerment, it is also true for those living in a postcolonial society. As soon the strike was declared, lorries full of helmeted policemen were seen patrolling outside Kenyatta University campus. The chief executive officer of the university used soft power to entice the lecturers back to the lecture rooms. The day of the meeting was a Monday, and by Thursday of the same week less than fifty lecturers out of a workforce of about three hundred were still on strike. The rest had gone back to their stations, signed a form in which they pledged to work and denounce the strike and the strikers, and earned their pay immediately. Those who did not go back did not earn their salaries.

Ironically, some senior members of the academy went to great lengths to justify why lecturers did not need a union and allegorised the poverty of the lecturers by comparing them with the ascetic priests of the Middle Ages. Moreover, they were at pains to demonstrate that those who were at the front line of registering the union and agitating for higher pay had failed miserably to pursue the noble goals of the academy. These staff were reminiscent of the homeguards who populate the works of Wa Thiong'o (1964), such as *Weep Not Child* and *A Grain of Wheat*, that are set in the colonial period. Since the lecturers who persisted with the strike were few, they were easy prey for the government and university managers. Workers' unions thrive on the solidarity of their membership. No sooner has that solidarity been weakened than they lose their strength to bargain. The consequence of breaking the strike was the immediate dismissal of the interim chairman and secretary general of the union.

In the aftermath of their dismissal, the vice chairman and the assistant secretary general automatically took over the leadership of the union. Together with the interim vice chairman, we inherited a weakened and poor unregistered union. Since the government and university authorities were aware that the union was inconsequential to the operations of the university, they ignored it. Nonetheless, we, the remnants, stood undaunted and gallantly continued to sing 'solidarity' songs. I had to move from a more expensive apartment to a very cheap dwelling. When I received some commission for selling copies of a journal for the Writers' Association of Kenya, I was able to pay rent for ten months. Well-wishers who empathised with our objectives extended moral and material support to us. Support came from Kenya, Tanzania, Namibia and the United States. The individuals who supported us requested to remain anonymous. Perhaps it was this international fraternity and solidarity that kept the fire burning. Since the union was unregistered, its resource base was built through fundraising. We appealed to well-wishers and colleagues to donate and fundraise particularly for the purpose of sustaining the officials who had been dismissed.

By July 1994, about thirty lecturers were still on strike. Our meeting place was within Kenyatta University, near the Protestant chapel, under a tree. It was a strategic place; whenever our colleagues passed by on their way to the lecture halls they looked the other way, as if they were afraid of some nameless, malignant force peering straight at their faces. This encouraged some of them to come forward and confess that, though they supported the registration of the union, they were afraid to stand up the way we were doing. Some of them said that if they joined the strike, their families would starve. The fact that the stalwarts who remained on strike did not intimidate

those who had fallen by the wayside encouraged deserters to support the union privately. For the gesture of standing for the cause of lecturers we earned respect. Senior members of the academic fraternity gradually began empathising with the striking lecturers, and told them that they had shown strong willpower but that it was time they put their weapons in the scabbard. One professor, who was a founder member of the original University Staff Union in 1981, advised me against behaving like the Kremlin hardliners of the 1980s. I relayed the same information to my colleagues.

Shortly after this piece of advice, we held a brief meeting at a private venue and decided on the strategy to officially call off the strike. The university administration had ignored us and never imagined that we would be interested in going back to work. We wrote letters demonstrating our willingness to resume duty; after three months, the university informed the heads of our departments to allocate us a workload. On hindsight, I think that while the university administrators were operating at the behest of their mandate to hire and fire, they were very empathetic with our cause in that particular instance. They understood that university academic staff needed a forum through which they could express their grievances and yet would not openly express this gesture. We resumed our duties without much drama and quietly as if nothing had happened.

Later on in my life, when I ruminated over those events, I was reminded of the words of one of the characters in Albert Camus's (1947) novel, *La Peste*, translated as *The Plague* in English. In that novel the character, Dr Rieux, spends all his life fighting against the plague and helping to lessen the pain of plague victims when he can. The plague is so real and pervasive that it is transmuted into all areas of the life of the characters. Yet, as suddenly as the plague emerged on the scene, it equally mysteriously disappeared from the same scene. Without belabouring any philosophical and allegorical interpretations of this incident, the words of Dr. Rieux are telling:

He knew what those jubilant crowds did not know but could have learned from books: that the plague bacillus never disappears or dies for good; that it can lie dormant for years and years in furniture and linen-chests; that it bides its time in bedrooms and bookshelves; and perhaps the day would come when for the bane and the enlightening of men it roused up its rats again and sent them forth to die in a happy city. (Camus 1947)

Just like Camus's character, I believed that our return to work did not signal the end of the struggle for academic freedom for university lecturers. The struggle for academic freedom and marginalisation was part and parcel of the struggle for democratic space. As expressive space was muted, many people found solace in organisations and parties that fought against dictatorial

tendencies. After the wave of agitating for the registration of the union was temporarily put down, I went back to class to teach *Fasihi ya Kiswahili* but remained politically active in my constituency.

In 1998 I was awarded a scholarship by the Fulbright Foundation and left Kenya for the United States to study for a Doctor of Philosophy degree in Comparative Literature at Indiana University (Bloomington). Meanwhile, events were taking place at a momentous pace in Kenya. Four years after I left the country, elections were held and for the first time an opposition candidate won with a landslide victory. Within months of the election, the Universities Academic Staff Union was registered, the vice-chancellor of Kenyatta University was chased away by the restive academic staff, and elections were held in all the union's branches. I returned in 2003 to what I genuinely believed to be a transmogrified geographical space. However, I was surprised that most of the officials of the union that had been elected early in 2003 had given up union positions and had been appointed to various administrative positions in the university. They were either directors or assistant directors of various units at the university. The conversations I had with some officials revealed that they had accepted the appointments because they could strive to transform the university administrative structures from within. I reluctantly accepted these explanations but was not quite convinced because of the hurry with which they had resolved to leave the union en masse. The union had not established firm administrative structures and it was imprudent to abandon it at that juncture.

The Second Strike

In September 2003, I was elected Secretary General of the UASU, Kenyatta University Chapter. I took up the position at the time of simmering industrial action. Lecturers had a raft of grievances, chief among which was poor remuneration. A strike was called immediately and without proper preparation. Consequently, it was implemented haphazardly. However, the new government that came to leadership in December 2002 was basically sympathetic to the plight of academic staff.

Some of the senior ministers in government were associated with the university in an immediate and direct way. They had been lecturers at the University of Nairobi and at Kenyatta University. As the Secretary General of the union at Kenyatta University, I was charged, together with my no-nonsense chairman of the time, with the responsibility of starting and sustaining the strike till all the demands of the lecturers were met. There were other unofficial members of the union think tank who continually raised difficult and uncomfortable questions that sensitised me to the gravity of the situation.

The task of calling meetings daily and inspiring members to support the strike during its life was arduous. These actions were so repetitive that they led to boredom and strain, not only for the members but also for other officials of the union. There was a lot of sloganeering and vituperation from myself and other officials of the union in general. With hindsight, I think the techniques of communication were wanting partly because of a lack of training. The books I had on leadership, such as Sembene Ousmane's *God's Bits of Wood* and Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Petals of Blood*, were useful, but they were not sufficiently programmatic as monographs for teaching union leaders in matters of leadership and mobilisation. In my role I did not come across publications like *Trade Union Administration: A Caribbean Workers' Education Guide* (Morris 2002), in which the management of trade unions is explained simply and succinctly:

The management of trade unions in the challenging environment in which they have to operate today requires skills which were previously frowned upon by Trade unionists. These skills are basically the same as are required to run any modern organisation effectively. Financial management, accountability to Members, research and development, organisational and negotiation skills and planning for the future of the organisation are some of the approaches which successful trade unions use (Morris 2002: Preface).

Despite these weaknesses in my leadership, in consultation with members of the union it was decided that methods of disseminating information be diversified. Officials and members relayed information through the print and electronic media. This proved to be very useful because it assisted the union to elicit and enlist the support of the public. I spoke to journalists and one of them devoted a whole page to the ongoing strike in Kenya's *The Daily Nation* newspaper on 11 November 2003. Part of his statement was as follows: 'When a system remunerates doctors, engineers, architects and other civil servants at a higher level but pays those who produce those cadres at precipitately low levels, something is seriously the matter.' Opinions such as these galvanised public sympathy for the university academic staff. In brief, such choreographed opinions set the stage for sensitising the government and bringing it to the negotiation table. The strike was formally called off on 9 January 2004, after the government agreed to offer the union a salary increase.

The main weakness of the union at this point in time was its propensity to concentrate more on welfare matters, such as housing allowances, than on the core academic mandates of academic staff, including but not limited to manageable class sizes, provision of teaching facilities and research funds. This tendency consequently and subsequently led to the belief among

members of the public that university lecturers were keener on the increase of their salaries than on dispensing their core mandate of teaching, research and service to the community.

The Third and Fourth Strikes

The attitude was further entrenched in the public imagination by the frequency of industrial action and lack of innovative methods of dealing with labour disputes at the universities. The third and fourth strikes that were staged on 25 October 2006 and 9 November 2011, respectively, were far less popular than the first two. The same causes that had triggered the first two strikes led to the third and fourth strikes. When, on 25 October 2006, the third strike was launched and paralysed learning in six public universities, one of the dailies in Kenya, *The Standard Newspaper*, reported tersely: ‘The strike effect was evident in all universities and campuses, though some lecturers were unaware of the start of the industrial action following confusion and coordination problems by the Universities Academic Staff Union (UASU)’.

Apart from these leadership challenges, managers and the government had learned how to deal with striking university lecturers. Three days after the initiation of the 2006 strike, a judge of the industrial court issued an order directing the lecturers to renounce the strike and resume work immediately. Citing the Industrial Disputes Act, he argued that lecturers could not be on strike and at the same time be negotiating their salaries. Simultaneously, students who were sponsoring their education in the self-sponsored programme came out strongly in opposition to the strike. They demanded that lecturers be replaced as they were breaching a contract they had entered into with them. We deliberated at our various branches and resolved to suspend the strike to give negotiations a chance.

As Secretary General of the Branch, I was appointed Joint Secretary of the negotiations committee. The joint secretary’s responsibility was to record as accurately as possible the proceedings of the negotiations, as the basis on which the collective bargaining agreement could be sealed. With very few workshops to prepare me, I had to learn the art of negotiating on the job. Negotiations proceeded well for a while but when the union officials noticed some laxity on the part of the university councils, the discussions collapsed. Alongside other officials, I went back to my branch, convened a meeting and informed the members what had transpired at the negotiation table, in carefully crafted and politically charged language. The effect was electrifying; members were incensed and vowed to return to the picket line.

For their part, the university managers cracked the whip immediately. By the end of that day, 25 October 2006, I received a letter from the deputy vice-chancellor in charge of administration dismissing me from the university's employment. The UASU Branch Chairman, Joseph Kinyanjui, and I were picked up and sent to Kasarani police station for questioning for much of that day. We were declared *persona non grata* on the campus. This did not deter me from sustaining the strike from outside the university, so negotiations had to go on notwithstanding my firing. When the negotiations ended, a 30 per cent pay rise was awarded to lecturers and the sacked union leaders appealed to the Minister for Education, Science and Technology for reinstatement. Some vice-chancellors did heed to the minister's plea while others flatly refused to allow the strike leaders back on their campuses. I was one of those who were accepted back at Kenyatta University. I was later informed by an insider who insisted on anonymity that my return was allowed because I blended my union activities and academic responsibilities well.

How I Left the Union

After five years, with mounting inflation and the rising cost of living, the fourth and last strike during my tenure as secretary general of the union took place. On 9 November 2011, I again headed a lecturer's strike at Kenyatta University. Although the strike was lacklustre, the union was able to agitate for a 15 per cent pay rise.

By this time the university managers had learned to use the union's Constitution to fight the union itself. One of the articles of the union's Constitution states that a member of the union, including officials, could join the university administration as a way of upward mobility. The clause was selectively used to deflate the strength of the union by poaching its strongest officials. The national Chairman of the Universities Academic Staff Union, Samuel Kubasu, was appointed by the vice-chancellor of a university in the western region of the country to be a chairman of department. When he refused, he was accused of insubordination, suspended, called for disciplinary action and summarily dismissed. The tragedy was that he could not be recruited thereafter by any other university in the country, public or private. Union officials were generally stigmatised as rabble-rousers.

Other vice-chancellors got a hint of what had happened to the national chairman of the union. One afternoon, I received a call from the vice-chancellor of my university. She informed me that she wanted to appoint me Chairman of the Department of Kiswahili and African Languages. In a thinly veiled threat, she warned that she would not like to see the scenario

that took place in one university replicated at Kenyatta University. After listening to her, I called an urgent executive committee meeting of the union at Kenyatta University chapter and let the members know what had transpired. Following a long deliberation it was resolved that since I had worked for the union for ten years, I may as well relinquish my position as secretary general, continue advising the union as an ordinary member and take up the new position as chairman of department. The following day, I informed the vice-chancellor that I had accepted her appointment.

Conclusion

When I look back at my role as a leader of the Universities Academic Staff Union (Kenyatta University Chapter), I can say that there are some activities that I performed well and others that I would do differently were I to be given a second chance to be a leader. The story I have narrated clearly demonstrates that the position that I held exhibited tensions, contestations and in some cases expensive trade-offs. From interviewing members of the union at the time, I really inspired them through my eloquent expression and courage to lead from the front whenever there was a knotty issue that confronted them. Without knowing it, I executed my responsibilities within the realm of role theory effectively.

On the other hand, I failed as a manager because I envisaged my basic duty as courageously joining the strikes, with the result that I neglected committees such as the research committee, the resource committee, the publicity and the training committee among others. This is because there were financial constraints that made the committees stall in their work. Only the strike committee appeared to be effective. The main challenge I faced as a union leader was that it was difficult to balance my role as an academic and a trade unionist. Some members of the union sympathised with university managers if they came from their respective ethnic communities. Moreover, over time, the members of the union transformed from being proactive to being transactional. Before they began paying membership fees to the union, they had come out clearly to support the union's agenda in action and spirit. As soon as they began paying membership fees, they gradually but inexorably expected the officials to work for them, including going on strike for them.

Given that the success of unions depends heavily on numbers, this attitude turned out to be the single greatest undoing of the Universities Academic Staff Union at Kenyatta University. From the story I have told, the role, resource- and constraints-based theories as well as autoethnography served my purpose well. However, these analytical perspectives tend to

address the union leader without accounting for the actions of union members. We need a theory or a framework that addresses union members as proactive rather than transactional entities. This has been the undoing of the Universities Academic Staff Union a few years after its establishment.

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