

# **Critical Capacities: Facing the Challenges of Intellectual Development in Africa**

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## **Abstract**

The lecture will present a critical analysis of the challenges that have inspired and constrained African intellectual development in the changing postcolonial context of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

African intellectual identities have been hard to articulate and institutionalise within formal educational institutions reluctant to move beyond the universalising premises of the scholarly paradigms developed in post-industrial capitalist contexts.

These include particular globally hegemonic organisations of power and knowledge – intellectual regimes that have constrained the emergence of African-focused intellectual culture within the formal structures of African universities and which are currently being propagated through the globalisation of higher education policy in a manner insensitive to the meaning and impact of higher education reform in African contexts. African intellectuals have responded to the situation in a variety of creative ways, both within and outside African universities in a manner that offers useful insights and strategies for the future.

The present scenario underscores the need for the establishment of strong, creative, intellectually productive institutions equipped to address continental knowledge needs in a manner grounded in the political and cultural aspirations of Africa's diverse societies. This requires African intellectuals responsive to the challenges of democratisation, gender equality and social justice.

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### **I Introduction**

Why intellectual development?

I have chosen to devote my inaugural address to this subject as a way of honouring the legacy of the late Prince Claus, who was always very clear on the importance of culture. In his address on the occasion of the Honorary Fellowship Award Ceremony at the Institute of Social Studies, the Prince took the opportunity to advance several propositions pertaining to development cooperation. I have singled out two of his propositions for our attention today.

“The object of ‘development cooperation’ is to help the recipient countries to achieve greater independence, in particular economic independence, in the light of the realisation that the achievement of political independence alone means very little. In reality the result of development cooperation in most cases is merely to confirm or even reinforce dependence.”

“An awareness of one’s own cultural identity and past is a fundamental condition for sustainable autonomous development.”

His Royal Highness Prince Claus of the Netherlands, Address Presented at the Honorary Fellowship Award Ceremony, Institute of Social Studies, The Hague, Wednesday 1 June 1988.

Over a decade later, I would add the proposition that intellectual development is a key aspect of cultural development, one worthy of critical attention at the present time. This is especially so in view of the fact that Africa is not only one of the most underdeveloped continents, but it now also has the most fragile and under-capacitated higher education sector in the world.<sup>1</sup>

Leading international development thinkers now acknowledge that Africa will have to “think its way out of its current predicament”, and even those who once dismissed the need for universities in Africa now show renewed interest. The question of African intellectual development is indeed critical to the future development prospects of the region.

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<sup>1</sup> A phrase attributed to David Court by Berrit Olsen (1994)

I will argue that the unfulfilled promise of African intellectual development has been a key factor perpetuating Africa's underdevelopment. Yet it is to intellectual development that we must once again turn in a collective effort to reverse the underdevelopment of the continent. This will require the reclaiming and strengthening of African intellectual work for the pursuit of African interests. I shall further argue that the community of critical intellectuals – notably feminist intellectuals – have consistently pursued alternative approaches to knowledge-building, both within and beyond the academic establishment, in a manner that illustrates the potential for critical intellectual work to advance liberatory agendas for development, democratisation and social justice.

The complexities of the postcolonial era have generated new African intellectual identities that are contradictory in their diversity, peripatetic, multiply-constituted and cosmopolitan, located in epistemologies that are likely to owe as much to Africa's social movements, civil societies and independent research communities and networks as they owe to the formal academic establishments.

The generation of African intellectuals in which I would locate myself includes those who have survived the iron grids of military rule, the traumas of numerous civil wars and conflicts, the failures of modernisation, and the continued dependency and underdevelopment of the region, and have resisted the continuous undermining and disparagement of African intellectual and conceptual capacities, both at home and abroad. They are a resilient lot, whose commitment deserves to be commended. However the point to emphasise is not so much their resilience, as the importance of the critical dispositions arising out of postcolonial experience, and the critical role that such intellectuals have to play in the future survival and well-being of the world's most impoverished and beleaguered continent. Africa's critical intellectuals are not neutral, with abstract academic identities determined solely by the dictates of a formal, disciplinary, academic training which in claiming universality, denies its own specificity. Rather they engage positively with the challenges of the particular vantage point afforded by being located on the African continent and informed by the historical experience of the region.

Decades after decolonisation, and the civil rights, workers and women's movements of the 1960s, anti-imperialist, nationalist and international feminist challenges have profoundly challenged the intellectual hegemonies of yesteryear. As a result, it is no longer acceptable for those working in the humanities (arts and social sciences) to masquerade as 'identity-less' observers, amoral, asexual beings who exist 'outside' their society. Such claims suggest a schizoid split between theory and the context in which it exists, something that is an anathema to today's more reflexive intellectuals, and unacceptable within the epistemologies that guide their work. The world's leading natural scientists are also questioning the

supremacy of science over other kinds of knowledge, and acknowledging the importance of other levels of truth and meaning.<sup>2</sup>

Despite a broader developmental condition that has constrained the African higher education establishment, Africa's more critical intellectuals have contributed significantly to the emergence of the alternative theories, analyses and methodologies that have been forged in the crucible of the epistemological, socio-political, cultural and economic conditions of the postcoloniality, a challenging environment if ever there was one.

During colonial times, the idea of a modern, African university was first put forward as a liberatory project.<sup>3</sup> When flag independence was achieved, national universities were considered as essential to nationhood as a national anthem, or a national army. These days we nostalgically remind ourselves how the Zambians responded in the 1960s. As Kenneth Kaunda observed at his installation as the first Chancellor:

“The University of Zambia is our own university in a very real sense. The story of how the people of this country responded so enthusiastically to my appeal for support is a very thrilling one. Humble folk in every corner of our nation – illiterate villagers, barefooted school children, prison inmates and even lepers – gave freely and willingly everything they could, often in the form of fish or maize or chickens. The reason for this extraordinary response was that our people see in the university the hope of a better and fuller life for their children and grandchildren.”

President Kaunda, at the Chancellors Installation Banquet, 12 July 1966, cited in Ajayi, Goma and Johnson, 1996, p1.

The independence of so many African nations gave rise to the establishment of hundreds of tertiary institutions. From no more than a handful of colonial colleges, the sector grew to over 300 universities in the 54 nations, and even larger numbers of technical and training colleges. African tertiary enrolment figures have grown from a few thousand in the 1960s, to somewhere between four and five million at the present time (Teferra and Altbach 2003). However impressive this might seem, Africa still has the weakest higher education system in the world. The gross tertiary enrolment rate amounts to just 3% of the eligible age group, by far the lowest in the world and demand continues to surge past the available provision.

Since political independence, African intellectuals have also developed scholarly ethics that privilege engagement and responsibility over abstraction and irresponsibility, ethics that define freedom not so much

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<sup>2</sup> Professor George Ellis, UCT cosmologist who recently won the Templeton Prize, made his career by exploring the connections between science and spirituality.

<sup>3</sup> Africanus Horton was a strong advocate of the publicly-funded modern university in the mid-nineteenth century, and viewed it as an instrument that would help restore Africa to its former place of glory in the world (Ajayi *et al* 1994:17)

in terms of liberal individualism, but in terms of the collective interests of African people whose struggles demand the freedom to challenge all the legacies of oppression.<sup>4</sup> Much work has been undertaken to highlight the perils of state repression and censorship and, more recently, to challenge the abstract tyranny of ‘market forces’ manifesting through global policy dictates (African Watch 1991, Diouf and Mamdani 1994, Mkandawire 1996, Zeleza 2003).

Today very few would dispute the essential role of higher education in African development and democratisation. Indeed there is currently a renewal of interest in reforming African universities to facilitate Africa’s participation in globalisation, the global economy and the global village. This seems strange to some of us. Most Africans understand their history as one of extensive involvement with the rest of the world, albeit an involvement on highly unfavourable terms. I refer to immeasurable costs – the loss of lives, the destruction of cultures, the expropriation of natural resources, accumulation of huge debts, and the mortgaging of future prospects.

## **II The Landscape**

### ***The Academic Establishment***

*There is always a little thought even in the most stupid institutions*  
*Foucault (1989:155)*

The late Ruth First observed that the modern institutions of governance established in colonial Africa were invented at a time when militaristic regimes ruled not so much “by the people or for the people, but *despite* the people.” (First 1970) There is little doubt that a prominent feature of post-colonial governments too – half of which were military dictatorships by the 1970s – has been their proclivity for ruling despite the people.

Colonial regimes began as military and economic conquests, followed by military rule. The emphasis was on the army and the establishment of an administrative bureaucracy, with relatively little expenditure afforded to public services, to health, welfare or education. Taxation revenues were sent to London, Paris and other colonial capitals, with local expenditure kept to the bare minimum and dedicated to the imperial agenda of ensuring maximum use of cheap local labour and the efficient extraction of the raw materials needed for their burgeoning industries. The colonial regimes did not view the education of Africans as a profitable investment, and some even viewed it as a direct threat to their supremacy. Only during the later stages were a select number of secondary schools and colonial colleges set up to sustain the colonial

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<sup>4</sup> This is reflected in the fact that the 1990 Kampala Symposium took as its subject ‘Academic Freedom and the Social

enterprise by training African men for the lower echelons of the male civil service. Given the almost exclusively male staffing of the colonial state, even less was provided for women, and what there was focused on the domestication of African women – a process designed to produce housewives suited to supporting husbands recruited into the colonial service.<sup>5</sup>

Since flag independence, basic education for the majority has formed the bulk of Africa's expenditure and emphasis. However, it has always been understood that decolonisation and nation-building required higher levels of intellectual capacity. If ordinary people valued it as a route to a better life, the African leaders and intellectuals of the nationalist era shared an understanding of education as having a key role to play in the great tasks of nationalism, namely “decolonisation and national sovereignty, national development, democratisation and regional cooperation.” (Mkandawire 2000:2) In other words the African University is not so much a colonial edifice as a post-colonial one, in the sense that it owes its existence to the ending of colonialism.<sup>6</sup>

The higher education institutions established at independence were strongly associated with the establishment and reproduction of the nation state, and concerned with their continental and national relevance in a way that distinguished them from the earlier Western models of the ‘ivory tower’. They pursued indigenisation, massification and the diversification of access in their efforts to address the challenges of national development, but they did so in the context of unforeseen constraints.

The failures of the grand nationalist visions of development are strongly implicated in the deterioration of the post-independence national political consensus. Growing schisms emerged between increasingly autocratic states and their increasingly educated and restive populations. Governments tightened their control over the academies to the extent that they ceased to be key sites for the production of grand visions, critical theories and analyses of development, turning instead to the delivery of technical expertise and policy-bound studies (Allen 1986, Sall 2003).

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Responsibility of African Intellectuals’ (see Diouf and Mamdani 1994 eds).

<sup>5</sup> See Mann 1985, Hansen 1992, Mianda 2002.

<sup>6</sup> This was of course not the case in South Africa, where the state established a whole array of deliberately racist institutions designed to school the various sectors of the population to uphold apartheid, and where the restructuring and reorientation of the sector into a unified and de-racialised system presents pressing challenges.

One might say that the far-reaching visions of African intellectuals have been sabotaged by two main factors. The first is national and refers to the limits placed on development by authoritarian regimes. The second is international and refers to the increasingly stringent global economic dogma that has displaced more ambitious and holistic visions of development since the ‘Lost Decade’ of the 1980s. Structural adjustment and neoliberal reforms have required massive cuts in all services to the people, but specifically constrained public spending on higher education in ways that have undermined the early progress.

Ironically, these two aspects – political authoritarianism and economic austerity – are not unconnected, but rather mutually enforcing, as the late Claude Ake cogently argued (Ake 1998, 2000). In Nigeria for example, it took a return to military dictatorship to impose structural adjustment programmes on a highly resistant populace, and for a long time locally discredited military dictators were propped up and condoned by the international financial institutions. Viewing African governments through the narrow lens of debt-repayments, and from the great distance that separated Washington from African people, these institutions regarded the supreme military councils as highly efficient ruling bodies – and *militarily* speaking perhaps this was true.

The long-term costs of such truncated vision have been devastating, even to those who formerly supported the atrocious regimes of Mobutu Sese Seko, Idi Amin, Siyad Barre, Sani Abacha and their kind. We now have a long and tragic record of evidence on this kind of ‘efficiency’ – the killing of opponents, the corruption, the increasingly uncivil features of traumatised civil societies, the banalities of primitive accumulation – all the worst excesses of militarised masculinity run amok. In the worst cases, even the national army’s monopoly on weapons and the use of force has given way to more invidious and dispersed forms of militarism the entrenchment of warlordism, gangsterism, genocide and the concomitant normalisation of perversities such as sexual violence. The responsibility for the development that has produced these conditions must be shared. They have been possible through the numerous military and financial deals that have secured foreign loans and investments that have filled the pockets of these so-called leaders, leaving our economies in ruins. Meanwhile Africa’s people are still expected to pay off these enormous debts by foregoing the basic public services that might have mitigated their debilitating poverty.

In the 1980s the international financial institutions had the effrontery to suggest that Africa did not need universities.<sup>7</sup> This provoked such outrage that the position was soon modified towards a redirection of African higher education, summed up as “a return to the developmental logic of the independent state, but without its ambition or vision.” (Mamdani 1996: 3) Indeed the kind of ‘relevance’ now being called for speaks not of responsiveness to development or to regional and national agendas, but rather responsiveness to the labour needs of the global market. ‘Diversification’ no longer refers to greater social inclusivity, but

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<sup>7</sup> The World Bank blueprint presented to the 1986 Conference of African Vice Chancellors held in Harare.

to privatisation, and ‘access’ no longer means access to education for marginalised groups but access to the education ‘market’ by would-be service providers.

The motivations for this reduction and redirection need to be questioned. The world market in higher education now exceeds 30 billion dollars, and the USA’s free trade advocates are arguing for the complete opening up of higher education ‘services’ that would see regulation left to the General Agreements on Trade and Services, a move that would perpetuate the USA’s global domination of this lucrative market (Altbach 2003). Needless to say Africa will be hardly be able to compete successfully on such an uneven playing field. Analysts have noted that by the mid-1990s, the African region was spending over 4 million dollars on 100,000 expatriate technical advisers, and the continent was displaying such extensive ‘development failure’ that many governments abandoned any pretence of sovereignty.<sup>8</sup>

‘Relevance’, ‘diversity’ and ‘access’ have been redefined to articulate the interests of different and more powerful stakeholders.

### ***Beyond the Academy***

The 1970s saw the emergence of several independent regional scholarly associations and networks that sought to reassert and sustain a regional intellectual agenda. Perhaps the most significant of these are the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) formed in 1973, and the Association of African Women for Research and Development (AAWORD) formed in 1977. Both are autonomous Pan-African networks which reaffirm intellectual traditions that challenge imperial legacies, encourage inter-disciplinary research and value independent publication.<sup>9</sup> As the established academic institutions deteriorated, these independent networks only gained in importance, ensuring the survival of a vibrant intellectual culture closely attuned to the challenges facing Africans at all levels of their diverse and complex societies.<sup>10</sup>

The most influential of these bodies, CODESRIA, pursues the intellectual priorities collectively identified by the social science community at the General Assembly held every three years for this purpose. Key areas have included development economics and structural adjustment, the military and militarism, social

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<sup>8</sup> This argument is developed in Mkandawire & Soludo 1996.

<sup>9</sup> This is especially significant given the context: between 1981 and 1993 Africa generated less than 1.5% of the world’s scientific publications, and academic journals have been especially hard to sustain (Teferra 1995, Zeleza 2003: 395-417).

<sup>10</sup> CODESRIA and AAWORD were joined by the Addis Ababa-based Organisation of Social Science Research in East Africa (OSSREA) and the Southern African Political Economy Trust (SAPES) based in Harare. Later nationally-based NGOs like the Center for Basic Research in Uganda, the Center for Advanced Social Studies and Center for Research and Documentation, both in Nigeria, and the Forum for Social Studies in Addis Ababa were also established as key sites for radical, engaged research, veritable havens for public intellectualism.

and civil society movements, identity and ethnic politics, democratisation and governance studies, indigenous knowledge, academic freedom, higher education reform and, since the 1980s, gender studies.<sup>11</sup>

Among the various postcolonial developments that have informed African scholarship, feminism has perhaps been one of the most interesting. Not only has it grown in the context of constraint and decline, but whereas independent African scholarship appears to have begun in African universities and subsequently migrated out of them, gender studies seems to have begun by activists who had left the universities but now shows signs of migrating back into them.<sup>12</sup>

Gender and women's studies have grown into a transdisciplinary field that has gained ground across Africa in recent years. This can be seen in the growing pool of publications covering a wide range of disciplines and fields, and in the corpus of methodologies designed to challenge both androcentrism in knowledge production and gender oppression in society. A small but growing pool of feminist-inspired scholars and researchers now works in and beyond universities. Their activities epitomise the key commitments of African intellectualism: a focus on continental challenges, a willingness to work across the disciplines, a strong sense of social responsibility (particularly towards women's liberation) and an insistence on maintaining the engagement between theory and practice. Most of those working in gender and women's studies do so in a manner that is motivated by a deeply-felt commitment to gender activism as a key route to effecting democratisation and social justice.<sup>13</sup>

Let me sum up this part of my discussion with a question. Would African people respond as they did in the 1960s if they were called upon to contribute to the university? The present situation is one in which African communities might still be likely to scrape their resources together to send a child for higher education. However they would probably be more desperate, more humble in their aspirations. Instead of dreaming that their children could become doctors, teachers, senior government officials, or university professors, they are more likely to be seeking some quick training in whatever practical skills seem most likely to assist him or her to migrate to Europe or North America, in the sad hope that he or she might send some foreign exchange home to alleviate their extreme poverty, to pay their basic food and medical bills. There was a time when this meant sending their sons to the university, later it meant sending them to the army. These days it is more likely to mean sending sons and daughters out onto the marketplace to acquire entrepreneurial skills and personal connections.

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<sup>11</sup> The first continental workshop on 'Gender Analysis and the Social Sciences' was held in Dakar in 1991, and gave rise to the collection of papers published as 'Engendering African Social Sciences', Imam *et al* (eds) 1996.

<sup>12</sup> These are more fully explored in Feminist Africa Issue 1 'Intellectual Politics' available at [www.feministafrica.org](http://www.feministafrica.org)

<sup>13</sup> The African Gender Institute has identified as many as 30 sites in Africa's 316 universities, most of them established during the late 1980s, and with several new initiatives underway at the present time. Bibliographic reviews point to a rapid growth in publications on African women and gender relations. The most comprehensive of these are Mama 1996, Snyder 1999, Lewis 2002 (available at [www.gwsafrica.org](http://www.gwsafrica.org)).

Perhaps, with the advances in democratisation, and the somewhat revised position of international financial institutions, there is an opportunity for African universities to advance African agendas in the contemporary global arena. Having discussed the constraints placed on the academic establishment, and the mobilisation of alternative scholarly networks, let us now consider the intellectual identities and methodologies that might best be mobilised to this end.

### ***Challenges of Identity***

If the best of Africa's intellectuals have identified with the goals of regional and national development and committed themselves to an ethic of regional pride and social responsibility towards Africa's diverse peoples, then we have seen how this kind of intellectual identity has become more precarious over the years, how it has been increasingly deprived of institutional support. Critical thinkers have been driven out of African universities, often by colleagues who defined 'responsibility' and 'relevance' as obedient service to government, no matter how distant from popular interests government had become.<sup>14</sup> The campuses became strife-ridden, and in many countries critical intellectuals were targeted for surveillance and repression. As Claude Ake noted, the responses were not always those of flight into exile or intellectual militancy:

"Some of us cooperated opportunistically with vice-chancellors and other state officials to break students and other colleagues who tried to resist the assault on the universities. Some of us who joined government became zealots of the assault on the universities, wreaking reckless vengeance on former colleagues for largely trivial long-held grievances. When we finally got round to rallying in defence of our institutions and our freedoms, our defence, if it can be dignified with such nomenclature, was unimaginative, fitful and perfunctory." (Ake 1994: 21)

Others have been no less critical of the inability of the intellectual community to withstand these challenges, drawing our attention to those who served despotic regimes, or pursued destructive impulses within civil society agendas – who became what Bourdieu (1998: 92) describes as 'negative intellectuals'.<sup>15</sup> The fact is that many paid – and some are still paying – a high price for pursuing more critical directions (Diouf and Mamdani 1994).<sup>16</sup>

Nor were the campuses comfortable places for the growing number of women who found their way into universities.<sup>17</sup> Indeed the growing contradiction between the growing numbers of highly educated women

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<sup>14</sup> Others chose to leave, rather than to comply with oppressive and tyrannical regimes, and some fled for their lives.

<sup>15</sup> Bangura's (1994) case study shows the ways in which the Nigeria military created a 'technocracy' – an academic elite that supported their activities in various ways.

<sup>16</sup> The abuses in Rwanda, Algeria, Egypt, Eritrea and Ethiopia suggest that academics are still at risk in many countries.

<sup>17</sup> Sall ed 2000, Bennett 2002, Mama 2003a

and the persistence of feudal and conservative gender politics is one of the factors leading to a deepening gender consciousness among women and men.<sup>18</sup>

By the early 1990s it was already apparent that self-censorship presented particular challenges, and at that time, the engagement or lack of engagement with gender contradictions presented an illustration of this tendency (Imam and Mama 1994). The pressures on academics to self-censor their work have intensified as the increasing financial dependency of African researchers on consultancies and unequal partnerships has grown over the years. Maintaining intellectual integrity – and loyalty to regional, socially responsible and critical intellectual agendas – is likely to become more difficult with globalisation, and the concomitant commodification of higher education (Zezeza 2003).

African intellectuals of both genders have become increasingly divided and fragmented, finding their institutional positions first politically and then economically precarious, and now increasingly subject to new technologies of professional regulation and surveillance.<sup>19</sup>

Within this scenario gender studies has grown, not so much because of the feminist challenges that the term implies, but because over 20 years of feminist intervention into the international development industry have created a space for particular kinds of gender discourse, referred to elsewhere as the development nexus.<sup>20</sup> Women in Development, Gender and Development, Gender Mainstreaming have become such buzz-words that even the most conservative of vice-chancellors is willing to accommodate the presence of something to do with gender on the campus, not least because it sounds as if it might attract some funds.

Africa's postcolonial intellectuals may generally have complicated identities, but those who are feminists perhaps especially so, given a critical consciousness born out of the contradictions between decades of politically correct constitutional and policy reforms, and the lived reality of persisting inequalities and injustices. Under these circumstances, feminist identities survive in a state of subalterity, perhaps with a degree of discretion, in interstices of male-dominated institutions. Their survival depends on carefully navigating these spaces, on the performative pragmatism required to retain space within what are after all public establishments.<sup>21</sup> At the same time, they remain vulnerable, attracting suspicion and hostility. They also continuously risk being compromised by the pragmatic terms on which they have secured marginal spaces within overwhelmingly patriarchal institutions.

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<sup>18</sup> This contradiction was sharply emphasised by the repeated threat to stone women to death in northern Nigeria, a country which has produced more women with PhDs than any other on the African continent.

<sup>19</sup> These take various forms, but include merit-based ratings systems, subsidy calculations that are formulaic enough to curtail more critical work and threaten local intellectual autonomy within a global system that is still Western-dominated. N. Rose (1990) addresses the evolution of managerial technologies that rely increasingly on self-governance.

<sup>20</sup> Editorial, *Feminist Africa*, Issue 1 Intellectual Politics.

<sup>21</sup> Currently enrolment figures suggest that as few as 25% of those enrolled in universities are women, and only 3% of Africa's professors (Mama 2003a).

### ***Challenges of Epistemology***

Epistemologies, like identities, have emerged in challenging and changing contexts. I will not dwell long on the epistemologies of the colonial era, for these have been competently dealt with already.<sup>22</sup> However it is in the aftermath of colonialism, and in the context of continuing inequalities in the global politics of knowledge production that post-colonial epistemologies have emerged. They therefore derive from a body of work rooted in colonial contexts, and which owes much to anti-imperialist, nationalist, feminist and post-independence politics. As such post-colonial thought is inherently critical, focusing on:

“..forces of oppression and coercive domination that operate in the contemporary world: the politics of anti-colonialism and neocolonialism, race, gender, nationalisms, class and ethnicities define its terrain...postcolonial theory’s intellectual commitment will always be to seek to develop new forms of engaged theoretical work that contributes to the creation of dynamic ideological and social transformation...it constitutes directed intellectual production that seeks to articulate itself with different forms of emancipatory politics...” (Young 2001:11)

Postcolonial and feminist epistemologies are in other words therefore critical and activist, committed to the political, social and cultural transformation of the societies in which they are located. Given the conditions under which they have emerged, they are also internationalist, demanding transnational engagements with the conditions of globalisation, and transdisciplinary, sustained engagements with social phenomena. Feminist epistemologies do not seek to propound grand, universal theories, so much as to develop more discrete grounded approaches to conceptualisation that will in the end develop qualified generalisations and theorisations that are targeted, partial and particular.<sup>23</sup>

Considering the dominant organisation of knowledge into science and the humanities (arts and social sciences) and the official privileging of the natural sciences and positivist modes of social science over the humanities, such approaches have found little space in resource-starved African universities, relying on continental and transnational networks, including transnational feminist networks.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> See Nkrumah 1976 *Consciencism*, Rodney 1972 *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, the many works of George Padmore, Frantz Fanon, Amílcar Cabral, Edward Said, Samir Amin, Adu Boahen, Ade Ajayi, Paulin Hountondji, Valentin Mudimbe, Anthony Appiah, and Gayatri Spivak.

<sup>23</sup> This is a view of theory one finds reiterated in Foucault ‘The role of theory today seems to me to be just this: not to formulate global systematic theory which holds everything in place, but to analyse the specificity of mechanisms of power, to locate the connections and extensions, to build little by little strategic knowledge (savoir) (in Gordon 1980:145.

<sup>24</sup> The privileging of science has derived from local and global factors. At regional level the focus on modernisation and industrialisation, seen as offering the way to ‘catch-up’ with the industrialised societies of the former colonial powers has led African policy-makers to place an almost unquestioned faith in the alchemy of science. Science, it was widely believed, would lift Africa into the modern age, offer better lives and enable us to participate as equals in the global community of nations. Today the privileging of science has gained new currency in the context of the technological revolution and globalisation, but science is still defined in exclusively positivist terms.

African perspectives remind us that this is an organisation of knowledge that has been deeply complicit in imperialism, and financed through capitalist expansionism and military interests. It has long been argued that the disciplines lack intellectual justification, given the interconnected nature of social, political and cultural life. Nonetheless the irrefutable Western dominance of the world's educational systems has seen this particular organisation of knowledge and its accompanying methodologies internationalised and exported, effectively globalised.<sup>25</sup> It has also been absolutist, with 'truth' and 'knowledge' emerging as universal discursive regimes intolerant of alternative epistemologies and world views, and which has subjected the colonised world to epistemic violence – the denigration of non-Western philosophies and their displacement by discursive regimes that reinvent 'Africa' and the 'Orient'.<sup>26</sup>

In African contexts the hierarchies of knowledge production have also coincided with an era of militarism. However African militarism has not fuelled an industrial revolution. Instead, in the context of economic and political underdevelopment and dependency it has played out with consequences that warrant our careful and critical attention. Science and scientific cultures do not exist in a vacuum, and its technological manifestations and applications are deeply mediated by politics and identities, including those of gender. Remaining alert to the human consequences of technological advance is an essential aspect of cultural development. It is clear that postcolonial and feminist readings of scientific development have much to offer. They remind us that the most pressing challenges of our times require more than purely scientific responses – consider the HIV/AIDS pandemic, the widespread abuse of women, genocide, the multiple social and cultural consequences of conflict, or the deeply gendered politics of today's war-making machines.

Epistemological changes are subversive by definition: they do not fit into pre-established canons or paradigms.<sup>27</sup> The same might be said of social changes. Neither can be 'engineered' in quite the way that positivistic epistemology assumes. This is because of the complexity and unpredictability of human beings and social processes, and the influence of identities, cultures and human agency – all of them gendered – on even the most scientifically planned policy frameworks.

### **Closing remarks**

Because of the ongoing nature of these cultural, institutional and methodological challenges, I have no intention of concluding this discussion. The matter of intellectual development deserves to be kept open, in view of the enormous challenges already endured, and those that we still face.

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<sup>25</sup> A argument developed in more detail in 'Open the Social Sciences' (Report of the Gulbenkian Commission 1996).

<sup>26</sup> See Edward Said 1988.

<sup>27</sup> Thomas Kuhn realised this back in the 1960s – see Kuhn 1967.

Let me end by suggesting that Africa's intellectuals, by virtue of their difficult and complicated postcolonial experience are in some ways uniquely positioned to engage critically with the contemporary challenges of global development. I have further suggested that the postcolonial and feminist epistemologies currently shaping African thought have much to contribute to the repositioning and reactivation of the critical capacities likely to contribute to the future revitalisation and development of a regionally-focused and organic intellectual culture. Whether this can best be pursued within or beyond the academic establishment remains to be seen. If Prince Claus was right, cultural identity is a fundamental condition for autonomy, and development cooperation should indeed help the recipient countries to achieve greater independence, then the possibilities for partnership become clearer. They hinge around supporting independent intellectual development. Because of the enormous strategic importance of public education in national and regional development, I hope that Africa's more liberatory intellectual traditions – post-colonial and feminist – will find both space and resources, not just at the margins of our beleaguered institutions, but at their very heart. Here they might just provide us with the creative cultural resources to inspire us to think beyond the confines of the present towards a global future that is more imaginative and more just than the present.

Thank you for your attention.

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