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Public and private domains and the Social Role of Universities in Africa

Claude Ake Lecture

Teresa Cruz e Silva
University Eduardo Mondale



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Introduction

The invitation by CODESRIA's Executive Committee to deliver the Claude Ake Lecture at 12th General Assembly honours me, but also presents me with an immense challenge.

It honours me in allowing me to pay tribute to an outstanding intellectual whose reputation long ago spread outside the continent and has become universal. The example of his citizenship and the refinement of his analyses has turned his work in pursuit of a more just and equitable society into a model for future generations. Claude Ake was one of the main guides of CODESRIA, as President of the Council between 1986 and 1989. This lecture is a tribute that CODESRIA and all its members render to one of its beloved sons who dedicated his academic life to the advance of the social sciences, challenging his colleagues to the permanent search for viable solutions for African problems; the invitation honours me by enabling me to associate myself fully with this tribute.

Reflecting on and discussing higher education institutions, particularly African universities and their social role puts me in a position of great responsibility. Firstly, because much has been written on the crisis which embroils African universities (Brock-Utne, 2003; Mama, 2003; Mamdani, 2007; Olukoshi & Zeleza, 2004; Sall, Lebeau & Kassimir 2003; Sawyerr, 2004; Zeleza, 2003), as other universities of the South. Secondly, as the Executive Committee of CODESRIA attributed the Claude Ake Lecture to the President at the end of his/her mandate, the expectation is that the speaker is able to raise important questions – with the clarity which this kind of intervention allows – about the role CODESRIA fulfils in the development of teaching and research in the humanities and social sciences, so as to overcome the crisis in African universities, and about the ways the future may be broached within the academic community. And since discussion of the social role of the university in Africa means also a survey of our research community, it is clear that the two themes can be considered together.

The basic theme of the academic debates of CODESRIA's 12th General Assembly, *Governing the African Public Sphere* will certainly be enriched by this meeting, whether through topics already discussed or by those of a theoretical and methodological character that the coming panels and plenary sessions promise to bring up. It allows us to revisit the concept of the public sphere in Africa in the context of the world social, economic and political changes of the late twentieth and early twenty first centuries. In this process, the restructuring of capital resulted in penetrating changes affecting the public sphere and the traditional function of the state. Neo-liberal dominance and the priority of the private sphere regulated by the market had a profound impact on educational structures, resulting in alteration in the social role of higher education institutions in the continent.

If we take as a starting point that the public sphere represents a social dimension and acts as a mediator between state and society, in which the public organises itself as the bearer of public opinion (Habermas), we cannot ignore the role higher education institutions perform as sites of action in this sphere, particularly in the case of African public universities.¹ As universities are places *par excellence* for the debate of ideas, while reflecting the society in which they are embedded, they are doubly challenged – on the one hand by the state pressing them into its apparatus, on the other by aims and objectives which determined their foundation. The university thus appears as an essential edifice in the middle of current tension between the public and the private:

¹ Our analysis of African universities is based on those in the public sector.

public policy in the area of higher education is shaped in conformity with the precepts of the capitalist system, according to private capitalist rationality expressed in the reduction of the public and expansion of the private. In this sense, present tendencies indicate the progressive diminution of state responsibility for this sector. Reverting to the thinking of Habermas, where he regards the public sphere as a far from neutral space, we are dealing with a space controlled by the dominant ideas of our time.

Despite the great challenges which African higher education institutions face, as producers of knowledge, they continue to have a vital and innovative role for the development of the continent. The question is whether the university is in a position to meet such challenges, and whether the academic community is capable of confronting the crisis surrounding institutions which have already suffered various shocks.

We begin by briefly considering the path followed by African universities in the twentieth century, identifying the challenges faced in their construction and growth. We then discuss the social role of African universities faced with the tensions of the new public space, as well as the role CODESRIA has played and will play in stimulating and reinforcing an educational project based on the inseparability of teaching and research.

1- The challenges of the last twenty years and the reconfiguration of University life in the 21st century

Capitalist restructuring in the later decades of the twentieth century produced global transformations directly affecting the public arena. With privatisation dominant in the public sphere, a new model of citizenship is being tested, with an ethic regulated by market interests conforming to an ever more exclusivist pattern. These socio-economic and cultural changes have been felt with differing rapidity depending on the social context in question. The increasing importance of knowledge and its technological applicability, transformed into marketable product, directly and rapidly affects university identity – on the one hand, as producer of knowledge, on the other, as trainer of researchers who work in the area of producing knowledge and technology. The advent of neoliberalism results in alterations in the productive base through scientific development, globalisation of the economy and the redefinition of the public and private. Education seeks to adjust to the economic transformations, as the mediator of science and technology policy in the service of world wide competitiveness, where the exact sciences are given priority in the financing of research in detriment to the social sciences and humanities. In this context, there is a growing tendency to manipulate the so-called non-exact sciences so that they produce folkloric accounts of the social impacts of neoliberal policies.

The developmentalist university and the assault by international financing agencies

Recent studies of higher education institutions on the continent (Olukoshi & Zeleza, 2003; Swayerr, 2004; Mamdani, 2007) show us that if we follow the course of the creation and evolution of higher education, with rare exceptions, such as North Africa and South Africa, it is evident that the majority of the universities were born in the transition between the colonial and post-colonial regimes. Having undergone a remarkable process of growth and expansion in that period, this development is nevertheless far from responding to the needs of the present (Sawyerr, 2004). There were countries which at the time of independence had only one university, which represented – to borrow Mahmood Mamdani's words – one more national symbol, alongside the flag, the anthem and the currency (Mamdani, 2007: 256). There were also regional universities, and those countries, although few in number, which only in the late 1990s and early 2000s created their first higher education colleges and universities. In the majority of cases, therefore, we are dealing with public universities which emerged in response not only to programmes of nationalist governments for the development of the continent – for this reason called 'developmental universities' – but also to decolonise personnel and the curriculum, most of their financing being supported by state budgets. (Sawyerr, 2004; Shivji, 2005; Mamdani, 2007).

Public policies dealing with the education sector are to a certain extent the product of economic, political and social contexts of the societies in which they are constructed, and they cannot be evaluated separate from the impact of global changes on the local economy, and local ideological and social processes.

With the imposition of neoliberal policies in the mid 1980s, African governments found themselves captured by international financial institutions which obliged them to apply new political and economic directives. The expansion of finance capital seeking new markets and the imposition of structural adjustment programmes imposed a neo-liberal

development model implemented by national governments in the following decades. This process led not only to economic reforms but also to reforms of the state, public social services such as health and education, so that these national institutions were put to the service of capital. Thus it is that, as a result of the great changes operating on public policy for education on the African continent in this period, universities became hostages of international financial agencies such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank.

The meeting of vice-chancellors in Harare in 1986, where the World Bank considered higher education a luxury which African countries could not afford, can be considered a fulcral point marking the beginning of disinvestment in higher education institutions by international financial institutions and by the state.

The positions of the World Bank concerning the education sector were instrumental in the design of national education policies in the following years. After the Jomtiem Conference – “Education for All” – in 1990, whose directives were ratified by many African states, there were various warnings about the risks which countries of the South ran if they neglected higher education in favour of basic learning (Brock-Utne, 2003). These did not however prevent cuts in the financing of public higher education, which were the consequence of diversification in higher education, or more precisely, the attention directed toward private education and non-university higher education institutions (Brock-Utne, 2003).

With the globalisation of a neo-liberal agenda and the consequent domination and control of all forms of social reproduction, the education sector was obviously affected. In this process, the new form of social insertion of academic production turns the university into a strategic target for the reorganisation of society and capital itself, annulling the conquests of the national public university. In the words of Shivji, with the neoliberal offensive, the university was transformed into a white elephant, it was condemned and the associated nationalist project aborted (Shivji, 2005).

The crisis of the 1980s and 1990s and the universities of the 21st century

The privatisation of education, which goes through different stages in different countries, leads to the reduction of resources for public higher education and the reallocation of state resources to basic education as well as to the diversion of public and donor agency funds to the private sector, in a process also marked by the displacement of public institutions into the private sector.

In many African countries the end of the 1980s and the 1990s are associated with the opening to democracy, and are also marked by a broadening of the public sphere in relation to the private. Yet they are also years in which education ceased to be a “state project” and in which commoditisation of services in the higher education sector advanced, with the transfer to the private sector of some of the tasks of social policy. In other words, following the analysis of the sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos on universities of the 21st century, public universities lose their priority as a “public good” produced by the state, with education now changing to a “collective good” which, while not ceasing to be public, does not necessarily have to be supported by the state (Santos, 2006).

In its new guise, the university must become an organisation rendering services, governed by management contracts and assessed by productivity criteria. Guided by the cost-benefit relation and imposing administrative criteria of quality control, the new model intensifies: i) the breach between teaching and research, subjecting academic production to the development of technology; ii) the increasing number of students – massification of higher education – without adequate investment in

infrastructure, financial reinforcement and the qualitative and quantitative growth of teaching staff; iii) problems of quality and equity, in a system biased toward exclusion. In this process, what is promoted is the diffusion of knowledge in detriment to its production and the submission of university objectives to commercial interests. The university sees its emancipatory potential disabled, and it takes on role which is reproductive and conservative. We are thus faced with the dangers to which Habermas called attention in his arguments on the public sphere, particularly the tension between communicative and instrumental action, which also affected higher education in Europe (Habermas,1994).

The exigencies imposed by neoliberal globalisation and by government policies throw into doubt both university autonomy and academic freedom, obliging the university to compete on an unequal playing field in the market for university services, and requiring it to search for new dependencies, while limiting its capacity to produce and divulge critical opinion capable of contributing to emancipation (Santos, 2006). This situation exemplifies well the processes of struggle to redesign the public sphere (Sall, Lebeau & Kassimir, 2003) that characterise these periods, and which are particularly intense in countries with authoritarian and repressive governments searching at all costs to limit academic freedom and the consequent autonomy of institutions.

After a decade of pressure on developing countries to cut financing of higher education in favour of basic education, the new millennium opened with new directives from the international financial agencies (World Bank, 2000; World Bank, 2002), emphasising the role of higher education as essential for national development and the support of donor agencies for the sector. These positions do not however alter the neo-liberal agenda of the World Bank, as the deepening of reforms to the state has implications for public institutions such as education, which come to be put at the service of capital, with education operating still as a commercial service according to the laws of the international market. The privatisation of public social services tends to deepen the historical conditions of discrimination and negation of social rights, in which education is included, for the majority of the population.

2- AFRICAN UNIVERSITIES AND THE ROLE OF CODESRIA

As we have noted, in the later decades of the twentieth century, higher education on the continent has lived in the shadow of international pressures. The processes of liberalisation of this period have encouraged the growth of private educational institutions across the continent. Because they accelerated the commercial character of university administration, programmes of structural adjustment have had a profound impact on university intellectual agendas, a process compounded by the contraction of financial resources, and aggravated by the lowering of quality standards. Despite restrictions imposed by international agencies and national governments on higher education institutions and the heavy costs which they and African citizens have had to pay – and continue still to pay – as a result of reforms from the mid-1980s, there still persists the conviction at the heart of academia that higher education institutions continue to be key sites for academic debate and for the production of knowledge. At the same time, there is the clear consciousness that there are many challenges ahead in the construction of a knowledge society.

The university and debates about higher education are universally considered a ‘public question’, even more so on the African continent owing to the objectives

directing their creation and their position in society, despite the changes we have mentioned. Notwithstanding the positions and agendas of multilateral agencies, it is also consensual that higher education is of vital importance for the resolution of economic and social problems which African countries face, as a result of which they are treated as a “public good” which it is necessary to preserve, but above all to transform, particularly because i) the reforms of recent years have promoted an exclusive system, marginalising the poorest social groups, which naturally includes African women (Mama, 2003; Swayerr, 2004); and ii) neo-liberal policies induce universities to change from the “public” to the “collective good” (Santos, 2006).

When higher education is discussed, the easiest and most tempting, but also probably the most harmful, tendency is to identify and ‘attack’ the long list of misdeeds authored by the neo-liberal agenda in respect of higher education institutions. Without wishing to ignore that such a list is important, even central, we should not forget that, in the always relevant words of Paulin Hountondji, it is always necessary to go beyond diagnosis of the situation, and avoid feeding a discourse of recrimination so familiar in Africa, through which blame for all misfortunes and errors is attributed to others (Hountondji, 1995). Rather it is important to search for solutions to problems, to formulate creative positions and find strategies to negotiate with the various actors in question. Given its mandate and mission, CODESRIA cannot by any means ignore the contexts in which higher education evolved in Africa, seeing that these have a negative impact on the progress of its programmes.

From the time of its foundation, CODESRIA has always advanced in tandem with the academic community. Over the years, its mission has adjusted to confront the issues of development, the crises and transitional processes whose contexts affect university development and that of higher education in general, so as to maintain, consolidate and expand an independent intellectual space, and support the strengthening of knowledge producing institutions through independent collaborative initiatives. In the process, their main partners were and are public universities.

The promotion and defence of the freedom of thought and the autonomy of research institutions has been a key element in the CODESRIA mandate. This position has been reinforced on occasions in which political authoritarianism impeded – continues to impede in some cases – the exercise of this right by the academic community. The African community of social science and humanities researchers grew in conditions of extreme repression. The history of CODESRIA contains many examples of how the Council dealt with situations in which there arose violent ways of impeding the exercise of academic freedom and the exercise of citizenship (Mkandawire, 1999). In the 35 years of its existence, CODESRIA has been an important actor in the analysis of development in the African continent and in the search for solutions for its problems. We can even say that at the Panafrican level, the Council has been distinguished by the search for different forms of decolonisation of the production of knowledge, while giving institutional support and alternatives to the research community in contexts of crisis.

Giving voice to African intellectuals, the Council has gradually opened windows of opportunity for research co-operation and dialogue in the continent in north-south and south-south directions, stimulating research networks at different levels nationally, regionally and internationally. CODESRIA has struggled and continues to struggle for the development of more horizontal forms of north-south collaboration between individuals and institutions of the south and between

Africans and their descendants in the north and in the continent, pressing for the maintenance of permanent linkages with Africans in the diaspora. These activities are realised through programmes and debates on research themes central to the intellectual agenda of CODESRIA, as is specified in its strategic planning. These plans, although innovative, reflect at the same time the need to reinforce and focus our actions on questions relating to the problematic of development in the continent alongside approaches of a theoretical and methodological nature.

Obviously, during its 35 years CODESRIA has passed through ups and downs, internal crises but also a process of growth, and has succeeded in prosecuting struggles imposed through external research agendas and academic contexts tending to minimise and obscure the visibility of African academia. The reflection on and reproblematisation of the notion of partnership, a fundamental aspect of the principles guiding CODESRIA and a vital element in guaranteeing academic freedom, intellectual autonomy and institutional integrity, continue to be part of the discussions concerning the process of constructing a collaborative platform of research on the basis of equality.

Particularly now that we live in a world of great asymmetry where opulence and poverty are seen not only in terms of class but also ethnic, racial, gender and even generation difference, the contexts in which CODESRIA works oblige this body to direct its work programmes and its intellectual agenda to respond to challenges put by this work environment to the research community. The strategic Plan of the Council for 2007-2011: *Consolidation and Renewal in the Social Sciences in Africa*, testifies clearly to efforts by academics in the social sciences and humanities creatively to confront the barriers encountered in the 21st century university, underlining that: “The historic relationship which the Council built with its core funders – African and non African – has been premised on a variety of principles, chief among them the non-negotiability of CODESRIA’s institutional autonomy, the academic freedom of African scholars, and rigorous accountability for all funds received”. Thus the Plan indicates how CODESRIA has been able to design strategies to reinforce, with its different partners, a relationship of co-operation based on respect for the sovereignty and autonomy of the different parts, without threatening its integrity.

3- THE SOCIAL MISSION OF THE UNIVERSITY AND THE CHALLENGES OF THE FUTURE

The emergence of most African universities in the 20th century, whether under the banner of pan-Africanism, nationalism or developmentalism, seems associated with the project of creating the nation and the search for direct responses to the demands of national problems. They were public universities managed and financed as institutions of the state apparatus.

The imposition of the neo-liberal agenda on African governments, and the consequent institutional reform which introduced private capitalist rationality in the social sphere imposed a transformation in university identity in keeping with the logic of the market. The scenario of state financial contraction combined with political and commercial pressures results in assessing university efficiency by cost-benefit criteria, which leads to the search for alternative financing, limitation in the autonomy of teaching and research, and new dependencies.

Faced with the resiting of its social role and the devaluation of its role as a fundamental institution in the production of knowledge, the public university faces a crisis of legitimacy, which cannot be dissociated from an institutional and financial crisis, owing to the interaction between internal and external causes

leading to this loss of autonomy. In this crisis, African universities are in some ways in a similar situation to higher education institutions in other parts of the world, particularly in the South, since changes in global political economy and the neo-liberal agenda dictate the forms of production of knowledge at the global as well local level (Swayerr, 2004), and produce in universities – even if at different rates and varying forms – a triple “crisis of hegemony, of legitimacy and of institutions” (Santos, 2006; 2008).

Lost legitimacy and the intellectual crisis: how to deal with it?

Placed in an extremely diversified sector, the African university of the 21st century has to rethink its mandate and its mission in function of the new identities assumed since the mid 1980s. Nevertheless, as we emphasised in the introduction to this text, the question remains as to whether the university and specifically the humanities and social science research communities are really prepared to face the crisis, and search for solutions beyond the mere struggle for adjustment and survival among the diverse changes of a political and economic nature which have a direct impact on the public social sectors.

A tentative response to this questioning necessarily leads to another query: how to cope with lost legitimacy and institutional crisis which has affected African universities?

In their analyses on the future of universities and ways of overcoming the crisis at the global level and at the level of African universities, Boaventura de Sousa Santos (Santos, 2006) and Akilagpa Swayerr (Swayerr, 2004) call attention to the risk that the university of the future runs, on the one hand, if university leaders limit themselves to “managing inertia” (Santos, 2006:45) instead of elaborating solutions, and on the other, if in the name of “institutional survival”, they concede points concerning the fundamental values orienting the university as a places of learning, thought and debate (Swayerr, 2004:23). This means in my view that the next steps must lead the academic community to use its knowledge to recover the ability to separate intellectual values from the interests of the market (Swayerr, 2004; Mamdani, 2007), putting this knowledge in the service of a more inclusive university from the viewpoint of class, gender and generation: an institution which is also more sustainable, and able to reoccupy its role as “public social good”. In this process, we cannot afford to lose sight of the fact that the 21st century brings other threats which affect universities of the South, other than African ones in the present context – as a result of the intensified internationalisation of the market for university services, in a situation of accentuated inequalities between universities of the North and those of the South in a global society marked by the revolution in information technologies and communication.

What role for CODESRIA?

In the double crisis of legitimacy, institutional and financial, which affects African universities, we can indicate as the fulcral point the loss of autonomy with its associated implications for academic freedom. In Mahmood Mamdani’s (Mamdani, 2007) study of Makerere University, we can easily see that the main target of World Bank reform policies to commoditise education was the autonomy of the university, and its Faculties, Departments and Institutes. These come to be transformed into resource generating units mainly through paid teaching instead of research, dependent on donations and other resources not necessarily or exclusively from the state budget, which leaves them hostage to impositions of the market or funding agencies.

In his article on three generations of African academics– “Three Generations of African Academics : a Note” – published in 1995 (Mkandawire, 1995), Thandika Mkandawire made a seminal reflection on the future of African universities which I think fundamental for any study wishing to understand the mutations they have undergone since national independence and the risks to the process of intellectual reproduction if measures are not taken to support young African academics of the “third generation”², who today support a good part of the daily functioning of our universities. We remember that other analysts of the same period of higher education point out the ageing process in Faculties of Social Sciences and Humanities, with the retirement of many teachers who studied in the 1970s and 1980s, the deception felt by the second generation and the widening distance between these and the youngest lecturers, and we should revisit Mkandawire’s 1995) analysis – to look for long term solutions which enable us to resituate the role of the university as a ‘public good’, and return to the Faculties a real autonomy, with the new generations at the centre of this process.

The CODESRIA Strategic Plan for the period 2007-2011 emphasises: i) close attention to the context in which university identities are reformulated, ii) revisiting Mkandawire’s reflections on the role of the Council in reinforcing academic freedom (Mkandawire, 1999) and its actual practice by African academics, and iii) the necessity to invest in the third and fourth generations of African academics. Born in independent Africa, those generations has passed through a university experience marked at times by arrogance, authoritarianism and bureaucratisation, as well as a crisis of institutional resources, absence of literature and difficulties of intellectual interaction. Yet the community of African academics must continue to struggle for the universities’ ability to maintain intellectual reproduction, with long term plans which sustain the university and give it back its critical and liberating public mission.

In an editorial for the journal *African Journal of Political Economy*, published in 1996, Claude Ake wrote:

“Unless we strive for endogenous development of science and knowledge we cannot fully emancipate ourselves. Why this development must be endogenous should be clear for it is not a question of parochialism or nationalism. The point is that even though the principles of science are universal, its growth points and the particular problems which it solves, are contingent on the historical circumstances of the society in which the science is produced” (Ake, 1996: iii).

The critical thinking of Claude Ake and his unceasing battle to place the social sciences in the service of peace and dignified human development remain valid. We have to stay alert to the threats which circle around the African university so as not to run the risk, as Ake would say, of participating – in the name of democracy

² The first generation of African academics studied in some of the best American and European universities, returned to their countries inspired by the euphoria of independence and participated in the foundation of new teaching and research institutions, as well as founding CODESRIA and AAPS. The second generation graduated locally, then also trained overseas and returned to the continent, motivated by the great expansion of universities; many of them subsequently formed part of the first wave of the “brain drain” as a result of their disappointment. Both the first and second generations had much mobility and access to contacts in foreign institutions and to the latest academic debates in their areas of work. The third generation, “produced locally”, graduated in the 1980s and were trained amongst the extreme difficulties faced by the universities, particularly the lack of literature, means of communication and research technology. It is a generation less familiar with important international theoretical debates, and tends towards extremely descriptive work. For discussion on fourth generation see the Special Issue on “Forth Generation African Scholars”, *Africa Development*, Vol.XXXIII, No.1, 2008. Dakar, CODESRIA.

– in the making of our own poverty by training citizens capable of contributing to the marginalisation of the African continent.

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