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The fourth and fifth generations of African scholars: A South African case study

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In the so-called African millennium, it is perhaps excusable to pretend that African scholarship has come of age. Almost 20 years after the seminal article by Professor Thandika Mkandawire, which proffered a generational profile of the African scholar, it is perhaps opportune now to revisit the subject. Following on this historical masterpiece, the present article seeks to present a critique of what has become the hallmark of African scholarship albeit from a narrow South African perspective. It does so by taking into account some of the factors (good or bad) responsible for the status quo. A random sample of academic articles, including interviews with a number of African scholars, was used to formulate the argument in this article. A critique of the human capital in selected South African universities was also essential in completing a picture of academic progress or lack thereof. While not undermining the milestones reached, a kind of introspective reflection on the state of African scholarship can only aid the advancement of African knowledge enterprise; hence this instalment.

Keywords: African scholarship, brain drain, academic mentoring, academic equity, African scholars

1. Introduction

Several scholars have commented on the state of African scholarship spanning the last five decades or so (Adejunmobi 2009; Man Singh Das 1079; self- citation 2012, 2013; Mkandawire 1995; Obichere 1976). In appraising this notion of African scholarship, subjects and perspectives covered are expectedly diverse and vast notwithstanding a critique of shells such as Centres of African Studies wherein, from the sound of it, one would expect greater exertion of Afrocentric or Africa-centred ideas. What abound in some of these centres, though, are ideologies, which, in the main, characterise the post-World War II body politic of realignment and the resultant Cold War. This in part explains the academic token sensitivities that were to follow. But such developments, besides the establishment of relatively newer African universities, triggered Africa-centred political ideas responsible for the emergence of African nationalism, African renaissance and Pan Africanism (Rafapa 2005). It was rather in its context within and/or relevance to the African socio-political condition that African scholarship found its vivid expression – a feat achieved to some greater measure in the Humanities and the Social Sciences (political, language and the philosophical) spheres. But what constitutes the notion of African scholarship?

Describing African scholarship in today's terms is problematic since others would insist that scholarship is scholarship per se. I, perhaps following the influence of scholars such as Mkandawire (1995), Olukoshi (2006) and Carr (2012), insist on enlisting the notions of African scholarship for the purpose of facilitating the ensuing characterisation. How else can Africa evaluate its progress in the so-called globalised knowledge economy if its identity is subsumed or the adjective 'African' dropped? How can African scholarship energise itself without appealing specifically to its continental rootedness? Assuming that its agent is an African, who then qualifies as an African anyway? Was it even necessary that the former president of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki, forthrightly declare "I am an African", in his opening speech at parliament in 1996 (Mbeki 1996)? Why was Mbeki's declaration underlined by the urgent need by other non-African members of parliament, especially those of European extraction, to follow suit? Speaker after speaker declared that they too were African. Yet some of these 'Africans' covertly or overtly continue to pay allegiance to other than African origins. So, what then is this thing called African scholarship?

To unravel this conundrum, one is tempted to venture a bit further back by asking; what or who is an African? At the risk of sounding pedantic, I would further gamble, specifically in the context of the present article, to define an African as a person of a darker hue and woolly hair, whose origin is historically and exclusively on the continent of Africa. Therefore, African scholarship should refer

to all academic activities chiefly by such a people, and primarily for the benefit of the African continent. While it is not the intention of this article to go on the racial or territorial tangent in an effort to define the concept 'African', it is safe to argue that according to many scholars including Cornel West (1993) or Reid and Radhakrishnan (2003) *race matters* after all. This is why apartheid segregationist social engineering was based purely on the race premise.

Granted, the foregoing delineation, especially along racial lines, may not necessarily be accurate. At most, it may be unfashionable or even undesirable. Others could view such a discourse as being absurd or racist. But to facilitate the ensuing argument, I beg the readers pardon; for such a definition, could make Africa-specific discourse possible or even palatable. In any case titles such as *Urgent Task for African Scholars in the Humanities* (Adejunmobi 2009), *Brain Drain Controversy and African Scholars* (Man Singh Das 1979), *The Contribution of African Scholars and Teacher to African Studies, 1955-1975* (Obichere 1976) or *Three Generations of African Academics: A note* (Mkandawire 1995) are precedents in invoking the African racial notion pursuant to successful academic discourse.

Of particular interest to this article is Mkanadawire's instalment, which succinctly profiles three generations of African academics – from the era of isolated airlifts, through an era that, owing to the failure of the departed African academics to return home, triggered what has become known as the brain-drain phenomenon, up to home-grown scholars whose enterprise is characterised by training under extremely difficult circumstances including harsh political repression and restrictions on academic freedom (Mkandawire 1995).

Mine is but an attempt to flog the same debate but choosing rather to confine myself to the politics around promoter-student relations in the South African context. To this end, this article is firstly interested in establishing whether the emergence of promoters who are sympathetic to African issues have any bearing on the quality of academic exertion and African scholarship's thrust into global academic discourse. Secondly the article points to a critical lack of articulation or dialogue between African scholarship and African indigenous knowledge practitioners, especially the attitudes or tendencies by some African scholars to proceed in their supposedly African academic discourse without due consideration of commonplace African worldview(s). Arguably, the result is the creation of a disjointed picture of Africa insofar as perspectives or worldviews and identity are concerned. A poser: wither African scholarship? How far has it come? And what does it mean to be an African scholar in South Africa today? What are the responsibilities of African academe towards the African renaissance or regeneration project?

This article begins by reiterating, albeit in a summary form, the collective profile of the third generation of African academics, which, according to Mkandawire (1995), represents the foundation of home-grown African scholarship. Then it ventures into ideas about what might be considered the profiles of the fourth and fifth generations of African academics. Guiding questions include in which category would you place yourself as an African academic? Where did you pursue your senior degree(s), and why the choice(s)? What was the political environment at the time? Can you summarise your rise to your current position both as a professor and as an administrator? How would you characterise your supervisor's/promoter's role? How different are you to your previous promoter(s), and, generally, what drives your academic work?

2. Population and sampling

The population of the study generating this article comprised the South African so-called 'black' professors who, by virtue of their recognition in academia, are deemed to have achieved in their respective fields of specialisation. Particular focus was placed on those who are in positions to influence policy such as Deans, Heads of Departments, Research Professors and nationally commissioned and recognised music composers in academic employ. From this population, a sample was purposely selected based on availability and interest in the subject. Only a few who feel strongly about the subject and have no qualms about their identity are cited. Nevertheless, the themes are widespread among interviewed scholars.

3. The third generation of African scholars

Regarding what he calls the third generation of African academics, Mkandawire (1995) observes the dissipation of the rationale to send students abroad, or at least the obviation of such a tendency. He discusses the following as being, among others, the general characteristics of this generation: firstly, a number of the third generation of African scholars received their education under extremely difficult circumstances. Besides exposure to generally repressive environments, most of them spent much of their professional life under restrictions and different forms of repression indicative of a lack of academic freedom. Secondly, this third generation of African scholars literally grew up and worked in what Mkandawire regards as "scandalous material conditions" (1995: 79). Soon after the 1960s, African universities began gradually losing the nationalist agenda upon which they had been founded. Thirdly, the generation worked in institutions that, since African universities lost their original *raison d'être* in the eyes of the state and sometimes the public then (Mkandawire 1995:79), were grappling with issues of identity.

If Biobakus's theory (1963:1) were to hold, "an African university cannot help but study Africa in the normal course of its [university] function". But we know that, for whatever justification, most universities in South Africa, especially the historically whites-only (HWO) universities, saw and continue to see themselves as satellites of their European counterparts; for they mimic, perpetuate and continue to privilege the rituals of the West (Lebakeng *et al.* 2006). For inexplicable reasons, the historically blacks-only (HBO) universities also follow suit by mimicking these HWOs in turn. In sum, the third generation of African academics operated under difficult conditions. Their characterisation is that of relentless struggles both from within and without their space of operation.

4. The fourth generation of African scholars

That South Africa has historically been several countries in one, one for the poor African majority and the other for the largely affluent whites, is common knowledge even in academic circles (Nattrass & Seekings 2001). This is acutely epitomised by the socio-economic contrast between Sandton and Alexander Township (Gauteng Province) or Cape Town and the Cape Flats (Western Cape Province) and many other cities in South Africa.

Due to the notorious apartheid system, which stratified society along racial lines, different universities in different locations within the borders of South Africa subscribed to different ideologies, which were in all respects dialectical and sometimes antagonistic (Bunting 2006). Whereas the HWOs directly or overtly supported apartheid (Mackenzie 1994), the HBOs, otherwise known as bush universities, were, by and large, bastions of political strife and struggle (Reddy 1992). Given this divided history, the notion of what is African scholarship is understandably mired in this not-so-distant past.

Enter the new dispensation! The post 1994-transformation imperatives forced institutions of higher learning into a long and often problematic process of transformation. The transformation included the breaking down of academic enclaves by merging, in most cases, institutions of divergent historical and ideological backgrounds (Badat 1994, 2007; Jansen 2004; Sehoole 2005). Significantly, the class of 1976, which, in the main, espoused the Black Consciousness Movement philosophy and arguably was responsible for the so-called Soweto Uprising, today represented by, among others, Professors Barney Pityana, Mamphele Ramphela, Njabulo Simakahle Ndebele, Muxe Nkondo and Sathasivian "Saths" Cooper, went on to become the first generation of 'black Vice Chancellors' in the reconfigured South African universities landscape. Other than this cadre, the majority of African academics, now in the twilight of their academic careers, have as a defining feature a history of being taught by white academics,

particularly of Afrikaner extraction. In such a historical context, student-promoter interaction inevitably occurred in the less-than-ideal apartheid environment.

Promoter-student relations can be likened to a mentoring relationship. It takes the experienced professional committing to guiding the inexperienced through processes central to the development of the mentee or student. In academe, the identification of a promoter is often decided upon by the department or the school in consideration of the topic that the student intends pursuing and of course the expertise available among the faculty. While not forced, the senior academic is nonetheless duty-bound and obliged to provide supervision to the allocated student; and likewise the student accepts the allocated supervisor/promoter. He or she often hopes and prays that all goes well in the course of the study programme.

5. Dearth of African promoters

As Collins, Kamya, and Tourse (1997) posit, it is commonly presumed that there is a relative dearth of professionals of colour – in this case African academics – to serve as mentors. Because of their greater numbers, white academics end up taking on the greatest share of responsibility for mentoring junior scholars. This is evidently the case in the South African academic context where still a significant number of senior academics are white males (Mabokela 2000). Ordinarily this situation gives little or no choice at all as to who will mentor, especially in the situation where a number of Africans have also begun aspiring to higher qualifications. Supervision across race, therefore, has become a reality.

But as Collins et al. (1997) contend, and all things being equal, people tend to be attracted to those who they are similar to rather than those different from themselves. From this premise, it would follow that Africans would normally prefer African mentors and likewise white mentors would prefer mentoring white students for many reasons. These interracial dynamics are hard to wish away, especially in South Africa. What happens when the mentee and mentor are not only differentiated by race but also hold dissimilar ideologies or belief systems?

Mokale Koapeng (2015), one of the premier choral musicians and conductors in South Africa, distinguishes between supervisor/promoter and mentor. Considering his Black Consciousness philosophical perspective, it comes as no surprise that despite the fact that his supervisors were mostly non-African, he rather drew inspiration from African intellectuals some of whom were outside academe. Being a reputable composer prior to enrolling for a senior degree, he hardly felt any pressure to conform to the whims of his supervisors. Like Joe Malinga (2015), who studied jazz in Europe under Professor Dieter Glawischig, in

Austria in the 1970s, Koapeng's African identity was asserted through his choice of music. Otherwise, the majority of African students felt the need to conform to the institutional cultures as espoused by the supervisors/promoters. Arguably, a number of these students, some of whom are now African academics in the South African academic environment, have been allowed little space to fully pursue their subjects of interest. Sharpening their pro-African ideologies or even expanding their imagination into terrains considered alien to them is unthinkable. For instance, it is relatively difficult for black students to venture into territories that are considered alien to them. As Lesibana Rafapa (2015), now a Professor and Chair of the Department of English at the University of South Africa (Unisa) recounts, in the eyes of white promoters, an African could not possibly major and excel in English. He argues that works by writers such as Sipho Sepamla would not be considered worthy of study in an English major class because in the eyes of white promoters, a black writer could not possibly be a paragon of English literature. In concert with Rafapa, Ndwamato Mugovhani (2015), now a Professor and Head of Performing Arts at the Tshwane University of Technology, relates his anguish in shunning African harmonic nuances in favour of what he calls 'Victorian Choralism'. In language studies, Mokgale Makgopa (2015), a professor in African languages and Dean of the School of Human and Social Sciences at the University of Venda (UNIVEN), questions the wisdom of using English in studying an African language, as is the practice in South Africa. In sum, these, and many other scholars, have had to endure these or other forms of humiliation in order to pass their examinations and to be accepted into the academic enterprise. Faced with the aforementioned realities, most African students of the time have learnt to govern their intellectual prowess and to consider their choices carefully for fear of a backlash. This they did in order to mitigate against punitive evaluations of their work and to avoid overstaying in their terminal degree programmes.

Naturally, others persist often at great pain and personal cost. For instance, Maitakhole Sengani, also a professor in African languages at Unisa, spent 15 years being shuttled from one promoter to the next in pursuit of his PhD qualification. This is the price he had to pay due to his rightful insistence on the ideological approach to language teaching, which derives from the African experience (Sengani 2015). It was only his sheer determination and persistence that defeated the aims of his supposed promoters, who seemed hell-bent to frustrate and drive him away from academe. Mugovhani (2015) alludes to the same strategy of frustrating many an African student away from academe. Sengani's (2015) insistence on what he calls 'the *contextuality* of language teaching' made him an antagonist rather than a probing and promising student. And as such, promoter after promoter made him feel the agony of remaining stoic in his views in an unforgiving academic environment. Admittedly, in other instances

supervisors and promoters both black and white educated in universities outside the apartheid-poisoned environment themselves, mean well. In some instances, liberal non-African promoters wish and even encourage their African students to become more daring, only to become frustrated by the limited scope, exposure and imagination of such mentees. Most, after enduring the ordeal of academic brutality, seem to fail in seizing the moment and maximising opportunities presented to them.

The effect of having to always conform to the dictates and prescripts of white promoters, most of whom have differing motivations for being in a black student-white promoter relation or in academe in general, account for some African academics ultimately perceiving academia only through the prism of their former supervisors and promoters. The citation tendencies of such academics, notwithstanding this particular article for instance, reveal an inexplicable reliance on the master's voice. Such an exclusive reliance on the white perspective, even when dealing with African phenomena, is indicative of a syndrome manifesting in their inability to move out of the spell of their mentors. Such scholars seem loath to venture too far from what they themselves were taught, and fear to upset the apple cart. Ingesting academic misrepresentations from their former supervisors completely is for them a way of attaining recognition and maintaining good reputations. As Mapaya (2012:131) observes, in the many volumes of the Southern African Journal for Folklore Studies (SAJFS), very few African scholars' definitions of what constitutes folklore are canvassed or cited as if the discipline were exclusively an imported phenomenon from Europe and America; African folklorists are disinclined to find suitable disciplinary definitions from within. I am not advocating for an inward-looking kind of scholarship, but merely pointing to what amounts to mistrust of African ideations.

Another inhibiting factor insofar as African scholarship is concerned is that the work of African academics has to go through white-owned publishing conduits to get published (Shetler 2013). The overwhelming majority of editors in journals and publishing houses are white scholars who generally espouse and/or are inclined to support a certain set of ideologies. Often, they insist that for any scholarly output to earn any validity it should cite one of their own, or other academics (often white) who they believe to be pioneers of certain fields or disciplines. Whereas this may be an acceptable practice, the irony of it all, however, is that even when a form of knowledge is essentially commonplace in Africa, it cannot be utilised in scholarly work unless it was validated by a non-African academic. Rather such knowledge is regarded as unofficial, unrecorded traditions, non-institutional, subjective and therefore unverifiable (Mapaya 2012:131). Consequently, the fourth generation of African scholars, save for those with heightened political awareness, choose to play it safe, as

it were; careful not to upset the system into which they are so lucky to have been assimilated. It would be disingenuous to suggest that all white and black academics suffer this student-promoter fiasco. Some black students are lucky to be associated with progressive white promoters who go out of their way to normalise the situation. In sum, the profile of the fourth generation overlaps with Mkandawire's third. The only difference is that the politics of race bear significantly on the South Africa context, and as such give new meaning to academic hardship.

6. The fifth generation of African academics

Fast forward into the 21st century, South Africa is a relatively changed environment with a few African academics now occupying higher administrative positions despite the negative sentiments around the politically driven affirmative action project (Maphai 1989). Post-1994, the agenda of higher institutions is changing.

Firstly, racial demographics within institutions are progressively normalising, and student populations on most campuses of South African universities are reflective of the demographics of the country. However, the so-called 'Bush Universities' are still struggling to attract students from non-African communities. Nevertheless, the striving for equity is coming of age even though much work regarding the plight of black, particularly African, academics is yet to be completed (Ismail 2011).

Secondly, the opening up of and the generally better conditions in the post-apartheid South African universities have also managed to curb much of the continental brain drain (Rouhani 2007). Increasingly, many African academics from other African countries prefer to work at South African universities rather than outside the continent. These developments mean that African students, irrespective of the site or field of study, have a greater chance at like-for-like supervision. In such an environment, academics are expected to encourage and allow greater African exertion and experimentation, perhaps beyond the parameters of the erstwhile (academic) regime. For the likes of Mogomme Masoga (2015), a research professor at the University of Venda, the question of African relevance in African scholarship is non-negotiable.

Lastly, the funding as well as the legislative environment, and the general developments in South Africa mean that the African agenda stands a chance of being the primary driver of African scholarship. However, the jury is still out as to whether African academics from outside South Africa are giving their all in helping the growth of South African academics. The suspicion is that the African expatriates seem to recruit most of their students from their home countries as

opposed to South Africa. As such, rumblings of uneasy relations between home-grown academics and the African expatriates exist (Ruth & Peter 2006).

Nevertheless, it would be unfortunate for South African academics to attract to themselves the tag of xenophobia given all the assistance the South African liberation movements received from neighbouring countries. Besides, the internationalisation of the higher education project would be severely compromised if this sentiment were allowed to persist. The country can ill afford two sets of African academics working against each other in pursuance of the African renaissance project.

The onset of the materialist and consumerist culture espoused by *tenderpreneur-ism*, in addition to the myth paddled among certain academics that to attain professorial recognition one has to toil for many years, renders an academic career unattractive, especially in today's competitive South African environment. Even to those already in academe, the ambiguous promotions guidelines adopted by some South African universities seem designed to frustrate career progression. Fresh African academics faced with comparatively unattractive salary packages understandably agitate towards jobs in administration within the public or private sectors (Potgieter 2002; Pienaar & Bester 2008). The impression created in some South African universities is that employment in the administrative section is more important. Most administrative units are relatively well resourced and the staff well remunerated. It is also common to find academics moonlighting as business people or (political) ward councillors between teaching periods. By so doing, they leave little time for research and self-development. In other instances, the very concept of being an academic is not clear, or is simply undermined by those whose job it is to support the academic project of South African universities.

The majority of African scholars come to academe through a confused schooling system. As such, they need time to understand the imperatives of the university environment where constructing new knowledge as opposed to just imparting what they themselves were taught becomes a defining feature. Younger academics – and this is not peculiar to the South African situation – take a while to understand the responsibilities of being an academic. As Aitken (2010: 62) illustrates, for instance, "teachers teach, researchers research". What do academics do? The struggle of new staff members transiting from the primary and secondary school culture, amid the lure of the material glitz and glamour of *tenderpreneur-ism* and political deployment, could be eased by investing in structured induction processes, which include community building and collaborative research opportunities.

The existence of new black academics, albeit only a few, presupposes that these structural challenges can be conquered. What is needed is determination, perseverance and the will from senior academics to nurture and broaden the horizons of their mentees. Those that are already forging ahead should not shy away from criticism because nobility cannot be equated with materialism. The most apparent hallmark of those who survive is the almost fearless challenge of previously held theories and opinions. Citing musicology as an example; most, encouraged by their immediate mentors such as Agawu, Euba, Nzewi and Mopoma, reject the notion of ethnomusicology in favour of African musicology (Kidula 2006; Mugovhani & Mapaya 2014).

Many more of whom I regard as the fifth generation of African academics subscribe to post-colonial theories that have liberated African scholarship from the positivist scholarship grip of the Western kind. Fostering relationships with communities, not just as newly founded service learning or community engagement imperatives, but as genuine cross-pollination of epistemologies should be the defining feature of this generation. Commitment to serve the African continent should be the prime guiding principle.

In as much as Mthembu (2004) advocates for engaged African universities, I would personalise the call and direct it specifically to individual African scholars. Commentary on political happenstances, apart from television analysis common on the South African radio and television programmes, is still dominated by white opinion. Too many books about South African political figures are written from non-African perspectives. If African academics truly believe that a pen is mightier than the sword, they should walk the talk. The fifth generation should also come to the party insofar as devising prevention and treatment of plagues that threaten mostly the African population. The fifth generation of African academics have little to fear, especially now that everything is in the glare of the whole world. Considering all these advancements, I am inclined to conclude that the defining feature of an African academic in South Africa is that of freedom, access and opportunities even though the promotion guidelines and the remuneration packages are still unsatisfactory.

7. Conclusion

This article sets out to expand on Mkandawire's characterisation of generations of African academics while restricting itself to the South African context. The fourth generation of African academics, which could include the class of 1976, completed their terminal degrees overseas. Post 1994, this particular cadre of academics assumed leadership in many South African universities as Vice Chancellors. In the democratic South Africa, institutions of higher learning are

becoming de-racialised and plans are afoot to ensure that the student and the academic population at all South African universities is reflective of the demographics of the country. But questions are still being asked regarding the racial inequality at senior levels. The fourth generation of African academics who received their terminal qualifications in South Africa has been subjected to hardships, including having to conform to their white supervisors' repressive attitudes. Some emerged out of this situation more resolute, others chose the kowtow route.

Nevertheless, a few years down the line, African students have the opportunity to be supervised by African academics, thus avoiding the clash of worldviews that often bedevilled erstwhile scholarship. The fifth generation should be much more liberated and robust. Clearly, this will play itself out differently from one discipline to the next. In general, there is progress in terms of growing African scholarship. The outstanding task is to push for equity in race and gender, and to inculcate scholarship that is engaged with African realities as well as rewarding to those committed to the profession.

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Makgopa Mokgale, professor in African languages and Dean of the School of Human and Social Sciences at UNIVEN, Thohoyandou, South Africa. 19.08.2015

Masoga, Mogomme, research professor at UNIVEN, Thohoyandou, South Africa. 19.08.2015

Mugovhani, Ndwamato, professor in music and Head of Performing Arts at Tshwane University of Technology, Pretoria, South Africa. 13.02.2015

Rafapa Lesibana, professor and Chair of the Department of English at Unisa, Pretoria, South Africa. 18.02.2015

Sengani Maitakhole, professor in African languages at Unisa, Pretoria, South Africa. 19.02.2015