

Scholars in the Marketplace
The Dilemmas of Neo-Liberal Reform
at Makerere University,
1989–2005

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Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This is a case study of market-based reform at a single university—Makerere University in Kampala, Uganda. But the study also illuminates larger issues raised by neo-liberal reform of higher education. Because neo-liberal reform at Makerere has been held up by the World Bank as the model for the transformation of higher education on the African continent, these issues have a particular resonance for the African context.

At a general level, the Makerere case epitomises the fate of public universities globally in a market-oriented and capital-friendly era. When the reforms unfolded in the early 1990s, they were guided by the World Bank's then held conviction that higher education is more of a private than a public good. Unfortunately for Makerere, the Museveni government in Uganda embraced the World Bank's perspective with the uncritical enthusiasm of a convert, so much so that even when the Bank began to re-think its romance with the market, Uganda's political leadership held on to the dogma with the tenacity of an ideologue.

My *main* objective in this book is to question this dogma by shifting the terms of the debate on the public and the private: rather than pit the public against the private, and the state against the market, I seek to explore different relations between the two. Based

on who sets the terms of the relationship and who defines its objectives, I outline two different kinds of relationships between the public and the private in the organisation of higher education. In the soft version, the one I call a limited 'privatisation', the priorities are set by the public sphere. In the hard version of the relationship, the one I term 'commercialisation', it is the market which defines priorities in the functioning of a public university. If limited *privatisation* sums up a relationship in which the public (including the state) leads the private (including the market), *commercialisation* reverses the terms in an arrangement where the private leads the public. The difference is this: limited privatisation is the critical appropriation of the market for public ends, whereas commercialisation is the subversion of a public institution for private purposes.

The case study is a warning against commercialisation—the rule of the market—and an invitation to explore softer ways by which to harness the forces of the market in the public interest. In the process, I question two foundational assumptions of the Makerere reform that still continue to be held with different degrees of conviction. As is characteristic of the formulation of a dogma, both assumptions present alternatives as absolutes: in one case, the public vs. the private; in the other, disciplinary expertise vs. inter-disciplinary relevance.

The first erroneous assumption sustaining the Makerere reforms is that publicly-funded students are a net liability for the university, but privately-sponsored students are a net asset. The university's own figures for 2003–2004 showed the opposite: whereas the public treasury paid the university a uniform figure of shs 3 million per government-sponsored student, private sponsors paid an average fee that was less than half—about shs 1.2 million per student. In spite of this, most members of the Makerere community—the academic staff, students, and even administrators—believe that

private students are a money-minting machine and publicly sponsored students a financial liability. How can this be?

I argue that the illusion is sustained by how the Makerere budget is structured. The treasury transfers public monies for publicly-sponsored students exclusively to the central administration which spends these monies for centrally-administered activities, including basic salaries and wages of permanent staff of the university. In contrast, the revenue of teaching units comes mainly from private student fees, and is used mainly to pay a top-up to *their* staff. Thus the conclusion drawn by all teaching units, whether or not they are revenue-earning, that the way to increase their income is to maximise the number of privately-sponsored students they teach.

The Makerere reform joined an infatuation with privately-sponsored students to an extreme decentralisation that in turn fed it. Different constituencies pushed decentralisation for their own reasons. The World Bank believed that the most effective way to promote market forces in the university was to give maximum freedom to revenue-earning units. Within the university, decentralisation was advocated in the language of justice: its often radical promoters in different Faculties argued that the university belongs to those who work in it, particularly the academic staff, and that student fees are the rightful returns of the labour of the academic staff. Even if this version of privatisation was weighted in favour of the academic staff, there was still no room for a larger public interest in this reformed conception.

The more the reform decentralised decision-making to teaching units and left the welfare of staff to the ability of units to generate more money, the more the units restructured their activities in response to the market. The cumulative result radically transformed the units, both internally and in their relationship to one another. On the one hand, the tendency was for the leadership of units to pass on to more entrepreneurial Deans, Directors and Heads who

sought to administer without constraint from their Faculty base; on the other hand, market forces unleashed sharp competition between Faculties, Institutes and Departments. From the poaching of academic staff to turf battles over academic programmes, I narrate multiple instances of how the forces of self-interest amplified by commercialisation eroded the institutional integrity of the university from within.

Just as the first erroneous assumption pits the public and the private as opposites, the second held up the pursuit of inter-disciplinary relevance as the negation of discipline-based expertise. In this instance, too, I argue for an understanding of the complementarities between the two, so as to build inter-disciplinary pursuits on a strong disciplinary foundation. It is the failure to do so that has eroded the quality education historically associated with Makerere.

The Makerere reform went alongside a proliferation of inter-disciplinary academic programmes, but without an anchor in core disciplines. The result has been to devalue higher education into a form of low level training lacking a meaningful research component. The ‘innovators’ of the Makerere reform called this training ‘professionalisation’. I argue that this *low level training* is better described as ‘vocationalisation’ that is traditionally associated with community-based colleges.

Who is responsible for the Makerere crisis and what is the way forward? The responsibility, I believe, lies first and foremost with the political leadership in government and the top management at Makerere: if the former was determined to push the admission of more and more privately-sponsored students down the university’s academic throat even when Senate expressed doubts about whether a large-scale entry of privately-sponsored students was possible without a lowering of standards, the latter failed to blow the whistle on the reforms even when its negative consequences were amply

documented by several Senate committees. Inspired and backed by World Bank consultants, both government and management trumpeted the seemingly inevitable ‘necessity’ of commercialising higher education. Implemented in a context of extreme government repression that followed the strikes of 1989–1991, the reform had the ring of the formula that Margaret Thatcher had used in a different context, also to push neo-liberal reforms: TINA (‘There Is No Alternative!’). The lack of adequate debate in different constituencies and effective coordination between the centre and the units led to short-sighted plans and a proliferation of an institutional crisis. I discuss various aspects of this full-blown institutional crisis in different chapters.

I have two suggestions for the way forward. The first has to do with reducing numbers and re-thinking the relationship between disciplines and inter-disciplinary pursuits and, in that context, underlining the critical role of research in higher education. The second has to do with the question of financing higher education without cutting access.

Most of the expanded student numbers at Makerere are the result of a proliferation of non-research vocational programmes in the Humanities-based Faculties. The pursuit of these programmes requires neither research facilities nor a campus environment. To teach vocational courses in a campus context is to indulge in an expensive and unjustifiable luxury. The alternative is to remove vocational programmes from the university and to mount them in single-building, community-based, vocational institutions. These may be established as so many community colleges outside Makerere or may be run as separate evening colleges on the Makerere campus. In either case, each college should have a separate administration and budget—even if it employs Makerere staff on a part-time basis. It is only when the vocational part is excised from Makerere that the university can be restructured as a public research university.

My second suggestion is to call for a widespread debate, both within and outside Makerere, on how to finance a research university. Already, a few conclusions can be drawn from the Makerere experience. Instead of a sharp division between two groups of students, one supported with public funds and another privately, *every* student should have a mix of public and private support in a merit-based admission system. This system can then be supplemented and supported by a need-based programme of loans and fellowships for disadvantaged students.

Beyond this, we need to think through the important question of how to raise adequate public funds for a public research university. Should there be an educational tax whose proceeds are earmarked for higher education? Should there be regional quotas for regional students—East Africa and the Great Lakes—whose cost is born by respective regional governments? Should research universities—rather than all of higher education—be defined as a preserve of the reconstituted East African Community so that we return to the notion of a research-based University of East Africa with many national campuses, each of which with a different disciplinary, interdisciplinary and professional specialisation? None of these questions can be answered by an intellectual in the isolation of his or her study. All require public deliberation in a public discussion.

I wrote this book for two reasons: a commitment to Makerere as my home university, and a conviction that research must be an integral component of higher education, particularly in countries with a recent colonial past.

I was a teaching assistant at Makerere in 1972 when I was uprooted by Amin's expulsion of Asian residents and citizens of Uganda. I returned to Kampala in 1979 and was appointed a member of the academic staff at Makerere in 1980, and then Dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences in 1982–1984. Disappointed at the failure of the post-1986 leadership of the National Resistance

Movement (NRM) to appreciate the importance of higher education for both development and citizenship, I became a leading member of the Makerere University Academic Staff Association (MUASA) and then a member of its Strike Steering Committee in 1989–1991.

My interest in the organisation and direction of higher education on the African continent has been nurtured through various experiences, both positive and negative. The positive impulse came from the University of Dar-es-Salaam where I taught from 1973 to 1979, a period rich in original thought, debate and innovation. The negative experience was at Makerere University (1980–1993) and the University of Cape Town (1996–1999). At Makerere, I lived through a period where successive governments systematically devalued higher education, either because they saw it as a dangerous centre of independent and critical thought (the Obote II period) or because they embraced the World Bank line of the 1980s that higher education was not productive (the Museveni period). At the University of Cape Town, I witnessed a university administration that paid lip service to ‘transformation’ but was so terrified of losing control of the process of change that it came to see any innovative idea as a threat to its position and power.

Convinced that higher education was a public good of vital social, political and economic significance, I looked to participate in institutional initiatives that would nurture this vision. I believe this quest was central to sustaining two decades of involvement in the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA): in the process, I represented East African universities on the Executive Committee in 1985–1991 and served as the president of CODESRIA from 1996 to 2000. At home, disappointment with the decline of institutional support for research at Makerere led a group of us (M.A. students at Makerere, activists in the trade union movement, and myself) to form Uganda’s first non-government public research institute, Centre for Basic Research

(CBR), in 1988. In 1991, CBR joined with CODESRIA to organise an Africa-wide symposium on ‘Academic Freedom and Social Responsibility of the Intellectual’ in Kampala in 1991. Finally, my CODESRIA experience led to an invitation in 2002 to chair the Africa Committee of UNESCO’s global Forum on Higher Education, Research and Knowledge.

The process that led to the writing of this book began with the constitution of a study and research group at Makerere University in June, 2003. Members of the study group were former colleagues at Makerere, based either at the Department of Political Science and Public Administration, or at the Institute of Women and Gender Studies. We met regularly over 2003–2004, when I had research leave from Columbia University in New York, and less regularly during 2004–2006.

The composition of the study and research group changed over time, for reasons that were mainly beyond our control. Dent Ocaya-Lakidi, professor in political science at Makerere, was struck with partial paralysis; Quintas Obong, a lecturer in the political science department, passed away one night in his sleep at the University of Cape Town, where he had gone to defend his PhD dissertation; some others could not conclude their effort due to the heavy teaching and administrative load which had become the lot of most academic staff at the ‘reformed’ Makerere.

To members of the study and research group—Dent Ocaya-Lakidi, Sallie Simba Kayunga, Joy Kwesiga, Josephine Ahikire, Nansozi Muwanga, and the late Quintas Obong—I owe a special debt. Dent, Sallie and Nansozi participated in the formation of the study design at the outset and all members read through and commented on draft versions of the main chapters of the book. To acknowledge a shared commitment, I dedicate this book to my colleagues in the Makerere Study and Research Group on Higher Education.

Through the entire period of research and writing, from 2003 to 2006, I was assisted by Morris Nsamba who worked as my research assistant. Morris had just completed his B.A. in the political science department at Makerere. Besides his great energy and intelligence, he knew the ‘reformed’ system of Makerere well enough to navigate its nooks and crannies. By joining the ‘old boys’ network’ of my generation and through this tenacity, we managed to get our hands on almost all the documentation we needed for this study. Morris catalogued the accumulated minutes and papers, read and discussed many of these with me, before I embarked on the solitary task of writing the manuscript. This would undoubtedly have been a much lesser book without the participation of Morris Nsamba.

The first draft of the manuscript was presented to a one day conference of invited members of the Makerere University academic and administrative staff in August, 2005, in the University’s Senate Building. Between 60 and 70 attended—mainly top administrators, Deans, Directors, heads of departments, and individual researchers. Several participated as formal discussants. To all of them, but particularly to E. Beyaraza, Joe Oloka-Onyango, Fred Jjuko, Nansozi Muwanga and Ruth Mukama, my thanks.

I would also like to thank two external reviewers for their helpful comments: Professor Arthur Gakwandi of the Department of Literature at Makerere University, and Professor Dominic Boyer of the Department of Anthropology at Cornell University—both respectively commissioned by Fountain Press of Kampala, and CODESRIA (Dakar), the two publishers of this book. Alex Bangirana and Francis Nyamnjoh, my editors at Fountain and CODESRIA respectively, guided the erratic journey of this book to a fruitful destination.

Funding for research came from Sida/SAREC of Sweden, which had also funded the work of the UNESCO Forum on Higher Education Research and Knowledge. In both instances, our collabora-

tion was born of a shared commitment. There was little to commend in the World Bank's notion of a globalised but flattened world, resting on a foundation of uniform processes. But this was a world imagined without history, and so without diversity. For different histories make for different presents, why oneness of the world cannot be assumed to be a sameness. The World Bank's notion of a flat world, *sans* history, can only entrench a global division of knowledge whereby research is concentrated in a few technologically advanced countries—the knowledge-driven economies—with its results disseminated to the majority of humanity living in market-driven economies and therefore fit to be no more than passive consumers of knowledge with no other future to look forward to than that of clones. But unless we are to reproduce an impoverished vision of colonial vintage, we cannot think of global knowledge as a permanent trade-mark of advanced countries with its results transported elsewhere as turnkey projects. Concrete conditions require an understanding of concrete processes, which is why there can be no independent thought—indeed no independence—without institutions to sustain independent research and produce relevant knowledge. The key institution is the research university. To Sida/SAREC and to Katri Pohjolainen Yap and Hana Akufo, programme officers who helped translate this conviction into resource support, my deepest thanks. My thanks also to Allison Howard, my Assistant at Columbia University, who helped proffread the page proffs.

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Mahmood Mamdani
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