

THE UNIVERSITY AND COMMUNITY

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"University and Community" at the
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All of us have come to this evening's session in the eager anticipation of hearing an address by Professor Asavia Wandira on the topic "The University and Community." This includes myself ...

Now while this statement is not, strictly speaking, correct, let me assure you that the disappointment produced by Professor Wandira's absence is as great for me as it is for you. And let me further assure you - although some may choose to dispute this assertion by the end of the evening - that the discomfort produced by that disappointment is even greater for me than it is for you - because I am up here and you are down there. Having been given, effectively, three days notice that I had been nominated as Professor Wandira's unfortunate substitute, I have been forced to resort to the rather dubious tactic of plagiarizing from my previous writings on the general subject of universities⁽¹⁾ and fitting them onto the Procrustean bed of Professor Wandira's title. In so doing I can only hope that I have been sufficiently systematic and provocative to give both direction and contention to the debates that will follow here during the next two days.

I take as my starting point the stated concerns of this colloquium as they appear in the draft programme. We are enjoined, inter alia, to examine ways in which universities can "serve the needs of communities" and address themselves to "urgent social problems". This we are to do in the context of "likely changes in ... social and political patterns," having consideration for the "diversities and needs of our communities." Against this background we are to discuss "desirable and feasible educational structures, curricula and processes, beyond those characteristic of the present system ... appropriate to the development of South Africa."

These various statements can be distilled down to a recognition and concern for six interrelated issues:

- Change
- Development
- Context
- Relevance
- Structure
- Technique

Structure and technique are issues which I will touch on only obliquely in this paper, since they will undoubtedly receive considerable attention later on in the conference. Tonight I concentrate on some of the implications of our recognition of the importance of change and context and our concern for relevance and development.

First of all, our concern for relevance. It is common cause among academics today - certainly in my own university - that "we must make our university relevant." Let me betray my functionalist academic pedigree by asserting that that statement, baldly put, is a piece of sociological nonsense. Any university which has lasted for any length of time has proved its "relevance", otherwise it would not have continued to exist. Its relevance, its functionality, for some group or segment in the society has been its raison d'être, that which has provided it with survival support - even if that segment has consisted only of the scholars it employs and the lawyers who administer its investments.

So the issue of relevance has to be rephrased and elaborated. The important question is, "Relevant for whom?" This is the contextual issue, to which I shall return shortly. Relevance and context are interrelated, and if we are to talk meaningfully about relevance we should remember that what we are really talking about is contextual relevance. More specifically, for the purposes of this conference we are really talking about our shifting perceptions of what the relevant contexts are.

Now context has a number of dimensions, one of them being time. And this brings us to the third of our interrelated concerns, change. Our shifting conceptions of relevant context are informed and directed by our perceptions of change - social, economic, cultural and political.

Why this sudden efflorescence of attention in Southern Africa to the issues I have enumerated, evidenced not only by this conference but in several other recent academic gatherings? Largely, I believe, because of our perception that the older, relatively static politico-economic structures that have been with us for decades are on the verge of undergoing extensive change. The perception of this impending change has been embryonically present for some time, but up to the recent past has largely been the purview of either the inchoate aspirations of the dispossessed or the lonely prophets and prognosticators on the fringes of the various decision-making hierarchies which are our masters. It has only been recently that the cumulative impact of events and collective opinion has begun to lead those in authority to give formal recognition to this perception and change its status from being that of a latent to an active principle.

This formal recognition by Authority of change-perception itself generates new flexibilities and creativity which are enormously beneficial for the drive in our universities for contextual relevance. Let me illustrate with the example of my own university. In the Rhodesia of 1977 the "cumulative impact of events and collective opinion" which I have mentioned above had reached a level of generalized awareness within the university which, because it lacked formal recognition, tended to be divisive. Some accepted the perception; some rejected it. Thus there was a conflict over what constituted contextual relevance. For some the situation spelt insane inertia in the face of inevitable change. For others it meant a threat to the stability on which the academic enterprise was founded. Anticipating what my colleague Dr. Chideya will be saying in a subsequent paper,⁽²⁾ this was a conflict of value as well as a conflict of interest.

Then Authority spoke. In a paper entitled "The University and Constitutional Change", dated June 29, 1977, our Principal and Vice-Chancellor commented, "It requires no great degree of political prescience to observe that Rhodesia is now on the brink of political and social changes which must have a radical impact on the University." Noting that there were "alternatives between inactivity and the production of a complete blueprint for an unknown future" he went on to endorse the supposition that

While, on this side of sanity, it is impossible to prescribe precisely the future development of the University, certain reasonable provisions for the future can now be made. It is assured that the relationship between the University of the present and that of the future is dialectical, that continuity and discontinuity, conservation and radical change will be combined.(3)

This formal imprimatur by Authority on change-perception, together with various sequential university arrangements to determine what "reasonable provisions" might be, had a diffuse but significant impact. An impact which, even if not definitive and categorical, was nevertheless instrumental in increasing the level of cooperation within the university between potentially opposed groups and in augmenting the university's will and capacity to adjust to changing conditions. Conflict of interest remained (and indeed may have been exacerbated by the process) but conflict of value was reduced through a new consensus on what constituted contemporary contextual relevance.

Paraphrasing I might add that all of this is a comment on the value of a conference such as the one in which we are now engaged. Without being unduly cynical I can predict that the two conferences now programmed will result in a mass of analysis which will suffer the fate of unmentioned internment in file boxes. I am reminded of a note from my favourite lay critic in Zimbabwe Rhodesia, 79 year old Mr. C.J. Oliver, who was kind enough to comment positively on a recent article that I wrote. He urged that I take steps to place it before the general public, saying, "Do not, I pray, murmur with a sigh that it is to be presented at some indigestion-fermenting and somnolent academic banquet - and thereafter filed expeditiously away in the U.R. archives." He then added, "If that is to be its fate then all I can ask is: WHY the HELL did you write it??"(4)

All of this is a sad commentary on our academic propensity to tie ourselves up in our own verbiage and our inability to translate analysis into action. I hope that my prediction is wrong in respect to the proceedings of this conference. But even if it isn't, even if the fate of our papers follows Mr. Oliver's colourful if gloomy scenario, this conference will be worth the expense in time and money. A conference such as this one has great value. That

value lies not only in its "conscientizing" role, but apropos to what I have already said, even more in its "legitimizing" role for change-perception. With the weight of authority represented in the sponsorship and participation involved I believe that it can contribute significantly to a new definition of contextual relevance for the universities of Southern Africa and hence their ability to adapt and contribute to changing socio-political patterns.

What are these "changing socio-political patterns", and hence the content of our change-perception, our new definitions of relevant context? The answer in detail will hopefully be provided in the discussions of this conference. Furthermore, the answer will vary from country to country. But the essence of the change lies, I believe, in the perception that the legitimizing argument for the university's existence will shift from an elite to a populist base, from an educational to a training role, and from a conservative to a developmental function. Note that I stipulate the "legitimizing argument", not the university's actual or desired function, which may well be different.

This brings me to the fourth of our designated concerns - development. The emphasis on development is largely a product of post-war Third World nationalism with its emphasis on a comprehensive mobilizing role for the state. The focus emerged against the perceived canvass of an international political economy inhabited by the Developed Countries, the Underdeveloped Countries and the L.D.Cs. Young states, "Anti-colonial nationalism identified spoliation and exploitation as a critical deprivation; from this followed, necessarily, the ideological commitment of the life more abundant - in short development - as a corollary of independence." The new independent state is seen as the vehicle for the attainment of this goal, and thus "this development syndrome is a far-reaching normative statement of the role of the nation-state." (5)

For the implications of this perspective regarding the university's role, a quote from Julius Nyerere is instructive: "The University in a developing society must put the emphasis of its work on subjects of immediate moment to the nation in which it exists, and it must be committed to the people of that nation and their humanistic goals ... We in poor societies can only justify expenditure on a university - of any type - if it promotes real development of our people ..." (6)

These are the words of a politician, and fraught with the ambiguities that the political idiom produces. They are, nevertheless, representative of a plethora of normative political statements in Black Africa regarding the role of the university, and therefore of great significance. I have already spoken of the oft-repeated cry to "make the university relevant." In the modern African context, with its emphasis on national development, the idiom changes while the focus remains much the same. "Make the university relevant" and "Make the university developmental" are, in effect, synonymous phrases.

I have taken up a considerable portion of your time to emphasise the interrelated nature of our four concerns. These interconnections immeasurably complicate our analysis and prescriptions. And, as if this were not enough, the interrelatedness is not only complex, it also implies certain tensions and contradictions as well. A critical dimension of this inherent conflict lies on the plane of what might be styled the Africanization/Pragmatization dichotomy. Not only is a preoccupation with these two concerns characteristic of the writings of academics on the subject, it also typifies many of the pronouncements of African politicians regarding the function of universities within the states with which they are concerned. The emphasis on these twin concerns is so pervasive that I need not substantiate the point by detailed quotation. The literature is well known to the participants of this conference and it is sufficient to remark here that what Ajayi⁽⁷⁾ calls "the search for relevance and identity" can, in the variety of perspectives and analyses brought to the subject by African academics and politicians, be subsumed under the two terms I have used.

By 'Africanisation' is meant not simply the indigenisation of the staff of African universities - although this is of course an important aspect of the process - or even the adaptation of curricula to African cultural and social contexts. The search for Africanisation is a more embracing quest which lays upon the African university the task of assembling the entire gamut of African heritage and ensuring its continuity by an analysis and pedagogy which gives it a contemporary relevance to the needs and aspirations of the modern African nation-state.

The issue of 'Pragmatisation' involves a more diffuse set of perspectives, but the central focus of this concern has been the utility of the university enterprise in terms of manpower training and research related

to national development needs. Thus the Accra Workshop of the Association of African Universities held in 1972 emphasised the responsibility of the African university to promote "social and economic modernisation", to be involved in the "pursuit and inculcation of practical knowledge, not esoteric knowledge or knowledge for its own sake", and to give priority to "research into local problems that will contribute to the amelioration, in particular, of the life of the ordinary man and the rural poor". In respect to manpower training, the African university is exhorted to "shift emphasis in its degree programmes from the purely academic to the professional and practical". (8)

The simultaneous attainment of the twin objectives of Africanisation and Pragmatisation presents difficulties of considerable magnitude. The national developmental requirements which are the objective of Pragmatisation carry with them a sense of urgency. "It must be realised that we are in a hurry", said Julius Nyerere regarding the University of East Africa. "We cannot just think, and debate endlessly the pros and cons of any decision. We have to act; we have to tackle these problems *now*." (9) Such urgency carries with it the temptation to import immediately available academic and technological expertise from outside Africa, which may not be conducive to Africanisation. There is the problem of the allocation of limited resources, both for the nation and the university in terms of the way academic manpower and capital is distributed, and for the individual African scholar in terms of the way he uses his all-too-inadequate time.

Finally, there is the problem imposed by the fact that the twin goals of Africanisation and Pragmatisation imply different sets of relationship between the academic community and the state. Pragmatisation implies the necessity of a tightly articulated working relationship between the two, in which the state has an immediate and direct access to the decision-making process in the university regarding the creation of priorities, the allocation of academic resources and the content of curricula.

On the other hand the task of Africanisation, as I have defined it in this paper, implies the necessity of a degree of detachment from the state and its immediate concerns to permit the reflection

mentioned in the paragraph quoted. The responsibility for concentrating and crystallising the ethos of the African cultural and social heritage and refracting it through an analysis of contemporary relevance requires a perspective produced by a certain distance - but not divorce - from proximate, pragmatic considerations, the kind of distance inferred in the often castigated "ivory-tower-ism" of the university tradition. From the Pragmatism point of view Nyerere was right when he said, "we are too poor in money and educated man-power to support an ivory tower existence for an intellectual elite".⁽¹⁰⁾ From the Africanisation point of view it could be asked whether, in the long run, African societies can afford *not* to support such an "ivory tower" existence for at least some of their intellectuals.

So far I have emphasised the difficulties inherent in the attempts to achieve simultaneously the Africanisation and the Pragmatism of the African university. But a consideration of these difficulties leads us to an even more fundamental dimension of conflict, which exists in the issue of the role of the African university in societal context. The function which I have assigned to the African university under the rubric of Africanisation requires not only the detachment mentioned above, it also implies an element in the university posture which places it "over against" the society as critic and judge. It is a particular and paradoxical characteristic of universities that they can only effectively perform their role of analysing and re-formulating the components of societal and cultural heritage in terms of particular sets of contemporary relevance by assuming a critical and oppositional stance to the *status quo*. Indeed, the very performance of the role augments the stance necessary for the performance. As John Ward has noted, "In the very act that society assigns the intellectual, that is, in preserving and transmitting the values of the culture, in expressing and giving voice to the values that inform the culture, intellectuals are driven inevitably toward heresy In the very act of formulating and articulating the values of the culture, the intellectual is driven to see tensions and even contradictions within the system of values that society knows and cherishes as tradition." This is the process which has led to the intellectual community's "seemingly inherent tendency to criticize existing institutions from the vantage point of general conceptions of the desirable, ideal conceptions which are thought to be universally applicable."⁽¹¹⁾

This reference to conceptions considered to be of universal applicability points to the core of the dimension of conflict we are now considering. The twin objectives of Africanisation and Fragmentation are both "particularistic", in that they address themselves to specific sectional or regional requirements and realities. A given society will expect its university to set about fulfilling these objectives from the same particularistic perspective, often restricted to the problem-solving mode or, if latitude is given to permit a contribution to the definition of goals, solely on the basis of some particular ideological dogma. Such a particularism is, I believe, antithetical to the genius of the university tradition and inimical to its viability and ultimate utility. At the core of this tradition is a universalistic ethos insofar as it adduces a normative pattern of action of universal applicability. This normative pattern attaches to the elevation to axiomatic status, in the university tradition, of the constructive and enriching potentiality of rationality. This is the general principle of universal validity: whatever is rational - regardless of its source or implication - is admissible as a basis for the academic enterprise; whatever is irrational - regardless of its attraction or apparent necessity - is not. It is in this sense that I refer to the university tradition as being "universalistic". (12)

Herein lies the difficulty and the dilemma. To be viable, to enjoy the support from the society necessary for its continued existence, the university must be seen to be relevant, and such relevance implies a degree of particularism in its activities. Furthermore, this particularism implies a close articulation between the university and the society. At the same time, essential to the performance of the university's role is a universalism which places considerations of rationality above the more particularistic claims of given structural or ideological requirements in time and place. Such a universalistic perspective requires a measure of autonomy for the university, providing the academic freedom necessary for its development and expression. (13)

We have now come full circle back to my original point of contextual relevance. The complexities of the university's role and situation make it clear that we cannot speak of "the university and its community," we can only speak of "the university and its communities",

in the plural. No single context can be assigned the sole status of relevance, although some may be of more relevance than others. The university condition is, inherently and perennially, one of multiplex, superimposed contextuality. The creative containment of the tensions produced thereby will continue to be a test of the viability both of the universities, and the states, which we serve.

FOOTNOTES

1. In particular: (a) "Universalism, Particularism and Academic Freedom: The Rhodesian Case", in The Future of the University in Southern Africa, H.W. van der Merwe and D. Welsh, eds. Cape Town: David Philip, 1977. pp. 102-124. (b) Education, Development and Change in Africa. (Hoernlé Memorial Lecture, 1976) Johannesburg: South African Institute of Race Relations, 1976. 25 pp. (c) "The Role of the University in National Development: Contemporary Issues." Unpublished paper, delivered at UNISA, Oct 19, 1978.
2. N.T. Chideya, "Scaling Up the Ivory Tower: In Quest of Relevance." Paper for the "University and Community Conference", University of the Witwatersrand, July 8, 1979. p.9.
3. Rev. Professor Robert Craig, Principal and Vice-Chancellor, University of Rhodesia. Unpublished Senate-paper, University of Rhodesia, June 1977, subsequently released for general circulation.
4. Personal correspondence from C.J. Oliver to M.W. Murphree, 3 June, 1979, and quoted by kind indulgence of the author!
5. Crawford Young, The Politics of Cultural Pluralism. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1976. pp.74-75.
6. Julius K. Nyerere, quoted in M.F. Todaro et al, "Education for National Development: The University", in Education and Development Reconsidered: The Bellagio Conference Papers, F. Champion Ward, ed. N.Y.: Praeger, 1974, p.204.
7. J.F.A. Ajayi, "Towards an African Academic Community," in T.M. Yesufu, ed., Creating the African University. Ibadan: Oxford University Press, 1973, p.18.
8. T.M. Yesufu, "The Role and Priorities of the University in Development", in T.M. Yesufu, ed., Creating the African University. Ibadan: Oxford University Press, 1973. pp. 42-43.
9. Julius K. Nyerere, "An Address by the Republic of Tanganyika at the Inauguration of the University of East Africa." West African Journal of Education (Feb.1964), pp. 7 - 9. Reprinted in L. Gray Cowan, ed., Education and Nation Building in Africa, pp. 309-13. New York: Praeger, 1965. p.312.
10. Ibid, p.310.
11. Quoted in S.M. Lipset and A. Basu, "Intellectual Types and Political Roles", pp. 433-70, in L. Coser, ed., The Idea of Social Structure. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovitch, 1975.
12. I refer, of course, to the tradition, not the history, of the university enterprise, which is replete with examples of particularisms of various types.
13. The Open Universities' manifesto on academic freedom points out quite correctly that academic freedom and university autonomy are not necessarily synonymous. University autonomy is the means to the end of academic freedom, not, in the tradition I have described, an end in itself. See B. Beinart, et al, eds., The Open Universities in South Africa and Academic Freedom, 1957 - 1974. Cape Town: Juta, 1974.p.1.