

The Imprint of Education

The Imprint of Education (TIE) is a project of the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), South Africa, in partnership with the Mastercard Foundation that is exploring the post-graduation trajectories of Mastercard Foundation Scholars Program alumni. TIE is investigating topics such as ethical and transformative leadership, give back, employment and entrepreneurship, student support and mentoring. It consists of five sub-projects or learning activities. The TIE project principal investigators are Prof. Sharlene Swartz, Dr Alude Mahali and Dr Andrea Juan.



Reimagining the African University – Conversation Series

Learning Activity Four consists of a series of conversations with experienced scholars and thought leaders on the future of higher education in Africa. In Reimagining the African University, they discuss challenges, best practices, and the potential for innovation to initiate further dialogue. This transcript is part of a series of interviews conducted in 2021 and may be used with appropriate attribution for scholarly purposes. The learning activity is coordinated by Prof. Thierry Luescher, under the intellectual leadership of Prof. Crain Soudien.

Interview with Prof Issa Shivji Interview conducted by Prof Crain Soudien on 21 June 2021

Crain Soudien: Could you briefly describe your connection with African academia?

Issa Shivji: My connection is two-fold. First, I spent all my adult life in the University of Dar es Salaam and came into contact with African academia in that context. Second, I have been active in a number of pan-African organisations, such as Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) which is based in Dakar and other sister organisations; and have interacted with colleagues from other countries in that context.

In the East African region, there has been close interaction among East African universities. The University of East Africa, from which the University of Dar es Salaam emerged in 1971, comprised three colleges in Nairobi, Kampala and Dar es Salaam. During that time, there was considerable interaction among East African academics and students. In addition, annual East African social science conferences were held, which were a great occasion for intellectual exchange and debates. Alas, the rulers in the region became too nationalist, resulting in the break-up of the University of East Africa.

Soudien: So, what in your view are the purposes and roles of a university?

Shivji: My idea of a university is still rather orthodox. I think a university is a site for thinking, a site for the production of knowledge, and, of course, a site where ideas clash and knowledge is developed. Thus, universities require an amount of freedom to be able to hold these debates and discussions among academics. That is my main understanding of the university.

African universities have not always stood up to what I have called the “orthodox” view of a university. In East Africa, perhaps in many other African countries too, universities were established immediately after independence. In some cases, a few existed prior to independence but they were appendages of some or other institution of higher education in the metropolitan countries. They became fully fledged universities only after independence. One of the immediate priorities of the independence governments was to train high-level civil servants to man the state apparatus. In addition, on some campuses, depending on the political leadership of the time, universities were given a considerable amount of leeway to pursue knowledge in its own right rather than simply for the purpose of producing administrators. This created room for generating great intellectual and political debates on the possible path of development; on reclaiming history; and on exploring and critiquing dominant theories and discourses. Dar es Salaam was one of the leading campuses in this regard.

Soudien: From where you are sitting now, what do you think has happened in terms of the evolution of the African university. How vibrant and how relevant has the African university remained in your view?

Shivji: Well, there are two strategic issues here: relevancy and vibrancy. Historically and from my own experience, there was a nationalist phase in the first 25 years after independence during which there were these intense debates to which I have referred. Then there was a neoliberal phase which changed the political context, which had an impact on the universities. In the late 1970s and for much of the 1980s, African economies found themselves in deep crisis. Universities were starved of resources; and, as governments embraced neo-liberal prescriptions and austerity programmes, higher education was de-valorised. The World Bank and its associates said that Africa did not need thinkers; rather it needed only implementers of policies. The “luxury” of theorising could be left to the developed North, which would do the thinking while Africa did the acting. At one point, the World Bank even suggested that there was no need for universities; and that, in order to get value for money, the focus should be on primary and secondary education.

There was resistance; so eventually the plan did not quite succeed. African universities were not abolished but they were neo-liberalised, which meant a number of things. First, there was privatisation of education and/or cost-sharing. This had a huge impact both on the quality of education and on the demography of the student population. A large number of students, for obvious reasons, were on government bursaries or scholarships. When these dried up, many from poor backgrounds could not enter

university. The result was that universities, which were already elitist and alienated, now became even more elitist and alienated from the population of the country.

Second, because the universities were starved of resources, the faculty moved out to greener pastures in other countries. So, there was a big movement of African academics to South Africa. Others left their universities to start or join various kind of research institutions funded by the donors and the World Bank. The establishment of such well-funded parallel institutions obviously affected the morale and research of the faculty staff who remained at university.

Third, those who stayed, initially out of necessity and later out of choice, took on consultancy work, most of which was based on agendas set by the client. This greatly undermined the basic vocation of the university, in particular the basic research which had been undertaken well during the first 20 or 25 years. Basic research declined; and policy research based on agendas set by funders became the norm. Under the guise of collaboration, this type of research was often led by foreign researchers to whom local researchers, including often senior faculty, were appended. African academics became the hunters and gatherers of data while the foreign “partner” took on the work of processing the data and theorising.

Fourth, as the universities were marketised, the courses being offered changed their orientation. They had to be packed and branded for the market. Increasingly, universities became vocationalised. In order to meet market demand, a perceptible institutional shift took place, from departments of social sciences and humanities to professional schools in fields such as law, engineering and business. To add insult to injury, the faculty crafted an increasing number of sandwich, executive evening courses in order to make money for the university and themselves. The attention of the faculty was divided; many of them spent more time and energy on evening courses than the regular university courses.

In short, the market determined the form, content, depth and approach to courses. Theory was eschewed; and action and a skills-oriented approach were privileged. So, instead of being centres of thinking and basic research, African universities were turned into sort of factories, with the academics being told to package and brand their products, including the students, to make them “saleable”.

In this regard, neo-liberalisation, in my view, devastated the fundamental rationale of a university just as it devastated the social fabric in Africa. The very idea of the university was undermined. A few faculty members who stuck to their guns found themselves abandoned both by colleagues and students. The radical and nationalist faculty staff failed to reproduce itself, resulting in today’s neo-liberal generation of young faculty member who neither care about nor have any sense of the traditions of their own *alma mater*. The vibrancy of the university of previous decades has all but evaporated.

Soudien: So, do you think that we are still under the shadow of neo-liberalism?

Shivji: Yes, although there are changes taking place. Having lost a whole generation of deep, committed scholarship, it will take time to rejuvenate the university, if it ever happens.

Meanwhile, as everyone decries the quality of higher education and the depth of the scholarship on offer, the international financial institutions have jumped onto the bandwagon, providing funding for foreign scholars to come from the North and fill the gap by mentoring the young faculty. These visiting academics from the North come for a few weeks or a couple of months; rush through a couple of courses; take time off to visit local tourist resorts; and off they go, leaving behind no sense of academic collegiality and camaraderie, which should be the stuff of university life.

This is not what universities were meant to be. The idea of the university should be of a kind of comrade-ship which is established among the faculty but also between the students and the whole academic community. The aim is not simply to produce people with certificates but rather to cultivate deep scholarship and, if possible, some societal commitment.

There has been some rethinking, but neoliberalism continues to cast its long shadow. And governments are preoccupied with other matters; the quality of education is not one of their priorities. Now and then there is talk about the issues but very little is done in practice. I think the neo-liberal ideology of marketisation, cost-sharing and user-costs is still fairly dominant in government thinking and in the thinking of government advisers. So, it has not been possible to reclaim the past or put it on a new footing. There are such debates but, by and large, they are still on the fringes.

Soudien: What instances, if any, are there of individuals or institutions maintaining or restoring that ethos and spirit from the past?

Shivji: One of the side-effects of neo-liberalism was that the intellectual community which was being built and which was still in its infancy was decimated. So, what remained, was not an intellectual community propounding, advocating and debating the idea of the university and its ethos, but only a few individuals.

However, such work can only be a collective effort, not an individual task. Although individuals may manage to spark debates, they cannot easily sustain them. They soon get demoralised for lack of support; and there is always a limit to how much an individual can withstand in terms of derision and ridicule from an ignorant young faculty and a hostile university administration.

A particular problem at present is that the young faculty educated outside, in the North, come back with all kinds of new intellectual fashions; it is as if they want to re-invent the wheel and start all over again. So, this is the current challenge.

Soudien: So, how, strategically, can the university escape the clutches of neo-liberalism?

Shivji: That is the crucial question. I think it is important to get the context right. An academic does not exist in isolation, independent of the surrounding social context. In my view, although not many would agree with me, the triumph of neo-liberalism is more or less coming to an end. There is crisis in the capitalist North and the hegemonic hold that neo-liberalism once appeared to have is cracking. This is a period of serious crisis, both in the North as well as in the Global South, including in Africa; and crisis is not always a bad thing. It provides an opportunity to reimagine.

In Africa, the first post-colonial phase was one of nationalism and developmentalism; of the building of the nation-state. We debated nation-building; we discussed historical agency; and we reassessed our past. But, if neo-liberalism has taught one lesson, it is the fragility of the idea of nationalism based on the nation-state and each a separate territorial African country.

So, the context for re-emergence would have to be one in which the African tradition of pan-Africanism can be revisited and reclaimed. The sentiment of pan-Africanism is still there in Africa, even among young people, although, of course, without any deep thinking or understanding. Because, unlike in other continents, regionalism in Africa – that is pan-Africanism – gave birth to territorial nationalism, not the other way around. Many of the first-generation African nationalists were pan-Africanists, including people such as Albert Luthuli in South Africa, as well as many freedom fighters who were based in other countries. Subsequently, in the bid to build territorial nation-states based on territories bequeathed by colonialism, the pan-Africanist ethos receded.

So, the effort to reclaim the idea of the university and build an African intellectual community, should take place as a pan-African endeavour at the continental level. Accordingly, I have been telling my South African comrades at a number of webinars that it is high time that South African academia looked to Africa rather than Europe, as it has done to date. I think South Africa has the potential to provide the leadership to rebuild the African intellectual community – that is, an African academy.

Soudien: So, in reducing the dependency on our wealthy neighbours in the North, how can the universities access sufficient resources in order to ensure an appropriate level of admissions and to foster the freedom required to rebuild the knowledge project, and change our approaches to teaching?

Shivji: Resources is always an important question. So, I think that governments must be persuaded that education is a priority on the basis that, like health, it is a strategic productive sector rather than just a service sector. Today, knowledge and education are deeply implicated in the process of production. So, that is how resources may be allocated to education on a priority basis.

In this regard, the thinking in Africa has to change. The continent cannot continue to depend on the North to revive its universities; the North is not interested and understandably so. Higher education has become a major export for some countries in the North. Why then should they invest in reviving African universities? Their agendas are not the same as the agenda in Africa, where the quest to rebuild academia is not simply a question of the quality of the education on offer but a question of pedagogy.

In my view, there is a need to establish a critical pedagogy in Africa's higher education institutions. This is a contentious position, although not one that should therefore not be held. However, such is not a proposal that a donor or a funder or even one's own government should be expected to welcome. In this respect, the question of pedagogy at university immediately becomes a political question.

To provide an example: During my time at university, students were not required to end their PhD theses with a set of recommendations. But these days, a PhD thesis must end with recommendations – addressed presumably to the government.

Soudien: I am appalled by this custom, which trivialises the endeavour.

Shivji: Absolutely. In fact, many of so-called recommendations that are written to meet this demand do not depend on actual fieldwork having been conducted, they are merely cut and paste. In my view, the fundamental value of a PhD, even if it raises questions of contemporary relevance, is in its contribution to the development of knowledge, for example, by proving or even disproving a hypothesis. Because one of our weakest spots in African academia has been that the scholars here have become data collectors, not producers of theory. The theories are received from the North. But if African academia is to be worth its name, it must be able to theorise.

Regrettably, the PhD students on the continent, regardless of discipline, hardly ever think along those lines because even their supervisors tell them that this business of theorisation is abstract. So, much of the PhD work that is produced tends to be descriptive, merely referencing a particular theoretical framework, having chosen this framework in an eclectic fashion, which is the worst footing on which to establish the process of theorising. But the PhD should be a site where theories can develop – which is crucial given that theory is the highest form of knowledge.

So, there is much work that must be undertaken on many fronts to reclaim Africa's place in the process of production of knowledge.

Soudien: How can we persuade our academic colleagues who are supervising the PhD students to adopt this mindset without patronising them or being condescending to them?

Shivji: I think a new breed of ideas is required, which depends on many discussions, and debates being held at every opportunity. And these should be discussions among African intellectuals. So, there is a need to engage in a double process: the process of building a pan-African intellectual community; and the process of raising these important questions.

To give an example: At the University of East Africa, and even subsequently, there were annual meetings bringing together the subject teachers from the different disciplines at the three sister colleges. Views were exchanged on the content of the courses; on the work being undertaken; on the pedagogy, and so on. These discussions were very fruitful, indicating how the task of changing orientation cannot be an individual endeavour, if it is to be effective, it must always be a collective enterprise.

So, for example, the debates that took place in Dar es Salaam had resonance in Kampala and in Nairobi, as well elsewhere; and the debates that took place there also resonated in Tanzania. By contrast, today, few intellectuals in universities in other African countries know about or keep track of the debates taking place in South Africa. And, conversely, many South African colleagues themselves do little to ensure a pan-African interaction.

So, this could be a starting point. But it cannot be left to happen spontaneously; it should be undertaken in a conscious and conscientious way.

Soudien: Could you talk a little about your views on indigenous knowledges and the use of indigenous languages in the context of knowledge production?

Shivji: I think these are important debates but they can also become diversions. Although language, of course, is absolutely important, the use of a particular language by itself does not necessarily lead to depth of thought. It does not necessarily follow that because people are thinking or writing in an indigenous language, they are involved in developing concepts which are the building blocks of a theory. It is the whole process of concept building, in whatever language, which is the crux, which lies at the heart of knowledge production and education.

Of course, in this context, language is important, but I do not believe that somehow theories and pedagogies can be developed by teaching in indigenous languages or by developing these languages. For example, although Kiswahili is widely spoken in Tanzania, little theoretical work is written in Kiswahili. And those few scholars who have a good handle on theories and concepts and can write in Kiswahili, do produce

theoretical works in the language which are equivalent to those produced in English; but they are not read by scholars or students or taken seriously.

Which is not say that it is not important to excavate indigenous knowledges, which is another area where basic research can be of value. Research should be undertaken on indigenous knowledges in an integrated, holistic fashion paying due attention to the development of these knowledges, which are not static; and the contradictions within them, which, like other forms of knowledge, can be sites of contentions.

It is also important to avoid romanticising indigenous knowledges just as other forms of knowledge should not be romanticised. All knowledges are sites of struggle, sites where ideas clash; and, in that sense, all knowledges have developed and are developing. The question then becomes: In what direction are they developing? and How can they be reclaimed and reconstructed and made relevant to the present situations and conditions? These are important debates that should be held, but always within the context of addressing the fundamental problems of African academia. In this regard, my fear is that the issue of indigenous languages and indigenous knowledges can become a red herring that distracts from the central issues facing African academia today.

Soudien: Turning to the issue of digitalisation and what has been termed the “fourth industrial revolution”, what is your view of where this technological revolution is going?

Shivji: I do not think that technology is in command in relation to the quest for knowledge, and the building of the academy and the intellectual community. It has always been the human who is in command. Technology is not a substitute for human knowledge because human beings are not robots who are programmed by technology. So, while the new technologies, such as digitisation, must be integrated into the production of knowledge, people should not allow themselves to believe that technology will solve all human problems. Technology should never be put in command. At the end of the day, human knowledge is human, and it also has to be humane, not robotic. This is somewhat polemic, but that is my view.

Soudien: Could you describe an important innovation that has taken place inside the African academy which people should know about?

Shivji: It would be worthwhile to review of the work undertaken by the Dakar-based CODESRIA, which is a pan-African intellectual organisation that has survived for almost 50 year and still has potential. The institution had continually brought together members of the African academy – young and old, women and men – on its various platforms.

Another more recently established organisation that would bear reviewing is the Sam Moyo African Institute for Agrarian Studies (SMAIAS) in Zimbabwe, which holds annual summer schools and produces a number of publications. Like CODESRIA, it has managed to bring together members of academy, particularly younger scholars, from both Africa and elsewhere in the Global South. During the 3 to 5 weeks of summer school, students come together not simply on an academic platform. By staying together; by having discussions; and, sometimes, by consciously creating open forums at which ideas are shared on major world events and trends, certain relationships are established which are important in the process of building an intellectual community. Another area worth reviewing is the publications and journals that are being produced in Africa, including at the University of Dar es Salaam, although the quality of this material is uneven and the work has generally failed to spark real intellectual debate. In part, this is the result of the mindset of African university administrations, which accord pride of place to the so-called international journals rather than African journals. It is the journals produced in the North that count when academics are seeking to promote themselves and their work.

So, the question of the kind of publications that Africa has managed to produce is worth considering with an eye on what can be done to change the situation. Because, in addition to the debates that are held at meetings, workshops and conferences, there are the debates that are held in written form in journals and bulletins. This is an area in which South African universities could give a lead given that they are better placed in terms of resources to be able to take on this kind of pan-African initiative.

Soudien: Is there anything else that you would like to add?

Shivji: I would hope that greater energy and thinking in the South African academy may be directed at supporting and building relations with universities in other African countries, not in a predatory fashion but in the spirit of genuine pan-African collegiality. In this regard, the South Africa academy should plug into African debates, and not be constantly overawed by European debates.