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# The African University as “Global” University

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Higher education is undergoing a period of profound transformation. Universities around the world are reconceptualizing themselves as “global” institutions, closely connected to—and competing with—one another. Many argue that “the globalization of higher education” makes the “free movement of people and ideas...the norm,” having “enormously positive consequences for individuals, for universities, and for nations” (Wildavsky 2010, 7). Others express growing concern that universities are increasingly corroded by their relationship to “academic capitalism,” producing commercial knowledge and pragmatic job training at the expense of the general good (Slaughter and Rhoades 2004).

This debate, however, frequently draws examples from the experience of large research universities in the United States, Europe, China, and oil-rich Middle Eastern countries, often ignoring African universities all together. Conversely, scholarship on African higher education focuses on problems facing individual institutions or national higher-education systems, rather than speaking to questions of “globalization” more generally (e.g., Afoláyan 2007; Assié-Lumumba 2006; Diouf and Mamdani 1994).

It may be tempting to exclude African universities from discussions about the globalization of higher education based on demographic measures. After all, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries now send more than 80% of the college-age population to university, up from 60% only 30 years ago (OECD 2012, 28). During the first decade of the twenty-first century, China alone increased its annual number of college graduates from 1 million to 6.3 million (Morgan and Wu 2011, 1). Countries in sub-Saharan Africa, by contrast, have seen only minimal growth, with enrollment numbers now hovering around 3% (Altbach et al. 2009, vii; Teferra 2006, 558). This article, however, argues that it is incorrect to treat African universities as extraneous to debates about “the globalization of higher education,” especially given that they offer the paradigmatic illustration of a highly asymmetrical world of “global” higher education. Comaroff and Comaroff argue that taking an “African vantage” often offers a “privileged insight into the workings of the world at large,” making it possible to “see familiar things in different ways” (2011, 1–2). For those whom the Euro-American academy is most familiar, considering the possibility that an African university—rather than our own institutions—may actually best embody the “global university” can shed new light on what “the globalization of higher education” actually means.

Rather than fetishizing “the global university,” many African academics are interested in what constitutes the “African university.” Acknowledging the university’s role in economic development, there remains the recognition that many universities in Africa are also the physical embodiment of Western colonial governance, initially designed to displace and devalue indigenous knowledges and expertise. Ajayi et al., for example, wrote that the “debate about what constitutes the African University” is central to the question of “how do we adapt the University to African culture so it can provide African development, not westernization” (Ajayi et al. 1996, 1–3). Many efforts to think “the African university” examine the long lineage of higher education on the continent, including the Library at Alexandria, Islamic *madrasas*, and ancient colleges such as Timbuktu (e.g., Ajayi et al. 1996, 5–13; Assié-Lumumba 2006, 25–6; Teferra 2006, 557). Central to discussions about “the African University,” in other words, is a clear recognition that the “university in Africa”—first imposed from a foreign power and later adopted out of national and economic necessity—has yet to become an African institution.

Locating African universities at the center of debates about globalization highlights the many contradictions and tensions already present within the broader world of higher education. Rather than treating universities as seamlessly interconnected institutions that house apolitical knowledge producers buffered from the world economy at large, African universities remind us that all universities are *primarily* political institutions with their own complicated and particular histories. Today, African universities cannot be understood independent of their colonial legacy, their struggles for national liberation, or the decades of economic crises that followed. In short, African universities—like all universities—are not singular and isolated institutions but rather multiple, complex, and contradictory sites of world politics.

## THE COLONIAL UNIVERSITY

African university education is relatively recent and closely tied to colonial rule. The first two students to graduate from a European-style university in sub-Saharan Africa received their degrees in 1879 from Fourah Bay College in Sierra Leone. Eighty years later, only six universities existed in sub-Saharan Africa (Hinchliffe 1987, 29). In South Africa, the first university—South African College—was established in 1829 and later incorporated into the University of Cape Town, when the university opened its new campus in 1916 on land donated by Cecil John Rhodes. Initially, colonial African universities were small, limited in their educational offerings, and catered primarily to the needs of the white colonial elite. However, during the

twentieth century—as demand for an educated administrative class grew—many of these colleges expanded their enrollments to include larger numbers of African students. For example, in the 1930s, Makerere College began the process of becoming a full university patterned on the British model, focusing exclusively on postsecondary education and intent on educating “a tiny elite meant to take the reins of leadership” after independence (Mamdani 2007, 1). Students received full scholarships, including room, board, health care, transportation, and a spending allowance. In 1949, Makerere College developed a relationship with the University of London, changed its name to University College of East Africa, and began drawing students from across British East Africa (Nyagotti-Chacha 2007, 78). This arrangement lasted until March 1970, when the East African Authority separated the University College of East Africa into three schools: Makerere University, University of Dar es Salaam (UDSM), and the University of Nairobi (Nyagotti-Chacha 2007, 78).

*In short, African universities—like all universities—are not singular and isolated institutions, but rather multiple, complex, and contradictory sites of world politics.*

These expanded colonial universities offered primarily vocational education, including degrees in the humanities, law, and medicine. This growth in higher education, however, did not alter the colonial incentives to keep access to higher education limited. By 1960, only 43.2% of eligible children in Africa were enrolled in primary education; only 0.2% attended tertiary institutions (World Bank 2000, 106). Primary and secondary education was provided by a checkerboard of missionary schools (Thompson 1968, 16) that varied greatly across colonial holdings.<sup>1</sup> Much of the education received in these schools reproduced a vision of the world absent Africa. Ngugi wa Thiong’o, for example, recalls how colonial instruction focused exclusively on learning the language, literature, history, and geography of the metropole such that any “Kenyan of my generation...knew many natural, historical landmarks of London...long before they knew a single street of their capital” (Ngugi wa Thiong’o 2012, 39).

Because education—and especially higher education—was difficult to attain, many Africans (including future nationalist leaders) left the continent to pursue advanced degrees. Jomo Kenyatta, for example, studied anthropology at the London School of Economics. Franz Fanon wrote *Black Skin, White Masks* as a thesis in literature at Lyon. Léopold Senghor formulated the theoretical basis for Négritude with Aimé Césaire when they were students in Paris. Amílcar Cabral studied agronomy in Lisbon. Julius Nyerere received degrees in economics and history from the University of Edinburgh. Kwame Nkrumah completed a master’s degree in philosophy as a student at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania. As African countries won independence, many of these national leaders placed considerable emphasis on expanding access to education, resulting in a renaissance of higher education across the continent.

#### THE NATIONALIST UNIVERSITY

At independence, many African countries were dependent on colonial administrators for skilled and managerial labor. When the Democratic Republic of the Congo won independence in 1960, for example, only 16 Congolese had college degrees (Gilroy 1960). The demands for skilled labor forced African leaders to rapidly expand their university systems, spending between 10% and 25% of total governmental expenditures on education—often with 10% to 35% going to higher education (Hinchliffe 1987, 163–4). The result was a massive expansion of higher education during the 1960s and 1970s. Annual university enrollments increased nearly 11% *each year* between 1960 and 1980 (Hinchliffe 1987, 1). For example, before independence, Nigeria had one university with a thousand students—compared to 31 universities enrolling 141,000 students in 1990 (Mamdani 1994, 1). In the decades after independence, universities also became powerful symbols of national identity.

These institutions became hotbeds of intellectual production tasked with pursuing political, economic, and scientific solutions to questions of governance and economic development in Africa. During the 1960s and 1970s, for example, UDSM became one of the foremost universities on the continent, achieving international fame for its vibrant intellectual activity (Shivji 1996, 2). The university attracted a dynamic international intellectual community of political scientists, historians, legal scholars, and sociologists—including, among others, Isaa Shivji (Tanzania), Walter Rodney (Guyana), Mahmood Mamdani (Uganda), Lionel Cliffe (United Kingdom), Giovanni Arrighi (Italy), Immanuel Wallerstein (United States), David Apter (United States), John Saul (Canada), and Terence Ranger (Britain)—interested in developing academic knowledge that was useful to the decolonization of Tanzania and Third World project more generally. Historians at UDSM, for example, wrote historiographical texts that focused on highlighting the contours of African agency (Ranger 1971). Other scholars became preeminent economic theorists of economic underdevelopment and world systems. Julius Nyerere, who regularly attended discussions on campus, described UDSM as “a strategic weapon in the fight against poverty, ignorance, and disease” (Mkude et al. 2003, 1–2) and declared that a self-reliant, socialist Tanzania required an education system that would cultivate “a proud, independent, and free citizenry which relies upon itself for its own development” (Nyerere 1968, 70). Some scholars criticized the close relationship between academics and the nationalist project; nevertheless, these criticisms were part of a vibrant academic and political conversation concerning the broader social role of universities and academic-knowledge production (e.g., Denoon and Kuper 1970, 1971; Ranger 1971).

### THE STRUCTURAL-ADJUSTMENT UNIVERSITY

By the late 1970s, however, many African countries faced profound budgetary constraints as a result of the oil crisis, the world recession, and the shifting of industrial production to Asia (Arrighi 2002). As a consequence, many African countries turned to international financial institutions for loans, most of which came with conditions requiring dramatic cuts to social services—including higher education. During this period, The World Bank began developing new metrics for calculating the economic benefit of higher education. Previously, The World Bank held that higher education was important for poverty reduction, but its exact economic value could not be calculated due to the long time horizon. However, by the early 1980s, The World Bank embraced efforts to “empirically calculate earning functions” (Collins and Rhoads 2008, 187; Heyneman 1999), including the value of education in terms of human capital—that is, treating education as fixed capital yielding higher wages for individuals making the investment. Reports from this period argued that higher education yields only a 13% return on investment, compared with 26% from primary and 17% from secondary education (Landell-Mills et al. 1989, 77). The result was an enforced reallocation of resources toward primary education, causing a “drastic reduction of higher education in Africa” on the grounds that doing so would create “higher efficiency and a more egalitarian distribution of educational resources” (Caffentzis 2000, 5).

One result of the tightened fiscal conditions was an outpouring of student protests, which many governments treated as “a threat to law and order” and therefore dispatched police to pacify university campuses (Mamdani 1994, 3). Another result was many decades of a “market-driven” model of African higher education, which “opened the door to a galloping consultancy culture” and “the NGO-ization of the university” (Mamdani 2011, 3). Today, African universities are heavily dependent on foreign aid, tuition from foreign students studying abroad, and philanthropic donors. Although collaborations between African universities and the Euro-American academy do exist, they often are “externally driven” and focus on establishing thin “institutional partnerships” rather than incorporating “local researchers into an externally driven project” (Mamdani 2011, 4).

*The study of African universities, however, situates these developments within a broader context of colonial rule, struggles for national independence, and the postcolonial structural-adjustment crisis—a history often ignored in contemporary discussions about the globalization of higher education.*

### AFRICAN UNIVERSITIES AS GLOBAL UNIVERSITIES

Today, scholars around the world live and work in universities shaped by the same political and economic forces that define the contours of African universities, including widespread reliance on private funding and tuition revenue, greater competition from the for-profit education sector, and increased job precarity within the academic labor force. The study of African universities, however, situates these developments within a

broader context of colonial rule, struggles for national independence, and postcolonial structural-adjustment crisis—a history often ignored in contemporary discussions about the globalization of higher education. For example, The World Bank—which once called for defunding higher education—now encourages countries to establish “world-class universities”<sup>2</sup> that can “compete effectively with the best of the best” in the “global tertiary education marketplace” (Salmi 2009, 3–4). Although The World Bank admits that most “world-class” universities “originate from a very small number of countries, mostly Western”—and similarly voices the possibility that “the definition of ‘world-class’ [might be] synonymous with ‘elite Western’ and therefore inherently biased against...non-Western countries” (Salmi 2009, 4, 3)—these concerns are quickly dismissed in favor of practical advice concerning how countries nonetheless might pursue the creation of world-class institutions.

African universities also illustrate the ways in which the most prestigious “global” universities are actually parochial institutions, with their own histories and contradictions. America’s oldest and most elite colleges and universities, for example, are literally founded on the wealth accumulated through the trans-Atlantic slave trade (Wilder 2013), which enabled a school like Harvard to emerge as one of the most prestigious “global” universities in the world. In 2012, Harvard’s \$30 billion endowment was greater than the annual gross domestic product (GDP) of more than 40 African countries, including Tanzania, Uganda, Botswana, Zambia, and Senegal (Haynie 2013).<sup>3</sup>

In conclusion, rather than treating the elite, “world-class,” and (primarily) Western research universities as the paradigmatic example of what a “global” university is—that is, the universal University—it is useful to consider what insights into the broader world of higher education African universities make visible. Doing so makes it possible to not only create new knowledge about the university but also to rethink what “globalization” means.

Speaking about his efforts to revitalize the Makerere Institute for Social Research, Mamdani argues that working within an African university makes it possible for scholars to produce knowledge that does not “oppose the local to the global” but rather seeks “to understand the global from the vantage point of

the local” (Mamdani 2011, 7–8). Central to his argument is recognizing that the project of reinvigorating African universities as sites of academic knowledge production is important not only in terms of economic development but also because doing so makes it possible to produce research that speaks to particular locations, political commitments, and histories. A project like this has the potential to radically transform what it means to imagine the world as “global” (Kamola 2012). ■

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## NOTES

1. Portuguese and Belgian colonies provided very little—and low quality—education, whereas French and British colonies often offered children of white settlers generous access to educational opportunities. The result was a “leaking of a few extra [educational] advantages” for “the children of the African soil” (Rodney 1968, 71).
2. What “world-class” means in the report remains largely undefined, except for the claim that “elite status is conferred by the outside world on the bases of international recognition,” as offered by “league tables” rankings (Salmi 2009, 4).
3. Data on national GDPs (in US dollars) are available at IMF, *World Economic and Financial Survey*, 2013, <http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/weo/2013/02/weodata/index.aspx>.

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