

Academic Freedom in Africa: 25 Years After the Kampala Declaration

Simukai Chigudu reports from the recent CODESRIA conference in Lilongwe where African scholars gathered to discuss issues affecting African scholarship such as intellectual freedom, South Africa's Fallist movements and African studies in the Western Academy.

'Intellectual freedom in Africa is currently threatened to an unprecedented degree. The historically produced and persistent economic, political and social crisis of our continent continues to undermine development in all spheres. The imposition of unpopular structural adjustment programmes has been accompanied by increased political repression, widespread poverty and intense human suffering.' – Kampala Declaration on Intellectual Freedom and Social Responsibility

Penned in 1990 by a collective of African scholars associated with the **Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa** (CODESRIA), the Kampala Declaration was intended to be the standard-bearer for the African intellectual community to assert its autonomy and undertake its responsibility for the peoples of the African continent.

The imperative of such a declaration was self-evident at the dawn of the 1990s. The Cold War had ended thereby marking a new epoch in the trajectory of African states – one rife with contradictions. As decolonisation had spread through much of the continent, the struggle against apartheid continued. Popular agitation for democratisation wrestled with recalcitrant military authoritarianism. The developmental dreams of the early post-colonial states met their limitations through the African debt crisis and the imposition of structural adjustment programmes. And the demographic explosion of the preceding decades combined with a looming HIV/AIDS epidemic thereby signalling an unprecedented social crisis.

The complexities of the moment demanded a rigorous Africanist social science to elucidate, analyse, and critique such realities. The realm of internationally recognised scholarship, however, remained largely inaccessible to African scholars based on the continent and the bulk of the knowledge produced about Africa emanated from the Western Academy. The likes of Mamadou Diouf, Mahmood Mamdani, Arthur Mafeje and other prominent African intellectuals made this observation pointedly in the publication – *Academic Freedom in Africa* – that emerged from the declaration. They argued that there is a strong connection between the then prevailing models of research in African contexts and the class formations that developed in African countries through colonialism at national and global levels. Furthermore, they and others highlighted that much Western scholarship on Africa presented grand, but ultimately flattening, theorisations about the continent as well as an almost ineluctable insistence on essentialising tropes about African politics and culture. In short, academic knowledge about Africa had largely served to render the continent intelligible to outsiders and not for Africans to analyse their own realities according to their internal logic.

That was 25 years ago. How much has African scholarship moved on since then?

CODESRIA reconvened in April this year, this time in Lilongwe, to have a conference celebrating the gains and reflecting on the challenges in the wake of the Kampala Declaration. The densely packed conference schedule offered a distillation of the wide-ranging and entrenched difficulties facing African scholarship. At the level of the university system, numerous presenters – lecturers and students alike – bemoaned a lack of remuneration, heavy teaching loads, inappropriate supervision, poor infrastructure, and a dearth of resources as factors that curtailed unfettered intellectual inquiry. Questions around gender and sexuality were especially important. A Malawian undergraduate student poignantly detailed the difficulties of passing a degree without acquiring an 'STG' (sexually transmitted grade) from a lecturer during the course of a young woman's studies.

The ensuing furore in the conference hall following her comment indicated the extent to which patriarchy and sexual entitlement are inscribed in many universities and intellectual spaces.



The South Africa Fallist campaigns was among the issues discussed at the Codesria conference Photo Credit: Desmond Bowles via Flickr (<http://bit.ly/27dUE6W>)

For other scholars, the most pertinent – sometimes even existential – challenges presented themselves in the vexed relationship between academics and repressive national leaders. Ebrima Sall, the Executive Secretary of CODESRIA, confessed his anxiety every time he returns to his home country of The Gambia where the possibility of imprisonment for dissent looms large. It was also in this discussion that South Africa's 'Fallist' movements came to the fore. The keynote speech by Rhodes University sociologist, Fred Hendricks, focused on this question. For Hendricks, Rhodes Must Fall and Fees Must Fall had shattered the ostensible liberal consensus around academic freedom in South Africa. As he put it, celebrating academic freedom in South Africa, as it is currently conceived in the constitution, is tantamount to celebrating the right of the destitute and the homeless to buy mansions along the Cape Peninsula. Without a radical redistribution and organisation of wealth and resources in the South African academy, he argues, the liberal constitutional model of academic freedom will merely reproduce the racialised inequalities of the apartheid regime.

Finally, the attention turned outwards. Raufu Mustapha, an Associate Professor in African Politics at Oxford University, divulged his frustrations about studying the continent within the Western Academy. He expressed incredulity when an African Studies department at another major UK university recently asked him to help 'Africanise' their curriculum, which as he put it, 'is a little bit late in the day for that, as it were'. Moreover, Dr Mustapha and several others noted how African Studies remains the only field in area studies where it is seemingly acceptable to write entire journal articles without citing a scholar from the region. Similarly, the top ranked journals on African Studies are all based in the West and conferences hosted by the US and UK African Studies Associations command more attention, press coverage and prestige when compared to analogous conferences organised by African research institutions in Africa.

The conclusion of the conference returned to the imperative of social responsibility that must undergird intellectual freedom. Despite all the troubles that beset the African academy and intellectual enquiry more generally, CODESRIA continues to set its sights on addressing 'epistemic violence' and promoting scholarship that forms part of a larger struggle for African development and freedom. And that, at least, is worth celebrating.

Simukai Chigudu is a DPhil (PhD) candidate in International Development at the University of Oxford where is a Hoffman-Weidenfeld scholar.



The views expressed in this post are those of the author and in no way reflect those of the Africa at LSE blog or the London School of Economics and Political Science.

May 25th, 2016 | [Education](#), [Featured](#) | [0 Comments](#)

☺

