



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Offloading African academic fodder? A response

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The impact of neoliberalism on the world university system has been widely debated. Trends in the global North today show not only the tighter managerialism that comes with cuts to university funding and commercialization, but also competition for fee-paying ‘student customers’ and casualization of academic staff in an era of increased international student mobility. There are louder calls for quality enhancement and more inclusive learning environments regulated and indexed by global rankings. In the global South and in Africa in particular, the same factors also drive institutional and infrastructural decadence amidst other postcolonial factors that have brought wider confrontation between the state and university staff and student bodies, which constitute the subject of this discussion.

Using the case of Nigeria and the state’s acrimonious relationship with the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) that led to the closure of state universities for most of 2022, Jeremiah Arowosegbe proffers a number of explanations that may be applicable to the experiences of most universities across sub-Saharan Africa. Increased dependence on state funding and finance has promoted state repression and reduced academic autonomy, he argues. In addition, state regulation of university tuition fees and staff salaries has also imposed undue influence on the governance of a university system that is already commercialized and privatized. While the study finds this funding model to be almost universal, and the reason why the state in Africa is both extractive and autocratic to the university system, it goes along with the view that this has given rise to an institutionally weak intelligentsia. When contrasted with South Africa, where there is ‘massive investment by the state in higher education’, it is clear that a stronger university system has emerged there that not only has attracted the best of African minds but has now taken the lead in the production of scholarly knowledge on and about Africa.

This longitudinal study, conducted by a scholar who has worked as a senior researcher in Nigeria, South Africa and the United States, makes very grounded observations, especially for Nigeria and the ASUU, just as it does for the establishment and development of the disciplines of history and political science across Africa. It will be the subject of a forthcoming book, which must be anticipated for the sheer empirical

detail it mobilizes and the plausibility of its general conclusions with regard to most university experiences across Africa. My response offers contextual comparisons with the Southern African university system in general and that of Zimbabwe in particular, with occasional reference to the discipline of history. I argue that Arowosegbe's emphasis on the role of the state is somewhat overstated. The state, and particularly the colonial state, has always been repressive and interventionist towards the university, viewing it largely as a trouble spot for political dissent (Mlambo 1995: 483), but this did not necessarily lead to the collapse of the university. Instead, elite alliances, transacting with and operating through the state, have exploited the inherent weaknesses of the postcolonial African university system and have used it as an instrument of primitive accumulation, thereby engendering institutional decay and eroding academic autonomy. Equally, the inability of African academics to offer a consistent and robust critique to this process or to operate outside state institutions by creating their own fraternities has left them vulnerable to state-induced shocks and taken away their bargaining power. This has forced them to look up to South Africa, as Arowosegbe notes – and, I would add, particularly to those universities that are much older and well established and that exhibit the original idea of the university that has little or no connection with the state.

It is important to qualify what I mean by the postcolonial African university system and distinguish it from what obtained in South Africa historically. Universities in British colonial Africa were established through the Asquith and Elliot Commissions (1945) as colleges of the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) to train and equip Africans with the requisite skills for self-rule through their own institutions (Vansina 1994: 45–9). Although this coincided with political independence in West and East Africa, in Southern Africa it went along with the radicalization of white settler politics that left the two independent African nations (Zambia and Malawi) without a university and the remaining settler colonies of Rhodesia and South Africa increasing their crackdown on prospects for racial integration and political independence for a few more decades. The SOAS 'college' model was therefore, to all intents and purposes, state-centred and state-sponsored. It was a model widely adopted and perpetuated at independence. It incentivized British scholars to establish various departments through high salaries; indeed, many who had no previous experience in African Studies went on to develop its various disciplines by experimentation. It was a short-lived phase that left an enduring legacy, although a number of the pioneer scholars retreated back to found new African Studies units in the UK when the African universities were up and running (Kirk-Greene 1995). In South Africa, however, the tradition of universities was older and more established. Despite being clearly divided between Afrikaner and English interests, it resembled the original idea of a university, established through endowments, grants and special interests and promoting the growth of both town and gown fraternities and alumni. Africans rarely found accommodation in these universities and accessed higher education either through correspondence with the University of South Africa or in church grant institutions such as Fort Hare or Pius XII College in Roma, Lesotho, which grew in later years to service African students from the other former High Commission Territories, Botswana and Swaziland (Ajayi *et al.* 1996: 31–7). Until the establishment of universities in the Bantustans following the declaration of apartheid, older South African universities remained largely semi-autonomous by design.

Arowosegbe adopts a generational approach in his analysis and naturally begins with this SOAS phase for Nigeria, paying particular focus to the development of the disciplines of history and political science. He argues that universities in Nigeria gained considerable momentum in establishing distinct disciplinary identities in these areas and that their pioneering historians, in particular, achieved revolutionary scholarly impact while offering 'exemplary leadership in university administration and . . . the development of Nigeria's public service'. These 'doyens' also returned to academia and the classroom, 'their first love', after distinguished service. As for political science, although it was not encouraged in colonial universities, it grew along with independence into a global force, making the University of Ibadan the key supplier of 'academic labour and intellectual resource' to institutes of African Studies across the African continent.

Nigeria, however, is unique in that its first generation of scholars emerged at that point of independence alongside the SOAS expatriates. The international success of the Ibadan School of History, for example, certainly lay in its response to the immediate intellectual demands of a postcolonial state, which included drafting new curricula for secondary schools, training postgraduate scholars, establishing archives and historical associations, and publishing academic books, textbooks and journals (Lovejoy 1993: 195–201; Falola 2001). This qualifies the state function of the university and coincides with what Arowosegbe has called the 'golden age' of such scholarship.

This was hardly possible in Rhodesia, where Africans were hounded out of the university and forced to trek to mission universities in South Africa or Lesotho before proceeding to the UK or American institutions for further training, but were still prohibited by racist laws from teaching at the local university when they qualified. Despite this, newly qualified African historians were active in the Central African Historical Association run from the University of Rhodesia and frequently published in its journal *Rhodesian History*. The 'golden age' for African historical scholarship in Rhodesia was therefore reached in this colonial period and achieved by African and radical white scholars in exile even under state repression. By 1970, when Rhodesia was declared a republic, the university had shed most of the SOAS staff, while the predominantly white History Department had strengthened its relations with and provided academic services to the state. In the process, however, it set its own milestones: it graduated a record number of PhDs, ran a world-class journal and incubated new academic departments. Political Science grew into a full-scale department out of History, while War and Strategic Studies maintained a subtle, if subversive, presence within the History Department, run and taught by active military personnel of the Rhodesian army or moonlighting British ex-servicemen.

The situation following Zimbabwe's belated independence in 1980 replicated the Nigerian experience twenty years earlier in many ways; a good number of academics were absorbed into the civil service and the administration of the one state university. Robert Mugabe, the new prime minister, was seldom the 'philosopher king' championing 'bogus ideologies' in the fashion of the founding fathers of African states in the 1960s described by Arowosegbe (2023: 609). Although he pandered to Marxist-Leninist rhetoric and his party had a history of purging intellectuals during the war, he initially left the university to run autonomously under the stewardship of a professor of law, with the first ceremonial state president as chancellor, himself a theologian who would retire to the university. Academics took to decolonizing the

school curriculum along the lines of new research and the country's ideological thrust (Barnes 2007). But this too did not last long, as the university slowly became a hotbed for protest against state authoritarianism and corruption (Mandaza and Sachikonye 1991). Draconian laws were enacted against the university (Cheater 1991); these also coincided with the adoption of structural adjustment programmes, which saw the university slide down the path of privatization and commercialization. This template is therefore all too familiar in independent Africa, but it hardly explains the expansion of universities that is also associated with this period.

In the case of Zimbabwe, the government's massive investment in education at independence had turned a corner in just over a decade from its implementation. Two presidential commissions confirmed the inherent contradictions and consequences of this expansion; the Chetsanga Commission (1995) recommended 'devolution' to decongest the country's now two universities and the Nziramasanga Commission (1999) recommended 'cost recovery' in this expansion of the university system, which meant introducing tuition fees (Shizha and Kariwo 2011: 128–32). The devolution process was captured by a clique of elites associated with the incumbent minister of higher and tertiary education responsible for overseeing it; these elites were, in fact, his erstwhile former colleagues from the same department in the Faculty of Education of the University of Zimbabwe (Beach 1999: 26). They were rewarded with vice-chancellorships and senior administrative responsibilities in the new universities that were established and in the higher education ministry. In its crudest form, devolution also serviced the ruling party's populist policies of establishing a university in each of Zimbabwe's ten constituent provinces, thus also turning them into what Arowosegbe has termed ethno-linguistic entities.

Universities became profit-making entities too, making them semi-autonomous only in so far as they differed on strategies for fleecing students. This ushered in an era of scandalous experimentation with Zimbabwean higher education. Half-hearted efforts to follow through 'niching' for each of the provincial universities were abandoned midway as emphasis moved towards teaching rather than research. The virtual absence of debate by academics or their unions on the viability of the processes engendered by this expansion was shocking; it is, in my opinion, what eroded their academic integrity and autonomy. A number of them are illustrative; first, expansion meant duplication of university roles and degree programmes without accompanying credit transfer systems or staff leave regimes that would engender mobility, innovation or exchange across universities teaching largely the same things. Second, it also came with competition among universities for 'student customers', forcing universities to come up with strategies for boosting recruitment, including introducing parallel (hot-seating), visiting, bridging and satellite campus programmes with significantly lower entry requirements. Staff unions were rewarded with incentives and gratuities from these recruitment profits, and failing such students was not good politics. Academics have thus been complicit in this elite capture. Meanwhile, the same state elites who created this situation now try to regulate it through a council of higher education that also doubles as a cooling chamber for retired university administrators. Zimbabwe's education revolution – the revolution that the two commissions meant to contain at the turn of the millennium – in the end turned into an exponential higher education boom that, like the Nigerian one, is slowly being offloaded to South Africa.

This leads me to another of Arowosegbe's assertions: that Nigeria, and particularly the University of Ibadan, provides much of the intellectual labour in most South African universities. While this is also true of the Zimbabwean presence in South African higher education, it needs to be interrogated before it can be celebrated. South Africa is still going through its own Nigerian and Zimbabwean moments, where established local African academics have gone into university administration, the civil service and even politics. The South African university system has remained largely unchanged because of its relative autonomy, which is associated with the historical factors outlined earlier. This has seen fewer Black South African students accessing these older universities and occupying academic positions there than they do in historically Black universities. This vacuum has been filled by foreign African academics who are able to access or manipulate loopholes in the South African immigration system that, until recently, has made permanent residence a requirement for accessing jobs in the South African academy. They in turn serve the optics of 'Africanization' in the predominantly white-dominated South African higher education sector, which still excludes Black South Africans, to placate populist noises about Black economic empowerment and decolonization. Second, the same National Research Foundation (NRF) programme that Arowosegbe lauds as a sign of South Africa's massive investment in higher education must be evaluated: is it serving any purpose to the South Africans themselves? NRF chairs (of all races, foreign and local) amass postgraduate students offloaded by the same processes of massification described above as doctoral and postdoctoral fellows; they are valued for the rewards they accrue to universities and individual supervisors or mentors through the number of successful graduations and publications. The South African higher education system is now an industry run by cartels of scholars with mostly Nigerian and Zimbabwean academics acting as interlocutors and factotums in an academic ecosystem in which Black South African scholars remain largely underrepresented. The international mobility for non-South African scholars that this process has facilitated is certainly unprecedented, but the demise of disciplinary fraternities in their home countries as a result of this intellectual rudderlessness is lamentable. All those scholarly societies and associations that drove the publications and home-grown journals of the 'golden age' of scholarship in Nigeria and Zimbabwe are long gone, even as some of the leading scholars look for validation in South African ones. Surely this is not the problem of the state; it is the problem of scholars who have been complicit either by their silence or by their co-optation in elite projects presiding over the destruction of universities and curricula in their home countries.

I conclude with the new transition in Zimbabwean higher education under the current regime that was ushered into power following the 2017 military intervention that replaced Mugabe with Emmerson Mnangagwa. A new crop of higher education leaders associated with this process have implemented a new strategic plan called Education 5.0, or, ironically, 'Heritage Based Learning'. Although acknowledging the disconnect between the country's high literacy but low skills level, as well as the chaos in the qualifications standardization engendered by previous policies enunciated above, the plan is still obsessed with 'industrialization' through a total onslaught on the arts. Like previous attempts, it promotes mergers that have seen previously autonomous departments of history being bundled into unwieldy entities

that are meant to produce graduates who must contribute to industrial development. These graduates are taught via modular programmes examined every month. The contradictions of this approach for the disciplinary practice of history are the subject of another discussion, but the deafening silence and the absence of a collective response by local scholars in general, and of historians of Zimbabwe in particular, are a reflection of how far they still are from being a fraternity for themselves.

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