Interview with Prof. Catherine Odora Hoppers
Interview conducted by Prof. Crain Soudien on 11 March 2021

Crain Soudien: Could you provide a little bit of your autobiography?

Catherine Odora Hoppers: I went to school in northern Uganda but was then forced to leave the country during Idi Amin's time before returning for five years after Amin was deposed only to leave once more when former independence leader Milton Obote was again ousted. So, I was in exile again.

After some time, I made my way to Sweden, where I took up citizenship and studied at Stockholm University for my Master's and PhD in international comparative education. It was during that time that I realised that the north really knew nothing about the kind of things that I had gone through and the ethos of life in the global south more broadly – including the role that the north had played in this. So, my PhD dissertation considered the issue of "Structural Violence as a Constraint to African Policy Formation". I then came to Zimbabwe and from there to South Africa in 1996 where I worked as deputy director at the Centre for Education for Policy Development.

At that time, South Africa was going through its agonies and triumphs and the centre was part and parcel of the transformation agenda in the country. I was then recruited by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) as a chief research specialist.

During that period, I was seconded to the Parliament of South Africa to help it articulate its position on the topic of indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) and technologies, which was an issue about which the country's universities were completely ignorant at that time.

I was then charged with the task of workshopping the issue of IKS with the heads of the country's science councils over two years, at the end of which period I was appointed by

the science and technology minister to head a task team to draft the national policy on IKS. Three years later the policy was passed and an IKS unit was created in the Department of Science and Technology.

Soudien: How would you describe your present relationship with higher education on the African continent as a leader in that landscape?

Hoppers: In occupying roles both within and outside the university, I have been well placed to introduce concerns expressed by people on the outside into these institutions.

In relation to IKS, my link with higher education was in operationalising indigenous knowledge systems as part of the national question, so that the issue would affect how the rules of higher education itself were constituted as part of efforts to free the academy from a set of rules that were established by the colonialist.

So, my relationship with higher education concerns what has been left unsaid and what continues to haunt everybody in the academy as a whole, including higher education institutions, science councils and other academic bodies, which is that we are left out because we have imbibed modernity hook, line and sinker. Now, what has been left out is coming to haunt us. but we do not know how to embrace it. So, my role in the higher education sector is to find pathways in which the academy can consider what modernity has encouraged it to leave behind and to embrace this and make it public. In other words, the goal is to promote cognitive justice; to ensure that all forms and traditions of knowledge can coexist in the public sphere and without duress.

Soudien: What in your opinion are the purposes and roles of the university at present in the context of the history of this institution and with a view to how the ideal university would be constituted?

Hoppers: The short-sighted view adopted for the university at independence was to produce the manpower required to indigenise the civil service. Which is to say that the rules for the system had already been set and the knowledge that was required had already been defined – it just had to be implemented. I refer to this as first-level indigenisation.

However, now we should move the university to contemplate second-level indigenisation, which means creating men and women who are blessed with critical thinking; and this entails questioning the rules of the game. We should encourage our students and ourselves to engage in the paradigmatic frames of the game itself.

Third, we should engage the constitutive rules of the system, regardless of which universities we are in. At present, we are all locked into what may be described as a surveillance system which was left by colonialism. However, in this context, at the moment when we accept ourselves as Africans, it is imperative that we create something new out of these institutions which were bequeathed to us. In other words, we should create codes through which we can question the rules of the game.

Soudien: You talk about questioning the rules of the game. Is this what you consider should be the role of university?

Hoppers: No, it should be about more than just questioning, more than just critique. The questioning of the rules of the game should produce a deeper diagnosis which should then lead us to a strategic prognosis. This must be the goal, otherwise questioning the rules of the game is useless.

Soudien: What is your perception of the value and relevance of the universities' present contribution to this project?

Hoppers: A brief history of the modern higher education project in Africa may help me to answer that question. Higher education on our continent in its present form is actually a young anomaly. We have made strides since independence, but we have been faced with major challenges. Higher education on our continent has emerged from virtual non-existence. some four or five decades ago to an enterprise that enrols several billion students and recruits hundreds of thousands of faculty and staff today.

Adopting an historical lens, the paramount role of the university during the independence period was to indigenise national civil services. But in time, as the short-sightedness of the original vision of the universities became apparent, our intellectuals wanted to expand the functions of the institution, recognising that the complexity of the intellectual and political processes required for development as a part of nation-building had been greatly underestimated. Our brothers and sisters who came before me understood that the mission to indigenise the civil service assumed that there was somebody else who was coming to build the nation, to complete the decolonisation project.

However, the efforts of these critical thinkers to decolonise the schools and national buildings largely came to a halt as international donors imposed their external models for development, such as through the structural adjustment programmes (SAPs). The universities came under pressure from external donors and naïve national government to become more "relevant", to gravitate towards meeting particular concrete or demonstrable goals. Unsurprisingly, this gave rise to a structurally conservative response as universities felt obliged to demonstrate their worth to their governments. Meanwhile agendas of decolonisation and nation-building were put on hold, which meant that the project of deepening higher education's national and rural contexts on the continent stalled.

This is not to dismiss the indigenisation efforts of previous generations of higher education leaders, but rather to say that their efforts at transformation did not go deep enough.

So, I came onto the scene with a different kind of lens. I came not so much to reject modernisation but rather to ask the disciples of modernisation to expand, to embrace what they had left out. For example, the aim is not to get rid of universities as such but rather to ask the university to be more human; to respect and promote the grounding of epistemology in an African context.

So, the project considered the current academic project, discipline by discipline, including those of law and economics, identifying the gaps in relation to IKS and how these may be addressed. For example, we realised that law and jurisprudence as practised by the West is insufficient. The notion of retributive justice, which is a pillar of Western legal thinking,

fails to accommodate a broader view of the link between crime and punishment proposed and practised as part of indigenous forms of jurisprudence, which place the emphasis on restorative justice.

I should further note that the approach adopted by the project was more than theoretical. For example, to address the problem of the discipline of law being mired in narrow Western interpretations of jurisprudence, I worked closely on efforts to transform the curriculum with a group of professors at the law faculty at the University of South Africa (UNISA), where I was based during this period. The collaboration was undertaken over three years, indicating that such processes of transformation take time.

Soudien: What does this approach say to the current politics of decolonisation, particularly in relation to the issues of access, funding, support, mentoring, and the production of employable graduates?

Hoppers: The theories of decolonisation have no project; they only know how to critique. Once you remove the critique from them, they fall flat. They don't know how to move from critique to restorative action. But we must go beyond post-colonial critiques. We must enter deep into transformative action. Now, transformative action must be undergirded by something. In this regard, I choose restorative action – the idea that people should feel restored by education. And when I talk about education, I mean education with a capital "E", not with a small "e" – in other words, I view it as all encompassing, as more than a mere discipline. So, we must move beyond post-colonial theories to concrete action which embraces a different notion of education.

In relation to the transformation of universities and their approach to human capital and the importance of indigenous knowledge systems in this, a change in the notion of expertise is required. At present, the emphasis is on professors as the fount of all wisdom. But what of those knowledge-bearers who are excluded from the university system?

In an effort to address this gap and build connections among the different forms of knowledge in society, I established an indigenous knowledge faculty comprising 16 elders from different parts of South Africa as part of my work as the Department of Science and Technology/National Research Foundation South African Research Chair (SARChI) in Development Education at UNISA.

These elders were knowledgeable in so many branches of life, for example, in indigenous law, in medicine and in art. They provided a sounding board for a new African approach to what constitutes expertise in knowledge production. Every year, emeritus professors from around the world and university leaders would be invited to work with them, thus challenging received notions of expertise and the academic arrogance that characterises these.

Similarly, the postgraduate students in the faculty were required to present their theses to the elders, to translate and make understandable what they had actually been writing to people who had no idea about their cultural and intellectual origins and frameworks. Twenty students over a ten-year period were obliged to present their theses in this way. The process, which had to be taken seriously, required that the students explicitly owned their knowledge; took responsibility for it; and were prepared for it to be presented and

tested in public. In other words, their knowledge had to be translated so that it could emerge from the personal into the public sphere and thus, in an indirect way, be validated.

In general, this project was a practical effort to shift established approaches to knowledge production and an example of the kind of innovation that may be adopted to disrupt, dismantle or animate the present higher education system.

Soudien: What challenges do you think need to be overcome to realise your vision of how the university should be constituted in terms of resources, political will, policy constraints and so on? And what is the role of technology in this?

Hoppers: I think that we have to face the colonialism within us first before we address the institutional challenges. We internalise so much of the West when what we should be doing is embracing what has not been articulated and bring it up to par. Then and in this context, we can consider the relative advantages and disadvantages of digital technologies – these gadgets and the ways of communicating that they produce. In this regard, I must say that I think beyond the gadgets. For example, if a thief came and took my laptop, I would not die – it is just a tool that I use to work. In this respect, digital technologies can come and go, but identity never dies.

Soudien: So, what is your attitude to technology?

Hoppers: I think technology can help everybody actually, although there are important issues of affordability around access. Increasingly, there are technologies that can help to foster massification so that higher education is not just for the elite but for everybody. But I am concerned about the general attitude towards such technologies, which tends to overinflate the importance of their role. With or without the technologies, millions of people will continue to survive.

Soudien: Can you think of instances, examples, situations in African universities outside your own experience where there has been movement towards what you envision in terms of knowledge production and popular access?

Hoppers: In Uganda, Marcus Garvey Pan Afrikan University (MPAU) promotes expanded community engagement. Community knowledge is at the centre of the curriculum. Students and researchers work with the communities bringing the insights and understanding that they gain back into the university. Meanwhile, the university shares the knowledge gleaned by its students and researchers with other higher education institutions on the continent and globally, and also shares the lessons learnt from community research elsewhere in its own engagement with communities. In this way, MPAU is a model for the deployment of IKS.

Sociologist and former vice-chancellor of the University of Zimbabwe, Gordon Chavunduka, is another example of the commitment to try and bring the fresh insights that are produced by IKS into the university itself. Unfortunately, the humble efforts of IKS proponents are generally ignored by higher education analysts and funders, who tend to look to the larger institutions, such as Makerere University, in their models for change. But Makerere is just maintaining itself; it is too old to think.

Soudien: So, who is that community of people who can promote the required change and is there a framework for supporting this network?

Hoppers: In South Africa, support comes from the National Research Foundation (NRF) and other ringfenced funding as a result of the 20 or so years of policy work that I undertook on the issue of indigenous knowledge systems. Otherwise, the NRF would have ignored IKS.

In other parts of the continent, the African Academy of Sciences (AAS) is seeking to integrate the efforts of individuals who have significantly advanced the IKS agenda in the subject disciplines and at the sectoral level. Members of the AAS are considering creating a mega project in indigenous knowledge systems, covering the whole of Africa bringing together all the individual efforts so that they can contribute to continental policy-making.

Soudien: So, what is your prognosis for where the university landscape in Africa could be going? Should we be concerned?

Hoppers: My view is that the salvation of the African universities lies in the emergence of a truly African university devoid of colonial vestiges and instead rooted in African values; in an African epistemology and pedagogy; and in African systems of knowledge.

This entails expanding the realms of our disciplines, considering their deep history. So, for example, what was the history of social science and how does social science link to African reality? What is the history of law and where does it link to African society? How does science connect to African society?

The former president of the International Council of Science (ICSU), Werner Arber, said that science is trapped in a supply mode, although it should be rooted in both supply and demand. The supply-side view of science concern, for example, the ownership and provision of vaccines and other medical cures. But the demand-side view of science talks to the philosophies and belief systems that underpin science.

It is in examining the demand side that we can expand the systems of science, producing, embracing and funding other ways of envisioning science. In 1999, a conference on "Science for the Twenty-first Century: A New Commitment", which assembled in Budapest, Hungary, under the aegis of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the ICSU said that there should be a vigorous intercultural democratic debate on science, otherwise, science would remain too narrow and too fixed on the supply side, not thinking about the history of science and how science can embrace other ways of seeing.