

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Beyond crisis: African universities' global presence before and after structural adjustment

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I want to say what a privilege it is to be invited to comment on Jeremiah Arowosegbe's article 'African universities and the challenge of postcolonial development'. First and foremost, this is because Arowosegbe's piece is exactly the kind of intervention we need more of: passionately written, politically engaged commentaries on the state of African universities today by scholars based on the continent who are invested in charting the best way forward for their institutions. African universities have been in a kind of Janus-faced state for at least the last decade, if not longer. On the one hand, institutions with records of having been among the world's most exciting universities of the 1960s and 1970s – Makerere, Ibadan, Dar es Salaam – have had to endure a near total, decades-long collapse driven by austerity programmes imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and forced on African states from the 1980s. This is a crisis that undoubtedly lingers – indeed, Arowosegbe makes it his focus – and these universities have had to struggle not to be entirely defined by this story of *lack* and of *failure*. On the other hand, some of these institutions (including those named above) have come through the fire of this collapse and have emerged with new life that cannot be reduced to mere tendrils. On the contrary: the continent's top dozen or so universities are today producing students who will very likely become the world's next generation of humanists, social scientists and hard scientists focused on Africa, and beyond too. The pipeline for this present generation of students often now runs from undergraduate and master's programmes in Africa, to top doctoral programmes in North America and Europe, to these students being the most competitive candidates for the mini-boom (relatively speaking) in tenure-track positions in disciplinary scholarship and pedagogy focused on Africa. Amidst a more general withering of the humanities in globally northern universities, African and Black Studies constitute a partial exception to the dying throes of higher education as we know it and are part of a laudable and long overdue diversification of the field. Adding to the reconfiguration of African Studies' landscape of labour, the dramatic shortage of viable jobs in North America and the UK is making the job market for graduates of the world's top PhD programmes a truly global one that includes Africa prominently. Not since the 1960s have we seen the prospect of top African universities being realistically able to attract new scholars trained in the global North to base themselves in Africa – a potential boon to African universities (even if one that remains more *in potentia* than realized).

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Within this broader landscape, Arowosegbe's article focuses on the crisis side of the picture. In fact, one could arguably say that he portrays crisis as the perpetual condition of African universities – or, at the very least, of these universities' relationships with the state. He begins the piece with a withering introduction of 'the exploding nature of [Africa's] societal crises':

The collapse of political integration and social cohesion; the decline of the civil society and the implosion of conflicts; the rise of authoritarian, non-developmental populist regimes amid extreme poverty; and the worsening material conditions of the populations are major indications of such crises. Nowhere are these crises worse illustrated than in the universities where constrained funding, infrastructural collapse, massive brain drains and strained relations with the state inhibit the production of knowledge. (Arowosegbe 2023: 591)

With regard to the last, he argues that 'the dependence of African intellectuals and scholars on the state reduces academic freedom in Africa to mere rhetoric' (Arowosegbe 2023: 596). These grim aspects of the political scene in Africa today are undoubtedly significant, and Arowosegbe's article can be read as a heartfelt and powerful lament regarding what it is like to try to build robust academic institutions amidst poverty, inequality and the authoritarian tendencies of governmental elites who wield significant power to control universities and their faculty, staff and students. As Arowosegbe moves into the details of his narrative, however, one could also say that the overwhelming pessimism of his diagnosis gives the article something of a dual character. On the one hand, the piece points to phenomena marking the relationship between universities and the state that are indispensable in understanding these institutions throughout the postcolonial period. On the other hand, I would also suggest that some of its more totalizing descriptions and arguments risk flattening some significant change over time in the vibrancy of universities on the continent and pushing too far into the background moments when African faculty, students and their institutions produced work that, far from reducing the concept to 'mere rhetoric', *exemplified* the meaning of academic freedom for the rest of the world. These were scholars who made it their mission *not* to be bound by the rule of political elites at home and abroad, and who instead directly challenged their own states and the international order of which they were a part – moves that made some African universities among the most prominent beacons for global movements of the era. In the remainder of my comments I consider each of these faces of Arowosegbe's article in turn – both highlighting ways in which it makes crucial interventions and querying it at certain points that I hope can contribute to the kind of conversation Arowosegbe's work excels in starting.

Some of Arowosegbe's most interesting contributions almost sneak into the piece without fanfare, sitting at the margins of the article's central axis. For instance, his attention to the specificity of source material from each of Nigeria's universities (Arowosegbe 2023: 595) leads to an attention to the role of Arabic-language research in 'the development of alternative historiographies, interpretations and sources for accounting for African history' and universities such as Nigeria's Zaria, less central than the flagship Ibadan, in this effort (*ibid.*: 598). Or, as another example, by including

among his empirical foci one that promises to zoom in on history and political science in the ‘development of academic disciplines . . . in the early postcolonial universities in Africa’, Arowosegbe points importantly to the relative lack of discipline-specific intellectual histories on the continent. And although his account of structural adjustment programmes gives only a relatively thin sketch of the way in which they affected universities (a missed opportunity on which I comment more below), making internationally imposed austerity the central cause of his account of what ails these institutions is laudable. It sets the stage for more in-depth, precise and variegated accounts of exactly *how* different African governments worked with the IMF and World Bank to navigate an imposed austerity while also attempting to make it work towards what Arowosegbe sees as political elites’ own interests in suppressing any potential critique from intellectuals.

Alongside these compelling aspects of Arowosegbe’s intervention are other ways in which the article sometimes falls short of what it promises, or foregrounds claims that marginalize key strengths of African universities, and their change over time, that even Arowosegbe’s own evidence can’t ignore. Perhaps the most important of these begins with his central assertion, cited above, that ‘the dependence of African intellectuals and scholars on the state reduces academic freedom in Africa to mere rhetoric’ (Arowosegbe 2023: 596). In its sweeping nature, this argument is highly debatable once we begin looking into the work produced by different generations of locally based African scholars. Most of all, it significantly understates the degree to which the first generation of professors and students at African universities produced work that loudly challenged their own governments and, in doing so, shaped world-famous social scientific theories of the *failure* of their own elites and the international capitalist system to effectively decolonize after nominal independence. To take one example, the University of Dar es Salaam (UDSM) was home to scholars who subjected their own government’s policies – including Julius Nyerere’s signal economic initiative, the Arusha Declaration – to withering critique as woefully insufficient to build up strength against an international capitalist system. Issa Shivji’s famous first book, *Class Struggles in Tanzania* (1976), for instance, concluded with a powerful take-down of the country’s supposedly socialist political class as amounting to a ‘bureaucratic bourgeoisie’ devoted to using their offices to enrich themselves instead of pursuing import substitution policies to develop local industry that could begin to break Tanzania’s dependence on Western commodities. And Shivji’s book was far from alone. The UDSM, where Shivji was a law professor, had a large and highly visible group of faculty and students who published work that became famous as part of the school of Marxist analyses of global capitalism known as ‘dependency theory’ or ‘world systems theory’ – a school of thought that theorized that ex-colonies such as Tanzania faced tremendous pressure to play a very specific ‘comprador’ role within an international system that would buy them out with ‘rent’ paid to provide access to their territories’ wealth in natural resources. Such was the prominence of UDSM within this strand of thought that Walter Rodney’s world-famous book, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (1971), was penned while he was a professor at UDSM. Rodney and others, including Giovanni Arrighi, Immanuel Wallerstein, Samir Amin and John Saul, were expatriates based in Tanzania, but they collaborated with Tanzanians like

Shivji whose critiques of their own state were often published (as Shivji's book was) not just freely but by semi-official publishers (the Tanzanian Publishing House)!¹

The presence of a critical intellectual scene like this at Tanzania's premier university, as well as other comparable ones at Makerere in Uganda, Ibadan in Nigeria and Dakar in Senegal, calls into question Arowosegbe's thesis that the relationship between African universities and their sponsoring states meant that 'academic freedom was mere rhetoric'. And, indeed, his own evidence at certain points in the piece contradicts this grim view. For instance, in his admirable attempt to emphasize the shock of the austerity-dominated 1980s, he draws a distinction between that moment's 'emergence of a political class in power that neither acknowledged the institutional and material needs of academics nor appreciated their particular intellectual requirements', and an earlier generation of 'post-independence African leaders' who 'under the guise of charismatic legitimization, post-independence developmentalism and the avowed management of political order as legitimizing imperatives ... appropriated the role of the philosopher king' (Arowosegbe 2023: 605). This distinction in the character of the political elite is sound and would be expected to correspond to some change over time in the character of the academic class (Arowosegbe, in contradiction to his central thesis, ever so briefly hints at the latter in noting their 'excellence' (*ibid.*: 600)). But what seems to be Arowosegbe's determination to depict the relationship with an anti-intellectual state as the root of the problems afflicting Africa-based academics ultimately means that the evidence of these academics' sometimes world-class nature does not end up getting worked into the analysis, instead standing as awkward contradictions to the article's conclusions.

And yet, Arowosegbe's article opens up numerous productive avenues for investigation – ones to which there is far too little attention paid in broader work. His close attention by name, thesis topic and often supervisor, for instance, of many of the first generation of Nigeria's home-produced graduates at Ibadan is another of these. It would have been wonderful to have had the article provide more information on these students – their demographics, class backgrounds, trajectories after graduation, etc. But nonetheless, like Pedro Monaville's (2022) recent book on Congolese university students in Kinshasa, it does take a critical step in this direction. Arowosegbe closes his article with yet another of these productive points. Criticizing the frequent and cyclical but ultimately unproductive dance done between the Nigerian government and faculty unions on strike as 'predictable festivals' that ultimately harm students most, Arowosegbe gives us an insight into the perspective of the populace and the street beyond the university walls. Ultimately, Arowosegbe's article does more to open up productive questions than to seal the deal with uncontested conclusions. This, however, is a significant strength – one that invites others to build on it.

References

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¹ For more on this intellectual scene at UDSM and its relationship to the Tanzanian state, see Ivaska (2011: 166–205).

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