



---

## The Academy and its Disengagement from Popular Struggles in Kenya<sup>1</sup>

Godwin R. Murunga\*

---

### Abstract

This is a study of the academy and its disengagement from popular struggles in Kenya. Focusing attention on the role of faculty unions and student associations, the study identifies and describes the trajectory of engagement and concludes that the current conjuncture tends more towards disengagement from popular struggles by unions and associations, many of which are consumed by daily struggles for staff and student welfare and nothing else. Thus the pattern has moved from active participation in popular struggles against authoritarian one-party rule to the current phase in which the terrain of higher education is at a crossroads. Academics and students remain disengaged from everyday political struggles in society and the possibilities of a re-composition of the student movement and faculty union are many. The study explains why the potential for greater involvement of universities as change agents in the diverse struggles for social justice remain under-utilised.

### Résumé

Cet article traite de l'université et de son désengagement des luttes populaires qu'elle menait dans le passé au Kenya. En mettant l'accent sur la situation des professeurs et des associations estudiantines, l'auteur identifie et décrit la trajectoire des luttes syndicales et sociales. Il conclut que la conjoncture actuelle tend davantage vers le désengagement de luttes populaires, tant beaucoup de syndicats et d'associations se sont épuisés dans des luttes ordinaires au quotidien. Ainsi, le modèle a évolué d'une participation active dans la lutte contre les régimes autoritaires du Parti Unique vers une période durant laquelle l'enseignement supérieur se retrouve au carrefour de

---

\* Kenyatta University and African Leadership Center, Nairobi. Email: gmurunga@gmail.com

l'incertitude. Des universitaires et des étudiants restent éloignés des luttes politiques quotidiennes même si les possibilités d'une recombinaison du mouvement étudiant et syndical existent. L'étude explique pourquoi la mobilisation des universités, en tant qu'agents de changement, demeure faible dans les diverses luttes sociales.

### **Introduction**

In this article, the academy refers generally to tertiary institutions of learning including universities and polytechnics. But given the history of political engagements between tertiary education institutions and the state in Kenya, the study zeroes more specifically on the story of universities as sites of political and popular struggle. The trajectory of engagement described here has a clear pattern that has tended more towards disengagement from popular struggles in the last three decades. The pattern has moved from active participation in popular struggles against authoritarian one-party rule to the current phase in which the terrain of higher education is at a crossroads and academics and students remain disengaged from everyday political struggles in society. The possibilities of a re-composition of the student movement and faculty union are many. I describe the history and dynamics involved in this process and explain why the potential for greater involvement of universities as change agents in the diverse struggles for social justice remain underutilised.

Student politics and struggles are organised around associations while faculty have coalesced around staff unions. These are new or resuscitated organizations and do not seem to anchor their pursuits in any popular struggles. In fact, they seem disengaged from these struggles and are unable internally to defend and enjoy the democratic gains evident in the larger Kenyan society. The associations and unions lack a serious ideological base around which to galvanise, mobilise and anchor any social struggles. Their organisational capacities are bureaucratised, weak and susceptible to manipulation from university administration and university management has exploited this with alacrity. Similarly, their activities are few and restricted to advancing the interests of their petty bourgeois class location. They enjoy different levels of acceptance and recognition by university management, the state and within society. In some way, this bureaucratisation and recognition has acted to depoliticise the associations and unions and to render them mere vehicles of struggle for better remuneration and working conditions.

As a result, there is little the associations and unions can do to advance popular struggles for social justice in society in general. Few are the academics who fit the definition of public intellectuals and their engagement in forums for public debate is miniscule. On the contrary, they are engaged in an all-consuming

struggle against reactionary university administrations. Much of this struggle rotates around staff welfare issues. This is understandable given that universities have been unable to 'integrate staff welfare in the universities transformation process' (Munene 2008:10).<sup>2</sup> Most university administrations seem wedded to older habits of the one-party authoritarian era in which staff welfare did not matter and was considered mainly as a last minute token by the state or university administration. The struggle for better working terms however favours the administration. In any case, Kenyan society seems to be democratising much faster than universities. This reality has prevented universities from being effective interlocutors in the national dialogue on social justice and political reforms. With most of their energies consumed by internal struggles for academic freedom (this is never linked to the broader national struggle) and staff/student welfare, their vanguard role in leading the process of transformation is limited to occasional strike action and students riots.

### **Intellectual Roles Clarified**

Kenyan higher education scene is dominated by public universities. In terms of political and civic engagement, public universities have greater visibility in national discourse than private ones. The same applies to student activism. Perhaps because of their background and history, faculty and students in public universities have historically shown greater interest in national affairs than private university students. They repeatedly mount protests, issue press statements and actively challenge the state on matters they feel strongly about. In contrast, private university students have a laid-back approach and rarely feature in public struggles. Consequently, a public discourse has developed that credits private university students for their 'maturity' and 'reason' in contrast to their public university counterparts. Little is however said about the class profile of private university students and how this might incline them to be distant from pressing national struggles. In any case, private universities are fee paying institutions and ability to pay counts as an important criterion for admission. Their fees are generally higher than those of public universities and, as such, they disproportionately attract students from a particular class of Kenyans whose interest in issues of social justice is, on balance, minimal.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, up to the early 1990s, the struggle for social justice and political reforms has found greater resonance within public universities and among its students and faculty. As institutions and individuals with a stake in the national project, the actions and involvement of public universities accords very well with the historical mission associated with universities as sites of knowledge and struggle. However, a distinction must be acknowledged between the institution and the individual. It is the commitment of the individual intellectual independent of the university as an institution that made/makes the struggles

for democracy vibrant. Universities are important but also incidental to the struggle. Indeed, universities quite often stultify thought and curtail social action (Adar 1999:193-94). It is the conviction and drive of individual lecturers/intellectuals rather than the university as an institution that give depth to the public engagements of intellectuals. In more recent times, universities have lost that cadre of students and lecturers who mobilised to democratise the university and society. Many of these intellectuals joined the emergent civil society while others became politicians. The result is the disengagement of the academy from popular struggles and the spectacle of society democratising faster than its universities.

The figure of the intellectual is therefore important to whatever role universities play in transforming society. Edward Said adroitly captured this argument. He emphasized 'the figure or image' of the intellectual arguing that 'an intellectual is an individual with a specific public role in society that cannot be reduced simply to being a faceless professional, a competent member of a class just going about his/her business'. For Said, an intellectual 'is endowed with a faculty for representing, embodying, articulating a message, a view, an attitude, philosophy or opinion to, as well as for, a public'. An intellectual raises 'embarrassing questions', 'confront[s] orthodoxy and dogma' and is 'someone who cannot easily be co-opted by government or corporations and whose *raison d'être* is to represent all those people and issues that are routinely forgotten or swept under the rug' (Said 1994:11). Said draws an explicit relationship between the stature of the intellectual and their ability to speak truth to power.

The capacity to speak truth to power is contingent upon the stature of the intellectual even though the standing that comes with academic achievement can also entrench status quo tendencies. The accomplishments of an intellectual in research, publishing and critical thinking add value and weight to what they publicly stand for and articulate. Intellectuals do not peddle rumours or gossip; they articulate ideas whose veracity they have established and that they know to be based on sound thought. The modes of articulation of intellectual knowledge vary; they include publications, conferences, television appearances, consultancy and expert advice. Intellectual standing is legitimised by expertise in research and dissemination and an understanding of the many sidedness of an issue. It is in this sense that Ali Mazrui's definition of an intellectual as someone 'who has the capacity to be fascinated by ideas and has acquired the skill to handle many of them effectively' is apt (Mazrui 1978).

### **Three Phases of Intellectuals Political Engagement**

There have been three major phases of (dis)engagement between intellectuals and the state or other status quo entities/forces in society. The first, 'the age of euphoria', sprang from the heady days of independence when intellectuals

shared in the same nation-building project as politicians and actively sought to serve towards the realisation of this project. The second was the period of ‘troubled relationship’<sup>4</sup> when authoritarian rule took root and intellectuals were among the social classes in society pilloried for being irrelevant and hounded for holding, writing and articulating views construed to be anti-government or against the status quo. Finally is the recent period of political reforms when basic freedoms of expression are guaranteed. Of these three periods, the first two are already too well studied. We recapitulate only to tease out their relevance to the third period which is of greater importance for our purposes.

### **Age of Euphoric Nationalism**

African nationalism was primarily led by intellectuals. Some of them became the founding fathers (rarely mothers) of independent African states. Their names occupy exalted positions of state and a good number have been described as philosopher-kings. In Kenya, such leading thinkers include Oginga Odinga and Tom Mboya even though others like Dr Julius G. Kiano occupied key positions in government. It was in the hands of these leaders that policy on higher education and the role of universities was formulated. They acknowledged the value of higher education and supported increased student admission. They needed trained people for the Africanization programme and for nation-building. As a result, the immediate task of universities was human capital formation and deployment.

As long as universities fulfilled the task of human capital formation and deployment, they enjoyed a cosy relationship with government and state officials. Many of the graduates looked forward to employment in government and had no problem with this cordial relationship. Students at the time remained largely ‘apolitical’ and content to ‘pursue their studies with little active attention to the political world’ (Savage and Taylor 1991:311; Klopp and Orina 2002:48). Intellectuals also exhibited similar tendencies. At the time, the interests and priorities of intellectuals and national leaders converged. The anti-colonial struggle had forged for them common enemies and interests. Indeed, a number of intellectuals had either taught these leaders or had shared school/college and became partisans in the nationalist movement (Ajayi et al. 1996). Though they were a minority at the university at the time, African academics left the predominantly expatriate staff to defend university autonomy. Most local intellectuals did not anticipate the serious problems posed by the close affinity of university and government. While government felt obligated to finance university education almost to a cent, it also knew this to be an easy way of extracting acquiescence from intellectuals.

Intellectual debates at the time were vigorous but cordial. Politicians took space in intellectual forums to articulate and defend their ideas. For instance,

Tom Mboya and Oginga Odinga took advantage of this to elucidate their philosophies, articulate their developmental convictions and engage intellectuals in the then Uganda-based *Transition* and also in the *East African Journal*. The debate around the Sessional Paper No 10 of 1965 on *African Socialism and its Application to Planning in Kenya* is a good example (Republic of Kenya 1965; Ghai 1965:20-23). It was in the context of these debates that Tom Mboya set the tone for universities. He rejected the view of universities as focusing 'constructive criticism of government policies' and warned of the risk of the academy 'organizing itself into a continuing opposition'. He insisted that universities must be 'founded on a basic sympathy with the national movement' and implied that academic freedom has limits. Such limits, he explained, require universities to be 'attuned to the national mood if they are to be appreciated by the people' (Mboya 1963:104-105). The argument was prophetic.

### **The Period of Troubled Relationship**

The year 1969 marked a decisive turning point in the cordial relationship between the state and universities. First, Kenyan politics changed dramatically with the falling out between Odinga Odinga and Mzee Jomo Kenyatta. The falling out created a formal political opposition and the academy almost naturally aligned itself with this side. Mboya had warned against the university lecturers deliberately constituting 'themselves into groups which are intended to oppose government'. Soon enough, intellectuals were at the receiving end of government power as they were perceived to be in the opposition. Students began to take an active interest in politics and opposed the move towards one party rule that KANU had carefully choreographed.

This marked a turning moment in the state-university relations. In 1969, government denied Odinga the opportunity to speak at the University of Nairobi (UoN). Students protested against this move. The government instituted strong arm tactics not only to contain the rising opposition within KANU, but also to prevent the coalescing of forces that would constitute organized opposition. Preventing the emergence of an effective and organised opposition, Tamarkin (1978:300-301) has argued, in part explains the enduring 'stability' of the Kenyatta regime. But while the Kenyatta government effectively curtailed freedoms in the larger society, it was unable to fully silence the university. Thus, this opposition to government 'relocated into universities and the university student political institutions became the structures through which these battles were fought' (Rok Ajulu as cited in Klopp and Orina 2002:49).

Government responded by intensifying surveillance of university students and lecturers. It used suspensions, expulsion and detention to silence both faculty and students. Periodic closures of universities whenever students protested became a tool in the government arsenal of repression. Those identified

as leaders of student activism were regularly expelled as a lesson to others, perhaps in order to extract silence, complicity and compliance. Whenever universities were closed due to protests, students were required to report weekly to their village chiefs for that entire period. For lecturers, detention and subsequent loss of jobs was used to ensure their compliance. Abdulatif Abdulla had been the first writer to be imprisoned for three years for writing and circulating a pamphlet titled *Kenya: Where are We Heading to?* These tactics however failed to produce silent acquiescence; they instead provoked more progressive literature and intensified student activism. In fact, prison became a fertile ground for authors like Abdulatif Abdulla and later Ngugi wa Thiong'o to write (wa Thiong'o, 1993:94).<sup>5</sup>

Daniel arap Moi took over power in 1978 and state authoritarianism took a turn for worse. He solidified the strong arm tactics built under the Kenyatta regime and sought to undermine even the basic mission of universities as sites of knowledge production. One means by which this was achieved was through the centralised administrative structure at the university. With the president as Chancellor, Moi used the powers of appointing key university administrators to install a structure of university management that matched in design and intent that of the provincial administration. He remained the titular Chancellor of all public universities and appointed all the Vice Chancellors (VCs). The VCs in turn influenced the appointment of the university council including the chairman of council. The VC influenced the appointment of three deputies, the registrars, finance officers, and principals of colleges. S/he then appointed chairpersons of departments and the dean of students.

The scope for academic freedom was, as a consequence, circumscribed by the role assumed by the VCs. The Senate, the highest decision making body on academic matters, was compromised through the actions of VCs. In more recent times in some universities, VCs have further enlarged the scope of patronage and subservience by packing such bodies as Senate with their appointees. In the 1990s, William Ochieng', a former Principal of Maseno University College, observed that 'Senates are themselves undemocratic bodies since they are packed by heads of departments and institutes who are mere appointees of the vice-Chancellors' (Ochieng as cited in Adar 1999:193). In the more recent times, the situation has grown worse.

There are notable examples of how things have grown worse. VCs have created a category of management academics that is distinct from classroom academics. For instance, VCs continue to unilaterally set up new directorates to which they appoint as Directors only those academics who uncritically support them. The idea is to enlarge the scope of patronage and to facilitate unquestioning loyalty, management has discouraged or undermined existence of elective positions in the university structures.<sup>6</sup> Appointees to administrative

positions earn generous allowances, something that ensures the sycophancy that management needs. In most cases, appointees are young academics some without their Ph.Ds. Through such manoeuvres, some VCs have silenced the professoriate in the guise that they belong to management. Indeed, at Kenyatta University for example, management required all appointees to administrative positions to cease being members of the University Academic Staff Union (UASU). The result is that the Senate has been expanded into an administrative appendage of management not an academic organ of the university. All these have contributed to disengaging the academic as an agent for popular struggles as most academics resort to individual pursuits.

In order to deal with organized faculty and student activism, the faculty union and student association were targeted and banned. Under Moi, student leaders were either patronised or harassed into acquiescing to administrative dictates. In extreme cases, they were expelled from the university on trumped up charges on flimsy grounds. Further, university management sought to influence student elections in order to have student leaders who were partial to the ruling party. This happened in the UoN with the unopposed election of pro-government students like PLO Lumumba. In recent times, management interference with elections of student associations continues, leading, for instance, to student riots in Kenyatta University (KU) in March 2009 and UoN in June 2010. During his presidency, Moi took the game of infiltrating the student union to new heights. He encouraged the establishment of District-based student and faculty associations. Formed on the basis of the Districts from which students/faculty originated, these associations were in turn patronised by leading politicians from those Districts. While occasionally, these Associations played a useful welfare role of raising funds to pay fees for needy students, etc., they were designed to facilitate a divide and rule strategy of counterbalancing the umbrella student/faculty association. Furthermore, these associations became bases for politicians to organize for expedient political gain.

During Moi's presidency, the relations between students and faculty on one hand and the state on the other hand deteriorated to an all time low. The state security apparatuses infiltrated every nook and cranny of the university and reported on lecturers and students. These were periodically picked up for one flimsy reason or the other and detained. Moi had callous disrespect for the core mission of the university and he responded badly to issues about faculty and student welfare. Fearing organized reaction from university students, he spoke derisively of the academic staff union and student association. Remuneration for academic staff hit an all time low under his rule. Many lecturers had to flee the country into exile after harassment and persecution from the state security apparatuses. For some like Elisha Atieno-Odhiambo, the stint in detention and subsequent exile took a personal toll leading him to declare at a

Historical Association of Kenya Conference at Lake Baringo Lodge in 2004 that his ultimate loyalty was with the Luo nation/ethnicity. If during Kenyatta's rule the seminar culture continued in muted forms, under Moi, this culture which had been the forum for critical analysis of society all but died. Moi even took it upon himself to occasionally declare debates closed as he did with the Mau Mau debate in the 1980s. With the rise in the number of universities and university students, the decline in government expenditure and investment in universities and the brain drain, quality in academic standards all but plummeted. There remained few isolated islands of excellence whose contribution continues to be underestimated to date.

If the basis of effective organising against a repressive regime depended on the existence of a critical mass of accomplished scholars, this threshold became elusive during the Moi presidency and has grown worse as many of these academics joined politics or relocated into the emergent civil society. This was demonstrated during the 1994 strike action when university lecturers went on strike to demand registration of the University Academic Staff Union. This was the last major faculty strike action that bore resemblance to an effective social action for justice. While in universities with a large cohort of senior lecturers and professors, the strike action undermined the teaching programme and drove home the demand for freedom of expression and the need to improve staff welfare, in others like KU, the then VC manipulated lecturers and defeated the noble intentions of the striking faculty. A section of the faculty, operating under a group of unnamed '100 Academics' congregated together in a move to defeat the strike. Where necessary, junior lecturers of the rank of graduate assistants and non-teaching staff were deployed to teach or administer examinations.

The defeat of the strike action through crude and unprofessional means had a predictable effect on staff morale and quality of teaching programmes. Many accomplished and politically active intellectuals were either fired from their job or took up other job opportunities. Some relocated to universities abroad, into the private sector or to civil society. Dr Korwa Adar, the chairman of the proposed Union was fired from UoN and relocated to South Africa while Kilemi Mwiria the Secretary-General was fired and was later elected Member of Parliament. He is currently Assistant Minister for Higher Education, Science and Technology. With a booming consultancy culture in Kenya, many lecturers took to consultancy work with its unedifying intellectual culture. If the value of intellectual work rests in the 'collective labour of the mind', as Mkandawire (2005) puts it, the net effect of the disruptive years of the Moi regime was to fragment the intellectual community, atomise the knowledge they produced and demoralise the staff and students.

### **The Era of Reform: Fragmentation and Atomisation**

The desire to put local public universities on the international map was further eroded by the economic situation in the country in the 1980s and 1990s. This was the time when higher education was assaulted by the combined force of World Bank/IMF austerity measures and the continuing authoritarianism of the government/university management. The austerity measures had a very absurd logic: they demanded that education be treated like any other investment – ‘foolish to make unless the returns are profitable’ (Mamdani 1994:3). Profitable returns were measured in quantitative terms thus, obscuring other spin-off gains that were not quantifiable, but whose value to a knowledge society is well-known. From this argument, the conclusion that the rates of returns on basic education outweighed those of higher education inevitably followed. The verdict communicated in a World Bank blueprint revealed at a meeting of African VCs held in Harare in 1986 was that Africa did not in fact need her universities (Imam and Mama 1994:73).

The reform era sanctioned an unhealthy assault on the university and intellectuals. Posed largely as a necessary reaction to the decay of higher education, this reform process undermined university education and the potential for mobilising the academy as a site of struggle for change and intellectuals as agents in the process. What passed as reform exposed universities to a market driven logic. Keen observers of the sector have concluded that the reforms and reform process at issue ‘can neither redress nor significantly change the current directions and conditions of [Africa’s] higher education system’. What passed as reform, Aina argues, entailed ‘managerial and technocratic tinkering and modification of formal policies, practices and structures...’, and did not address broader issues ‘of vision, mission, structures, and values’ and how to reclaim ‘the political will and organization to mobilize and accomplish the necessary changes and reconfigurations’ (Aina 2010:24).

In many places, reform boiled down to massification with an eye to generating funds for the university from ‘parallel’ degree programmes. In places like Uganda, this was logically followed by a reduction in state financing of higher education. The university opened up to parallel degree programmes where students who did not originally qualify for admission to university were admitted into a different module of lectures from the regular students. Of course, this meant that admission was relaxed to a point where almost everyone qualified to undertake a degree course. In some cases, bridging courses of various levels of seriousness were established to elevate the qualification of otherwise unqualified applicants. Universities in Kenya have opened up new campuses across the country, in some cases building new campuses structures within strategic places in the city to attract students and in other cases, buy out existing secondary schools or tertiary colleges and set these up as ‘new’ campus.

The new campuses have come with more opportunities for patronage that undermines the core values and functions of a university. For instance, they opened up new administrative vacancies to be filled up starting with that of Principal or co-ordinator. As I argue below, not only have VCs appointed to these vacancies faculty who pass the loyalty test, they have ensured that those appointed are ethnically compliant; i.e. they either come from the region where the campus is located or is of the same ethnic origins as top managers in the university. This means that the patronage system in place has systematically been ethnicised in a manner that undermines the status of the university as a national, not ethnic, institution. Worse, this expansion has negatively affected teaching faculty. Lecturers are not only required to teach round the year including during the holiday session, but also to travel and teach in far-flung places. There has been no commensurate increase in the number of lecturers and neither was there any serious attempt to expand the teaching facilities like lecture halls, laboratories, computers and libraries prior to the launch of these programmes. As a consequence, junior faculty, who did not qualify to lecture, were tasked to teach and supervise students. For many lecturers, teaching and supervising students replaced research and publishing. 'Since the number of students one has supervised is an important ingredient in the promotion criteria, some lecturers have sought to mitigate the inability to conduct research and publish, by supervising many students' (Wangenge-Ouma 2008:463). Indeed, universities have rewarded some with promotions on the basis of teaching/supervising students alone. Never mind that the quality of that supervision is hardly examined.

Since many of these developments in Kenyan universities took place under the Moi regime, it is obvious that the main legacy of Moi's presidency in university education was uncontrolled expansion in university admission, collapse of infrastructure for teaching including lecture halls and libraries, the exodus of faculty into exile or for greener pastures or into the civil society sector. This process represented the fragmentation of the Kenyan intellectual community and a crippling of its ability to mobilise for social transformation. By 2002 when Moi left office, universities were very weak sites for organising. Lecturers were over-committed by increased work load, proliferating parallel degree programmes and consultancy. Most lacked basic qualifications for teaching or supervising and had limited international connections. In other words, the community was fragmented, knowledge was degraded and the intellectual community was composed of disinterested and unmotivated lecturers.

Consequently, the capacity of local universities to produce a group which has collective interest in the production of knowledge and its application for the betterment of society remains limited. The existence of such an interest group is a precondition for the university to play its rightful role in social

transformation. If this group has potential to exist in Kenya, it is fragmented and the knowledge it produces dispersed into inaccessible locales. Worse, the prospect for reconstituting this group is limited because its base for organising is the union. Staff union struggles have been reduced to fighting over distribution of income from private students, while no struggles are noticeable in the area of academic quality and scholarly responsibility. Faculty union is currently preoccupied with bread and butter issues for the most part. Their intermittent activism does not connect with wider societal interests and university-based intellectuals are conspicuous by their absence whenever pressing national issues are discussed.

The ascendance of Mwai Kibaki to power in 2002 marked a moment of euphoria and hope for change. Kibaki indeed instituted some changes in the academy. He withdrew as Chancellor of all public universities and appointed eminent Kenyans like Professors Ali A. Mazrui in Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology and Bethwell Alan Ogot for Moi University to those positions. Others included Joe Wanjui, Harry Mule and Bethuel Kiplagat for UoN, Kenyatta University and Egerton University respectively. This development should have depoliticised the Chancellorship and released the authoritarian hold the government held over universities. Second, a competitive procedure for appointing VCs was instituted. The incoming Chancellor of the UoN actually set the ball rolling by conducting a competitive process of appointing a new VC. Other universities soon followed suit and most of the VCs today are supposedly appointed through an 'open and competitive' process. The question is: what significant change, in terms of administration and in relation to the core mission of research and training, have we witnessed in the universities? Have intellectuals taken the opportunity presented to define the vision, mission, and values of the university and to re-engage in popular struggles?

### **Intellectuals Cede More Ground**

Faculty failed to seize the opportunity to control the initiative of transforming universities into citadels of excellence and agents of social transformation in society. Instead, this initiative remained with the VCs who, contrary to Munene's laudatory notion of '*depoliticised chancellorship*' and '*market-sourced vice-chancellorship*', have repoliticised them in new ways. This re-politicisation depends largely on the control most VCs exercise over funds acquired through parallel degree programmes. Some have used these funds to entrench their dominance in universities as there is limited government oversight over these income-based funds.

Management initiative to change the university is however trapped within the neo-liberal market-based reform logic that, above everything else, seeks

managerial efficiency and profitable returns to investment. There is a local assumption that efficiency alone will enable the university to attain world class status. This status is however defined in terms of the ability of universities to mount income-generating programmes/projects and to master the language of business plans. The production of quality and socially conscious graduates is not prioritised. Thus, instead of designing intellectual plans, universities are drafting business plans with emphasis given to rapid results initiatives and quick measurable outcomes. The long term and painful process of research and learning is consequently frowned upon as the new tyranny of measurable outcomes is installed.

It is therefore not surprising that most Kenyan universities have in recent years celebrated achievements around managerial efficiency. For instance, the fact that KU was ranked top among State Corporations in Performance Contract Evaluation for 2006-2007 was celebrated not just as a major achievement but perhaps as the most important achievement. It was however not lost on keen observers that this evaluation did not scrutinise academic achievement – that is, how managerial efficiency translates into significant intellectual contribution falls outside the framework of this evaluation. Thus, these reforms have not gone towards effective transformation of universities into citadels of excellence, agents of transforming society for the better and as champions of social justice. University academics have consequently been left agonising over a reform logic that entails only the search after ISO (International Organization for Standardization) Certification and beautification of the campuses<sup>7</sup> instead of organizing universities positively to contribute to change in society. The celebration around performance contract, ISO compliance and beautification aptly displays how disengaged from everyday social struggles university academics are.

Matters have not been helped by the fact that public universities are in the news for anything but relevant contribution to societal struggles. The most damning recent examples are reports on tribalism in the university. Tribalism is indeed a perennial cancer in the university. It has been used to infiltrate and fragment faculty unions and student associations and to undermine collective organizing for social justice. Thus, a chairman of a local chapter of the staff union has openly sided with VC on important union issues mainly due to ethnic affiliation. The university, in turn, pays his tuition for Ph.D. studies. On the other hand, and as hinted above, VCs are guilty of tribal based appointments. At KU, the appointments have been used to enhance gender equity but gender itself is secondary to ethnicity. The university is therefore generating its own version of an ethnicised anti-democratic female power structure that continues to muzzle freedom of expression within. This structure is not qualitatively different from the male power structure that has dominated university

administration in Kenya for long. Like previous administrations, this structure rewards mediocrity and encourages petty spying and rumour-mongering. There continues to be a fear of spies walking around with voice recording devices and, once in a while, colleagues involved have been identified and embarrassed with their recording devices.

Academics and students at universities are however culpable in the destructive antics promoted by the administration. Faculty have undermined the values of quality, empowerment and transformation in many ways. Spying on colleagues is the least worrisome issue. The prevalence of rote learning with its emphasis on memorisation and repetition is perhaps a worse problem at the university. Paulo Freire described this as banking education in which 'the scope of action allowed to the student extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing [what the teacher] deposits'. This kind of education bears no transformative energy. On the contrary, it annuls 'the students' creative power' and is not interested in developing their 'critical consciousness which would result from their intervention in the world as transformers of that world' (Freire: 1994[1970]:53-54). As Mwangi Chege confirms, 'banking education remains the predominant pedagogy' in Kenyan universities. For him, 'a pedagogy that undermines students' voices' is no less criminal than 'government-instigated suppression of discourse' (Chege 2009:66-67).

There is anecdotal evidence from personal observation and newspaper reports that confirms the role of intellectuals in stifling student growth even though the responsibility for the lack of critical engagement of universities with society is shared between faculty, students and administration. Faculty are responsible for a failed pedagogy. Professors have abdicated from their core task of training junior lecturers. The highest levels of decision making in the university like the Senate are occupied primarily by full professors. But many of them have watched as management contravenes cherished universities statutes. In one instance at Kenyatta University after the March 2009 student riots, faculty in the Department of History received a memo informing them that 'examination for regular undergraduate students will commence on 30/03/09' and that for 'those who may not have finished the syllabus there is a probability of adjusting the examination at the exam office in the administration'. This memo, written by the Chairman was occasioned by a decision by the university management to shorten the semester by a few weeks therefore requiring those who had not covered the syllabus to adjust the examination set moderated by the external examiners earlier in the semester. When I presented this memo at a KU chapter meeting of UASU, it did not elicit the level of outrage proportionate to the breach.

Perhaps what is most damning is that university faculty and students have remained silent when such egregious cases are exposed. Just like in the years

of one-party authoritarianism, there is a remarkable climate of silence and a culture of self-censorship among academics and students. The culture of silence amidst decaying standards and of self-censorship in the face of glaring administrative contravention of statutes is a fine example of how society is democratising faster than the university. This culture reached a crescendo in early 2008 in at least two universities where, fearing that post-election tensions and violence would spill into the university, the administration ordered lecturers not to talk politics on campus. In an address to all teaching staff on 22 January 2008 held at SZ39 Hall, the KU VC, described the university as 'apolitical' and outlined measures she thought necessary for 'promoting peace' and safeguarding 'the good image of our university'. This included a decision collectively arrived at by KUSA (the student association), UASU (the Staff Union), the University Council and University Management to 'leave politics out of classrooms', avoid 'giving examples which might cause tension and anger' and avoid 'talking politics with them [students] outside class, e.g. in our homes or in/out of campus'.<sup>8</sup> In other words, silence and feigning ignorance of the post-election situation was thought of as a recipe for peace. When reminded that in disciplines like history one cannot avoid politics, society and democracy, she retorted that in that case, lecturers were advised for the time being to leave out teaching topics that could force them to mention such terms.

There is similar acquiescence to administrative dictates among students with the student associations and its leadership being the most compromised. Perhaps, one way of understanding these shifts in student politics and activism is to locate it in the neo-liberal reforms that transformed universities. These reforms entailed the introduction of cost-sharing at the university with an insistence on students meeting the cost of tuition, food and related expenses. The introduction of fee paying at the university in the early 1990s fragmented the university student population in new ways and forced many to devise new coping strategies. Among the strategies adopted have been the introduction of petty business that enables poor students earn a living and survive the harsh reality of university education.

This class dimension to student life in the university has its winner and losers. While many students have resorted to indulging in legitimate businesses, the instance of male and female students offering 'escort services' is perhaps the most striking negative consequence. Rich men (mainly politicians) and women (mainly business women) have used this occasion to sexually prey on poor students by soliciting sexual service in exchange of money, drugs, and related presents. The lurid details of this indulgence came to light following the death in mysterious circumstances of Mercy Keino, a University of Nairobi student, on 18 June 2011 after attending a party in Westlands Area of Nairobi. The instance exposed the double life of female students who have been trapped

by the allure of easy money in Nairobi's underworld 'where illicit sex, alcohol and rich men mix in one of Nairobi's latest fads'.<sup>9</sup>

The student leadership has not been spared either. While in earlier days of one-party dictatorship, student associations were training ground for national leadership, in recent times, student leaders rarely graduate into national leaders. On the contrary, students seek leadership with a focus on the immediate gains that such positions promise. Not only do student leaders attract the attention of eager university administrators who seek to compromise and manipulate them, politicians too have sought to influence campus politics in their own favour. Campaigns for student leadership mimic national political campaigns in many ways; from the expensive colourful campaign posters to the staggering amounts of money student leaders spend. Egerton University student leader, Erick Mutwiri, is reported to have spend Kshs. 100,000, his counterpart, Joseph Mbaka, of Maseno University used Kshs. 34,000 while Paul Maloba of Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology is reported to have spend a whopping Kshs. 300,000.<sup>10</sup> It is not clear where students source these huge sums of money.

The immediate benefits of being elected student leader include a monthly salary, free meals and an exclusive residential room that is properly furnished including television. Student leaders have also confirmed that there are other spin-off gains including 'connections to the high and mighty' and generous allowances from the many seminars they attend. At Kenyatta University, the president and vice-president of Kenyatta University Student Association (KUSA) were flown to a fully paid trip in the USA to visit the world's best-ranked universities and learn leadership skills. Such generous benefits for student union leaders are the reason why many students believe that their leaders are on the payroll of university management. These student leaders enjoy other benefits including after-graduation job placements. This has created a rift with other students, especially those perceived by the administration as uncompromising. Overall, it seems that student leadership is driven less by desire to contribute to betterment of student welfare and social transformation of society and more by personal gain.

### **Conclusion**

From the preceding, it is clear that the changes instituted in the university after the end of the Moi era have been cosmetic at best and do not constitute a basis for transforming the university into a citadel of excellence and a site for waging struggles for popular empowerment and social justice. First, the level of student dissatisfaction with the university management continues even though this dissatisfaction hinges on newer issues like the question of fees. The hope that

these new issues would provide a basis for redefining the vision, mission and values of universities have faded since intellectuals have left this process to a university management that operate with a neo-liberal market logic. Second, the quality of university education continues to be questioned and its relevance to our context doubted. Three, staff apathy in most public universities persists. However, this is greater for some universities than others.

Four, both the government and the university management have abdicated from funding research in the university. Few public universities in Kenya have clearly stated how much of their annual budget goes to supporting research. Budgets at the university still remain secret documents and the barest of information about them is released. Five, greater emphasis instead goes to income generating parallel degree programmes. These are energy-sapping programme that contributed to the death of the research and seminar culture at the university. While these programmes are generating income, few know how much income they generate and how it is re-deployed to improve university infrastructure (especially university libraries) and enhance the quality of teaching. Instead, funds generated have entrenched the dominant position of the VCs who control these funds and use them as a patronage resource. Six, faculty involvement in the major decisions affecting universities is still insignificant. In some universities, the legally constituted faculty union, UASU, is treated with the outmost contempt. The judicial system has been usefully complicit in defeating union activities by dragging cases through the courts for long periods. Finally, the public remains sceptical of the value of public universities and has repeatedly raised these doubts in newspaper commentary. Universities and intellectuals have also not shown themselves to be very responsive to societal needs, except when they indulge in ill-defined procedures called corporate social responsibility.

Generally, universities do not award the administration the leading role in its activities. Kenya is therefore the exception to this rule. Its emerging group of management academics facilitate the reactionary positions of the administration and further disengage intellectuals from popular struggles. The most important arms of the university everywhere are teaching faculty and students. In Kenya, the faculty and students are the least valued members of the universities. This is not because the VCs have denied them that position, it is because the professoriate has ceded ground and VCs have only too gladly taken over the space. If universities must play a role in popular struggles for social justice, the intellectuals must reinvent themselves and rediscover their historical mission. As things stand now, they need to be rescued by initiatives outside the university.

### Notes

1. This is a revised and expanded version of a chapter titled *The Academy as a Site of Popular Struggle: From Rise and Fall to Re-composition* forthcoming in a study titled *The Power is Ours* (FAHAMU, 2012). The chapter benefited from comments at a TrustAfrica Higher Education Pan-African Agenda Setting Dialogue on 'Trends, Themes, Challenges, and Opportunities for Higher Education Transformation in Africa' held from September 26-28, 2011 at the University of Botswana, Gaborone, Botswana. I am grateful to Pinkie Mekgwe, Adebayo Olukoshi, Jimi Adesina and Tade Aina for their comments to my presentation at the meeting and to Ibrahim Oanda for his comments on the draft of this article.
2. Munene's article is based entirely on interviews with university officials including 'leaders, senior administrators, deans, departmental heads, union leaders, student leaders and senior scholars'. As such it reflects very much the official view on issue affecting universities (See p. 16 for quote).
3. Fee payment is at the centre of the government definition of universities. According to the Universities (Establishment of Universities) Standardization, Accreditation and Supervision Rules, 1999, 'private university means a university with funds other than public funds. Public university means a university maintained or assisted out of public funds' (See Mwiria, et al., 2007: 177).
4. I have borrowed this categorization of age of euphoria and troubled relationship from Mkandawire (2005: 17, 20).
5. Abdulla wrote the book titled *Voice of Agony* and Ngugi wa Thiong'o wrote *Devil on the Cross* during their detention.
6. In some universities, the only elective positions remaining are Deans of Faculty. In Kenyatta University, for instance, the VC has gone further to dilute the elective mandate of Deans by appointing Associate Deans in select schools. Associate Deans owe loyalty to her office. This has been the case for the School of Education and the Graduate School.
7. See *Kenyatta University Newsletter*, vol. 4, Issue 6 of 21 May 2008 for Performance Contract Evaluation and *Kenyatta University Newsletter*, vol. 4, Issue 7 of 9 June 2008 for celebration on ISO 9000: 2000 certification.
8. Text of this speech is on file of the author of this paper.
9. See 'The Double Lives of Kenyan University Students' in *Sunday Nation*, June 3 2011 accessed at <http://www.nation.co.ke/News/The+double+lives+of+university+students+/-/1056/1193332/-/7rwk4/-/index.html>
10. See Nyambega Gisesa, 'Keeping Up With Student Leaders', accessed at <http://allafrica.com/stories/201105140095.html>

## References

- Adar, K. G., 1999, 'Human Rights and Academic Freedom in Kenya's Public Universities: The Case of the Universities Academic Staff Union', *Human Rights Quarterly*, vol. 21, no. 1.
- Ajayi, J. A. et al., 1996, *The African Experience with Higher Education*, Oxford: James Currey and the Association of African Universities.
- Aina, T. A., 2010, 'Beyond Reforms: The Politics of Higher Education Transformation in Africa', *African Studies Review*, vol. 53, no. 1.
- Chege, M., 2009, 'The Politics of Education in Kenyan Universities: A call for a Paradigm Shift', *African Studies Review*, vol. 52, no. 3.
- Freire, P., 1994 [1970]), *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, New York: Continuum.
- Ghai, Y., 1965, 'Review: Kenya's Socialism', *Transition*, No. 20, 1965.
- Imam, A. and Mama, A., 1994, 'The Role of Academics in Limiting and Expanding Academic Freedom', in Mamadou Diouf and Mahmood Mamdani, eds., *Academic Freedom in Africa*, Dakar: CODESRIA Books.
- Klopp, J. and Orina, J. R., 2002, 'University Crisis, Student Activism, and the Contemporary Struggle for Democracy in Kenya', *African Studies Review*, vol. 45, No. 1.
- Mamdani, M., 1994, 'Introduction: The Quest for Academic Freedom', in Mamadou Diouf and Mahmood Mamdani, eds., *Academic Freedom in Africa*, Dakar: CODESRIA Books.
- Mazrui, A., 1978, *Political Values and the Educated Class in Africa*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Mboya, T., 1963 [1993], *Freedom and After*, Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers.
- Mkandawire, T., 2005, 'African Intellectuals and Nationalism', in Mkandawire, T., ed., *African Intellectuals: Rethinking Politics, Language, Gender and Development*, London and Dakar: Zed Books in collaboration with CODESRIA.
- Munene, I. I., 2008, 'Privatising the Public: Marketisation as a Strategy in Public University Transformation', *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, vol. 13, no. 1.
- Mwiria, K. et al., 2007, *Public and Private Universities in Kenya*, Oxford: James Currey.
- Republic of Kenya, 1965, *Sessional Paper No 10 of 1965 on African Socialism and its Application to Planning in Kenya*, Nairobi, Government Printers.
- Said, E., 1994, *Representations of the Intellectual*, New York: Vintage Books.
- Savage, D. C. and Taylor, C., 1991, 'Academic Freedom in Kenya', *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, vol. 25, No. 2.

- Tamarkin, M., 1978, 'The Roots of Political Stability in Kenya', *African Affairs*, vol. 77.
- Wangenge-Ouma, G., 2008, 'Higher Education Marketisation and Its Discontents: The Case of Quality in Kenya', *Higher Education*, vol. 56, no. 4.
- wa Thiong'o, N., 1993, *Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms*, Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers.