

Article

Ajenda Afrika: African Studies in Kenya?

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There is no Kenyan university with an African Studies department. Only the University of Nairobi, the oldest and most recognised tertiary institution in the country, is known to have an Institute of African Studies (IAS). But even IAS is a research centre and not a teaching centre. According to Guy Berger and Corinne Matras' 2007 UNESCO report, Daystar University, a Christian university from where I am due to graduate, is the best institution of reference in journalism training in Africa,¹ yet the programme offers little in terms of focus on African scholarship. Discussing my experiences as a student at a Kenyan university, this paper demonstrates the limitations of higher education and calls for a reassessment of knowledge instruction, not only in the educational sector, but also in media and religious enclaves. I draw from my involvement with Ajenda Afrika, an African-centred student organisation based at Daystar University, in order to illustrate proactive student interest in the study of Africa.

Education

In my second year at university, I enrolled for a course entitled "African Societies & Traditional Religions." During the first class, the instructor informed us that the main text for the course was authored by Kevin Shillington, an Irish freelance historian currently based in London.² Whether or not an Irish scholar with extensive training and experience on the African continent was qualified to teach us about our history was not the issue, per se. Rather, what was disconcerting was the fact that no African-authored text would be used in that class, even as supplementary material. If a Kenyan scholar were to write about the history of Ireland under British imperialism, it is unlikely that the book would be used as *the* main text at the University of Dublin to teach History 101. As Harry Garuba observes, "...what a university really transmits is not only the

various contents and objects of knowledge, but also the manner in which the objects of knowledge are ordered and organised...’’³ For me, any holistic education must first find and listen to its own, localised voice.

In that same year, I participated in a course called “Historical Foundations of the Modern World” and was very excited when we started studying Kemitic civilizations. We discussed the remarkable discoveries of ancient Egyptians, the life, wisdom and deity-like position of pharaohs and the many significant contributions of this earliest civilization to those that came after. Toward the end of this section of the course, our instructor asked the class if there was anything important yet to be said about Egypt. Zealous about African history, I said that it was important to note that ancient Egypt was a black civilization. I was shocked by my instructor’s reaction. He did not refute my statement or avoid engaging in the longstanding debate. Rather, he very matter-of-factly agreed with me and went on to discuss the works of the Senegalese scholar, Dr. Cheikh Anta Diop and to make his most powerful statement in that class: “19th Century European philosophers have tried to whiten Egypt for their own racist objectives.”

My instructor thought that it was important to mention this reality only as a footnote in the wrap-up of the topic on ancient Egypt. Yet, for me, it was important to mention the phenotype of ancient Egyptians in a class full of 20-year-old black African students whose main source of information is entertainment media and consequently, whose image of ancient Egypt is based on the movie *Prince of Egypt* (1998),⁴ which portrays all the males as bare-chested Caucasians and the females as blue-eyed blondes. Under these conditions, drawing attention to the African roots of ancient Egypt is not a luxury since most Kenyan students are not given the opportunity to learn about African civilizations before the colonial era. Most history books in primary and secondary school start to chronicle African history from the late 1880s when Europeans came to the continent, yet African history can be traced from 3000 BC and earlier.

Media

The need for African Studies is further reflected in the content of Kenyan media that scandalously features few programs from the country, let alone the continent. Local television stations, for example, compete to air cheap Mexican soap operas and the latest American drama series. In early 2009, the government passed a bill that set a quota for local programming on Kenyan television.⁵ Media owners strongly objected to this move on grounds that local content was too expensive to produce, but the government stood its ground. The quota is slowly improving the situation but the problem has taken a different form. Pirated copies of the latest Hollywood movies and complete seasons of the newest and most hyped-up drama series are available on the streets of Nairobi for as little as Ksh. 150 (\$2 USD). It is now commonplace for Nairobi residents to have copies of a new movie weeks before it premieres on the big screen. Speculation is rife that media owners are behind this piracy cartel in order to recuperate losses incurred by the mandatory compliance to the quota on local programming. Such tactics have undermined the potential of the Amendment, which, at least in part, attempted to increase cultural consciousness among Kenyan youth, the target audience for much of foreign entertainment. While not inherently negative, entertainment consumption without media literacy can, and in many cases, has resulted in experiences of alienation, especially from local cultural knowledges.

Much like television, Kenyan radio programming is even more heavily lopsided in favour of foreign content, in part because the quota on local programming is applicable or enforced only in television. The most successful radio stations, in terms of listenership and advertising revenue, are those that specialise in rock and gangster rap music. Stations that feature local content or even balance local and foreign entertainment struggle to attract advertisers and therefore face financial constraints which force them to increase foreign material in order to survive. As a result, I am more likely to listen to a song by Soldier Boy on local radio stations than to a song by Eric Wainaina or Suzanne Owiyo, who, according to international publicity and performances are two of Kenya's leading

artists. It is likely that Wainaina and Owiyo's music are more popular and accessible outside Kenya than it inside the country.

Another point to note about Kenyan media is that successful television and radio personalities are often those who have a foreign accent. Any trace of an American or British accent, even if feigned, seems to guarantee opportunities in the media world, regardless of whether you are a trained journalist. In his 2007 essay, "Reading FM Radio Stations in Kenya: Opening a Pandora's Box," Christopher Odhiambo Joseph raises the question, "Do the English marked ethnic accents in the urban elite targeted audiences play a role much greater than mere entertainment and elicitations of humor and laughter?" Odhiambo owes his question to the fact that "these stations seem to have very explicit policies about the use of vernacular languages to the extent that they never play any music in vernacular languages."⁶ Needless to say, bearers of vernacular accents have a hard time making it in the media, even with impeccable training. Such exclusivity has resulted in a media fraternity where most personalities, especially on radio, are musicians, comedians and celebrities who lack journalistic training. Some of the jokes and careless remarks made on air are completely against media ethos, potentially demonstrating the effects of an un(der)trained media.

Print media also records blatant inequalities in content. In my experience, a walk along the streets of Nairobi reveals that it is easier to purchase the latest *Harry Potter* book than it is to purchase the most famous of Ngũgĩ wa Thiongo's books or any other Kenyan- or African-author text. Local publishers specialise in textbooks and inspirational materials, forcing local writers to seek foreign publishers. As a result, foreign books are cheaper and more accessible than local texts that can be three or four times more expensive and difficult to find. As a result, an entire generation of Kenyans seldom read and when they do, these are hardly ever local books. In my university, I know students who can devour back-to-back issues of *Cosmopolitan* but struggle to read the lead story in our dailies. On a more positive note however, there are new initiatives in Kenya which are aimed at improving our reading culture. Such initiatives include *Kwani?* and

Storymoja, promote the use of *Sheng* and other contemporary literary styles that were hitherto unheard of in literary circles. This new wave of writing has appealed mainly to younger Kenyans and has even developed into other forms of artistic expression, such as poetry and spoken word. However, such literature is still inadmissible in academic circles because older scholars do not consider it to be “serious literature.” One such case is Dr Egara Kabaji, a lecturer at Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology, who dismissed Tony Mochama - one of the contributors of *Kwani?* - as a “literary gangster.”⁷

Religion

The scarcity of African knowledge is further reinforced by the church which, since independence, has played a prominent role in the intellectual formation of Kenyans. Christian doctrine is a compulsory part of the curriculum in all primary and secondary schools. In early 2009, my church organised a seminar to decide on a theme for our annual youth convention. One of the members proposed that we have “African Christianity” as our theme in order for young people to discuss what it means to be an African Christian. One of the religious scholars in attendance, a Sierra Leonean Ph.D. holder who had recently graduated from a leading American seminary, sharply refuted this proposal. He argued that in this wave of globalization, Africans should not bother with such “trivial and narrow-minded” themes; otherwise, “we would be left behind by the rest of the world.”

Given the pervasiveness of Western cultural goods in Kenya, be it religious, intellectual or entertainment-based, the theologian’s comment raises the question: what is globalisation? A colleague of mine writes the word globalisation as globalliezation. He considers the concept of globalisation to be a lie because in most cases, it refers to Westernization. In the case of the religious scholar, globalisation for him meant focusing less on African Christian knowledges and more on Western knowledges which, ironically, he considered to be global.

Ajenda Afrika

By the end of my second year at Daystar, I painfully had learned that much like Kenyan media and the church, my education – at the best institution of reference in journalism training in Africa – did not include African knowledges. I became dispassionate in class, but longed for a way to channel the many questions, discoveries and contradictions that I consistently confronted and struggled to reconcile. My dissatisfaction encouraged me to work with two other similarly motivated students to start a student organization on campus called Ajenda Afrika. Through discussions, films, lectures, music, poetry and book clubs, Ajenda Afrika sought to address holistic issues affecting the lives of African people both within and without the continent.

The first step was to find a lecturer at Daystar who was culturally conscious, who would share in our vision and who would help refine it. We were fortunate to find a literature lecturer who recently had joined the university. Part of the reason we approached her was because she had captured the attention of students with her Afrocentric wear and accessories, which made her stand out from the rest of the faculty. But more importantly, she understood our frustrations and was willing to dedicate her time and resources to work with us.

We decided against formally registering our organisation because we anticipated opposition from the administration because of the topics we intended to tackle. Subjects like the Mau Mau war of independence are taboo and rarely discussed in intellectual, religious or social circles in Kenya. It is only in 2003 that the colonially imposed ban on the Mau Mau was lifted.⁸ It took 40 years of independence to recognise the Mau Mau as freedom fighters and not terrorists as regarded by the British. But in Christian circles, such as in my university, it is taking longer to lift the tags of “pagan” and “witchcraft” attached to the fighters who took inspiration from indigenous beliefs. Oathing ceremonies and other rituals undertaken by the Mau Mau are considered by many Christians to be contradictory to their faith, and as a result, the church disapproves of the freedom fighters. As our staff moderator, the lecturer also advised caution when choosing

certain topics, telling us to remove Malcolm X from the list of black personalities that we wanted to study for fear that his being a Muslim would annoy the university.

The fear of opposition from the administration was so real that to date, Ajenda Afrika has never been formally registered as a student organization at Daystar University. We simply put down the vision of the organisation, set up a committee to plan for the sessions and started having fortnightly meetings. We invite guests from outside the university to address most of our topics. Often, we are frustrated by the inadequacy of the university library in meeting our intellectual needs on African knowledge. The library in an institution that is considered to be one of the best in its category in Africa does not have a single book by Frantz Fanon or Cheikh Anta Diop. For this reason, we had to incur photocopying expenses to produce enough copies of excerpts from the many books that we wanted to read but were unavailable. In essence, Ajenda Afrika exists inside the university but it is not part of the institution. Rather, the university is like a bus stop: it congregates all the student-passengers but we have had to make our own bus – Ajenda Afrika – to take us to our destination.

The majority of students who started attending Ajenda Afrika had very little interest or knowledge on any topic about Africa, be it politics, history, literature or even sports. Like many Kenyan students, most of us had very disproportionate access to knowledge. In one session, for example, a student gave the date and place of birth of Abraham Lincoln, how and when he became president of United States. He had memorised excerpts of Lincoln's inauguration speech, his most famous quotes and significant legislations that were passed during his presidency, yet he had never heard of Kwame Nkrumah. Students who attended our sessions were reading and had in their possession, books by Sidney Sheldon, Danielle Steele, John Grisham, Robert Ludlum and David Baldacci, but had read only two or three African authored books– under duress in high school. In one of the sessions, only five out of thirty students admitted to having read any book by Ngũgĩ wa Thiongo or Chinua Achebe. At first, students found it challenging to

read for non-exam purposes. For us, Ajenda Afrika was a new phenomenon; our educational system trained us to read only when there is an impending exam. Gradually, reading habits improved and we all began to enjoy Africa centred authors and genres, such as slave narratives, with which most of us had never interacted. We all wanted to contribute to discussions and in order to do so, reading was essential.

Significantly, the imbalance of knowledge is not our fault, given the cultural and educational circumstances that have produced students who are apathetic to African knowledges. For this reason, we launched Ajenda Afrika: in order to create a space through which we could critically analyse the education system in Kenya. During sessions, we discuss the language and content of our education and how it has set us up to be indifferent and unconcerned about African history and ideologies in the academy. Students realised that the system in Kenya is a colonial relic and that the structures and curricula in place from primary to high school seem bent on meeting, even if involuntarily, the same objectives of colonial education. Together, we grasped finally the implications of Paulo Freire's observation that rather than encourage the colonised man [sic] to know and respond to his environment, colonial education kept the colonised man submerged in a situation in which such critical awareness and responsibility were impossible.

With time, especially in the first semester, the sessions provided an opportunity for us to vent and pour out frustrations that had accumulated since primary school. In one of the meetings during which we discussed Ngũgĩ's views on language in his book *Decolonising the Mind* (1986), one student broke down as she narrated how she had been punished ruthlessly for speaking in her mother tongue and how this experience had affected her relationship with teachers, her performance in that class and her attitude toward her language. Her experience confirmed views presented by Cheikh Anta Diop on the use of language in education:

One learns better in one's own language because there is incontrovertible agreement between the genius of a language and the mentality of its speakers. Moreover, learning in one's own language evidently saves many years of that would have been wasted in knowledge acquisition [through a foreign language].⁹

Meetings were versatile and took the structure most effective for the topic at hand. The most attended sessions were those entitled "Hip Hop as a Tool of Education" and "Mau Mau and Colonialism in Kenya." For the Hip Hop sessions, we invited an African-American pastor and historian who explored the roots of this music genre, its key elements and its present form. The lectures analysed the revolutionary origins of Hip Hop and juxtaposed them with the materialism and sexism evident in African-American and Kenyan Hip Hop scenes, respectively. Over the years, the African-American experience which is relayed to most of the world through Hip-Hop, has helped Kenyan artists sharpen the artistic expression of their own social issues. For this reason, the lectures attracted students who were poets, singers, graffiti artists and generally, people who grew up in the 90's listening to hip hop music and were interested in integrating social issues into their art.

The other most attended sessions were those on the Mau Mau. For these meetings, we invited two Kenyan activists who work closely with the now legal Mau Mau War Veterans Association and the Mau Mau Research Centre. This topic was of special interest to us because for most, it was the first time in our educational experience that we were discussing the Mau Mau. Some of us also hoped to hear the more titillating facts about fighting in the forest. The discussants analysed the social situation that precipitated the rise of the Mau Mau, the formation, training and tactics employed by the movement, the demands of the Mau Mau, the challenges they faced, the legacy they left behind and the post-independent governments that continually have tried to muzzle the remaining fighters and erase their contributions from Kenyan history. Such erasure is captured in the words of the first President of Kenya, Jomo Kenyatta: "...people supporting the subversive Land and Freedom Army [Mau Mau] are

stupid.»¹⁰ It is no wonder that very little of this chapter in Kenyan history is taught in schools or even talked about in public.

Conclusion

Ajenda Afrika is an educational experience albeit a unique one. It is different from formal education in both method and content for, first and foremost, it is student-centered. Moreover, learning is mediated through discussion as opposed to rote didacticism which requires one to memorise and be able to reproduce information. We do not hold exams and there are no failing students. At the end of that first semester, I realised that most of the students had left home unwillingly in order to survive the system of education. However, it was promising that in every African student, there was an inherent desire to come back 'home.' No matter how alienated the students had become as a result of their schooling, there was an innate desire to return to their history, to their art, to their science, to their philosophy, to their literature, to their ancestors and in essence to themselves.

The need for an African Studies department cannot be overemphasized. There is little doubt that knowledge about Africa is available. What is in doubt is whether Kenyan scholars and academics are ordering and organising the knowledge they have to suit the environment and context in which they and their students are located. In Kenya, the structures and curricula that govern primary and high school education are nationwide and thus, it is quite difficult and bureaucratic to change them. The onus is therefore left on universities to build the foundations of an African-oriented curriculum, because their mandate is more localised and it is much easier for them to implement policy change.

In a university like mine, the initial step towards this larger goal would be to start an Africana section of the library where books like those of Fanon and Diop would be easily accessible to students. The university should aim at establishing a fully-fledged African Studies department in the next few years. Universities could hire or identify from within, competent scholars in African Studies to design a comprehensive curriculum that borrows from already established and

successful African Studies departments in Africa and beyond. For Ajenda Afrika, the short-term goal is to start publicising courses which have African content but which students avoid because the courses are considered “irrelevant” to the job market. Since universities seem more geared toward the customer service model, the students in forums such as Ajenda Afrika may be a more influential force in pressuring administrations to start African Studies departments.

For Kenyan universities, African Studies departments will be the anchors with which their ships stop to find their direction; they will be the compasses with which the people on board find themselves in the map of academic geography. A holistic education should congregate diverse cultures at the banquet of cultural exchange. Like at a food party, everyone attending should bring a different cuisine to the buffet table. Unfortunately, every meal at this banquet has been from Euro-America. It is time for Africa to bring her own food to this banquet and to feast on it.

Notes

¹ Berger, Guy and Corinne Matras. “Criteria and Indicators for Quality Journalism Training Institutions & Identifying Potential Centers of Excellence in Journalism Training in Africa.” *UNESCO’s Series on Journalism Education* (2007) Retrieved January 5 2009 from <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0015/001514/151496e.pdf>

² Shillington, Kevin. *History of Africa*. Revised second edition. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005)

³ Garuba, Harry. “Advancing African Studies in an African University.” *Humanities and Social Sciences Online* (2009) Retrieved December 12 2009 from <http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl?trx=vx&list=h-safrica&month=0908&week=d&msg=UYnIwqnFIgWP5Tcn9sDXYw&user=&pw.>

⁴ Chapman, Brenda, Steve Hickner and Simon Wells. (Directors). *Prince of Egypt* [Motion Picture] (California: DreamWorks, 1998)

⁵ See Kenya Communications (Amendment) Act: http://www.google.com/search?hl=en&q=tkenya+communications+ammendment&aq=f&aqi=&aql=&oq=&gs_rfai=

⁶ Joseph, Christopher Odhiambo.. “Reading FM Radio stations in Kenya: Opening a Pandora’s Box.” *Arts, Culture & Society Vol 1: Cultural Production and Social Change in Kenya: Building Bridges* (Nairobi: Twaweza Communications, 2007) p. 161.

⁷ Ngunjiri, J. “Literary gangster: Smitta’s poetry book.” *Maisha Yetu* (2007) Retrieved March 15 2010 from <http://kenyanbooks.wordpress.com/2007/11/12/literary-gangster-smittas-poetry-book/>

⁸ Plaut, Martin. “Kenya Lifts Ban on Mau Mau.” (2003) *BBC News*. Retrieved March 15 2010 from <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/3196245.stm>.

⁹ Diop, Cheik Anta. *Towards the African Renaissance: Essays in African Culture and Development: 1946-1960*. Trans. Egbuna P. Modum. (London: The Estates of Cheik Anta Diop and Karnak House, 1990) p. 35.

¹⁰ “Today in History.” 2009. *Daily Nation*, 14 September (2009) p.14.