THE GLOBAL AND LOCAL LIMITATIONS ON ACADEMIC FREEDOM IN AFRICA: PUBLIC HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN MOZAMBIQUE

Teresa Cruz e Silva

‘(…) la liberté académique consiste à recherché et à diffuser la connaissance ainsi qu’à déterminer ce qui mérite d’être l’objet de ce savoir. Vraisemblablement, la liberté académique est souhaitable parce que sa négation tend à inhiber la créativité, à protéger les orthodoxies en place du défi susceptible d’être posé par les idées nouvelles, et à réduire les chances de mettre à nu et de corriger les erreurs au grand préjudice de l société’. (Claude Auké 1994:20)

ABSTRACT

Public policies dealing with the education sector are the product of the economic, political and social contexts in which they are constructed, and they cannot be evaluated separately from the impact of global changes on the local economy, and from local ideological and social processes. The curricula reforms of recent years have promoted an exclusive system, marginalising the poorest social groups; and neo-liberal policies have induced universities to change their social role and identity. Despite the great advances in many African political systems, in such an environment, the freedom of thought and the autonomy of research institutions – academic freedom in general – are at risk. This situation has been intensified where political authoritarianism has impeded – continues to impede in some cases – the exercise of this right by the academic community. Using the experience of Mozambican public universities, my reflection brings out the continued relevance of 1990’s discussions on Academic Freedom in Africa, in a situation of authoritarian and bureaucratic university administration.
INTRODUCTION

The promotion and defense of freedom of thought and autonomy of research institutions have always been key elements within African academic communities, and as part of CODESRIA programmes. Indeed, the first half of the 1990s, with the Kampala Declaration on Academic Freedom, and the subsequent activities, clearly marked discussion on this matter. Apart from the debates focusing on academic freedom as a concept, which continues to be discussed among the academic community, it seems to me to be even more interesting and relevant to observe the present significance which has come to surround reflections and discussion on the effects of the global political changes since the 1980s, and the challenges which their impact pose for African higher education institutions, especially the consequent constraints on the exercise of academic freedom.

I take as a starting point the debates at Kampala (1990) by renowned academics such as Archie Mafeje, Joseph Ki-Zerbo, Claude Aké, Mahmood Mamdani, Issa Shivji, Aysha Iman and Amina Mama, to mention only a few, collected in a CODESRIA publication edited by Mamdani e Diouf, ‘Liberté Académique en Afrique’ (Mamdani and Diouf: 1994), which I consider a classic work on this matter. I then emphasise that: i) without ignoring the great advances in various African political systems since Kampala, the questions and viewpoints raised in the 1990s remain valid in contexts in which, under pressure of global change, universities have altered their identities and no longer fulfill their social role; ii) we cannot ignore the fact that academic freedom continues at risk in some African countries.

On the basis of public university experience in Mozambique, my reflections hope to recover for debate some of the questions raised in Kampala (1990) – which remain real in situations where we are dealing with an authoritarian and bureaucratic university leadership context.

UNIVERSITIES OF THE XX-XXI CENTURIES: THEIR SOCIAL ROLE IN A CONTEXT OF CRISIS

Capitalist restructuring in the later decades of the twentieth century produced global transformations directly affecting African countries. 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.

With the imposition of neoliberal policies in the mid 1980s, African governments found themselves straitjacketed by international financial institutions which obliged them to apply new political and economic directives. This process led not only to economic reforms but also to reforms of the state, and public social services such as health and education. As a result of the changes operating on education policy in this period, universities became hostages of international financial agencies. With the globalisation of a neo-liberal agenda and the consequent domination and control of all forms of social reproduction, the new form of social insertion of academic production transformed the university into a strategic target for the reorganisation of society and capital itself, annulling the achievements of the national public university – which had emerged along with the political processes leading to national independences in Africa.

In its new guise, the university became 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 prioritizes the diffusion of knowledge to the detriment of its production and the submission of university objectives to commercial interests. The university sees its emancipatory potential disabled, and it takes on a role which is reproductive and conservative. These new obstacles which constrain and limit the production of and diffusion of critical thought throw into doubt both university autonomy and academic freedom. This situation is more serious in countries where governments are authoritarian and repressive.

The profile and evolution of public higher education institutions in Mozambique, as of universities of other Portuguese speaking countries, is not very different from that which we described, except that the process began later on, due to their tardy independences, and local contexts.
Much as has occurred and continues to occur in other higher education systems, Mozambique is still going through a process of curricula reform, so as to adjust it to international economic interests. It is a process characterised by authoritarian forms of integration, carried out from top to bottom, where political imperatives are imposed over pedagogical interests, and covered by a thin disguise of institutional autonomy. Hocine Khelfaoui (2009) observes on the alterations of Northern African universities undergone with the inception of the Bologna Process:

The reform, presented in the dominant discourse as an “inevitable” fact, linked to the requirements of “globalization”, has resulted in little significant public debate on the reality and the future of HE, or even on the content of the reform itself (Khelfaoui 2009:22).

In Mozambican public universities, curricula reform is also imposed and 'sold' as an 'inevitable' means of integration in function of regional and global exigencies. Mozambican experience is also marked by curricula reforms in which public consultation of 'local social agents' is insignificant, while their nature is completely disconnected from local realities. In Mozambique, as in the cases mentioned by Hocine Khelfaoui (2009), excluding the participation of academics and students in the construction of their own institutions in the process of reforms, denies them the right to their role as agents and supervisors in the system of public education policies. This problematic leads to the question of academic freedom and the social responsibility of academics faced with these new challenges.

ACADEMIC FREEDOM AND THE ROLE OF AFRICAN INTELLECTUALS

In his analysis on the impact of global changes on the academic freedom in Africa, in 1990, Mazrui questioned whether it was possible to speak of academic freedom without intellectual independence, when academic freedom should be part of University principles (Mazrui 1994:136). This question remains valid in a situation in which authoritarianism, prepotency and bureaucracy in university administration intensifies the crisis of institutional resources, the lack of properly equipped libraries and difficulties of intellectual interaction – which create barriers to the development of research and diffusion of knowledge, reinforcing the institutional crisis of public universities. Despite the constant use of motivational epithets such as the knowledge-
based society, the sharing of information and the importance of information and communication technologies (ICT’s) for the advance of research, we continue to live in a situation in which the right of access to means of communication and to information or the sharing of information is still not established in all the teaching and research institutions on the continent.

It is important to remember that since the Declaration of Kampala the African continent has experienced much political change which has allowed for the opening of space for discussion and the introduction of a more plural regimes. Nevertheless we cannot fail to recognize that such processes are far from linear, and that a different vision is required to find alternative solutions suited to each case.

Despite the democratic process initiated between the mid-1980s and early 1990s, there are alarming signs of authoritarian and bureaucratised administrative practices in university management in Africa. These stem from the application of measures responding to the exigencies of neo-liberal globalisation made since that time, which have the effect of undermining the legitimacy of the institutions. It is a situation which raises a series of questions on the social role of universities.

The administrative practices in university management in Mozambique, is not very different from that which we described. While analysing the situation of Higher Education Institutions in Mozambique, Aurélio Rocha states:

> These signs are visible not only in the progressive reduction of state support as also, and mainly, in the 'massification' of teaching and the consequent deterioration of training, which both constitutes a threat to the economy, and results in the increasing demoralisation of university work and the desertion of its most qualified agents (Rocha 2009) 1.

If for many situations to speak of human rights and the exercise of citizenship is still far from being a reality, how do we treat academic freedom?

When the rectors of public universities continue to be nominated by political decision, without respect to the opinion of the academic community, is there space for dialogue between the university administration and academic staff? Can we even speak of a relation between the state and the academic community? Or do administrative measures,
made at the top, without consultation, result in the increased authoritarianism of university leadership and the marginalization and exclusion of students, university officials and academic staff, thus reinforcing divisions between academics according to their own party and/or individual interests? In such context, how to deal with the problematic of university autonomy and academic freedom? Or even, how to cope with institutional crisis which has affected African universities?

Public education in Mozambique is a startling example of much that has still to be done. Taken by the international agencies as a successful example of democratic change and post-civil war economic growth, this country it is not however the best example in the area of the democratic exercise of academic freedom: university administration in the public sector is authoritarian, negating the real participation of researchers, students and support staff, preventing the articulation of their opinions. The financial constraints surrounding public educational institutions and the imposition of curricula models such as the Bologna Process – implemented top-down – aggravated the already weak relations between university leadership and academia, not to speak of the increasing distance between social reality and the guidelines of the new curricula reforms. Is the university thus able to fulfill its social role?

Reclaiming academic freedom without the participation and engagement of every member of the research community is not viable. It is necessary to make our rights count, responsibly, so as to enable us to reassert and preserve this liberty, against the increasing politicization of academic space, using regional and pan-African academic networks untouched by any political or economic agenda.

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. The crisis faced by African universities from mid 1980’s with great impact on the weakness of academic freedom in most higher education institutions, is consequently the result of the political and economic context in which the African universities are implanted since the referred period. In such context, it is only the academic community that can struggle to alter the present situation, instead of assuming the pacific role of victim of the process awaiting a solution from the outside.
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(Academic freedom consists in research and the diffusion of knowledge, as well as determining who merits being the object of this process. Indeed, academic freedom is desirable since its negation tends to inhibit creativity and to protect orthodoxies instead of enabling a critique posed by new ideas and to reduce the chances of uncovering errors greatly detrimental to society) ².

In the light of Claude Auke's position, the academic community still has a long way to go to retrieve the social role of the university and to return to its mission in a public space which is both critical and emancipatory.
REFERENCES


Mamdani, M., and Diouf, M., eds., 1994, Liberté académique en Afrique, Dakar : CODESRIA.


1 Free translation from Portuguese to English.
2 Free translation from French to English