

What is Makerere's problem?

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Government wants to retain control over Makerere but does not want to meet its financial obligations

Following on Prof. Mahmood Mamdani article; "Beyond the Colonized, Neoliberal University" (The Independent August 12th 2012), I responded with "Response to Prof Mamdani (The Independent September 1st 2012).

In his "Critiquing Makerere Research without fear" (The Independent September 22nd), responding to my response to his original article, Mamdani wrongly attributes to me several claims, key among them being that "like a misguided doctor, I fail to name the disease for fear of annoying the patient." I return to this shortly.

Prof. Mamdani believes that Makerere's problem is one of failure to train its own researchers. He calls it "growing own timber." Researchers who engage in knowledge production form the bedrock of a research university. Mamdani observes that Ugandan academics who receive scholarships to train in the Euro-American academe do not return home; or when they do they easily get disenchanted by the institutional and resource environment at Makerere. Out of frustration they depart, especially to the world of consultancy.

To get around this problem, Mamdani's considered solution is to train researchers locally, at Makerere.

I construe the idea of training researchers locally as a call to inbreeding. One would be forgiven for drawing parallels between this idea of "growing own timber" and the logic behind the colonial policy of indirect rule used by the British, a subject that Mamdani is most known for in scholarly circles.

What were the points of objection in my response article that Mamdani eschews? First, I objected to Mamdani's claim that "every research university grows its own timber." I do not know of any research university, worth its name, that prides in producing its own PhDs through a policy of inbreeding. Mamdani does not delineate the unique circumstances at Makerere that necessitate emphasising in-house training in the stead of an open policy of attracting and hiring the best regardless of where they trained.

Second, I also noted that to say that Makerere is not a research university because it has never produced researchers is a total misrepresentation. Makerere's different departments in fact have PhD programs. Mamdani grudgingly concedes to this point in his response article. But because he's wary of eating his words, Mamdani hastens to note that the College of Humanities and Social Science at Makerere is the only one without a course-work PhD program.

Needless to say, this is hardly peculiar to Makerere as it is born of the British education system. The course-work PhD is a uniquely North American style of doctoral training. If we simplistically employed the yardstick of course-work PhD programs, then universities in South Africa, India, Europe, etc., would hardly pass the test of being research universities.

Lastly, I argued that the lack of tutorials at Makerere has little to do with absence of PhD programs. Mamdani does not tell us that when he served as professor at Makerere, his tutorial assistants were necessarily PhD students.

Rather than respond to these objections and show that they're wrong, Mamdani opts for a deliberate

distortion tempered with hardly concealed personal charges. One such rather personal broadside is that because I decided to study for PhD at an American school, my views on Makerere are less eloquent than my actions!

But how times change so fast! For only a few years back when Mamdani published his *Scholars in the Market Place*, a book that was so critical of the university, some people at Makerere reacted by invoking his being at Columbia University to silence him. It appears that he is applying the same ludicrous strategy on me. To respond similarly wouldn't help, so I will not take that tack.

So what is Makerere's problem and what should be the solution? It would be erroneous to assume that Makerere has one unified problem requiring a single solution. It has many problems. But arguably the most important pertains to the quality and quantity of its academic staff with implications for scholarly output and training products. It is to this problem that Mamdani suggests the idea of "growing own timber."

If the problem was as simple as "growing own timber" then surely in the next decade or so, after growing sufficient timber, Makerere will be a truly research university. But, alas, not quite! Makerere occupies a rather precarious position of being a public university hostage to the whims of a government that is so cavalier in its attitude to university education and research. Staff at Makerere are paid a scandalous salary. A Lecturer, with a PhD, earns a net pay of about \$600 (UG SHS 1.5 million). This is about 10% of the counterpart salary for someone starting out as an Assistant Professor at an average US university.

In my article I noted that the problem at Makerere is not whether faculty are foreign or locally trained; the real problem is staff hemorrhage because of incredibly poor remuneration and an environment that remotely attracts new scholars and hardly motivates extant ones. If the government had been paying staff at Makerere decently and availing research funds yet we continued observing staff hemorrhage and declining standards, then Mamdani would plausibly argue that home grown timber could assuage the problem.

The Ugandan government wants to retain control over Makerere, but does not want to meet its financial obligations. Although rather unpopular, the idea of increasing fees at Makerere to reflect the actual cost of university education would yield two related results: it would decrease the student numbers while increasing the financial resources needed to run the university. Specialists in higher education have ably articulated this point and need no belaboring here. But the Museveni government, with a knack for populist policies rather than facing the realities of the day, remains aloof.

The government's indifference toward Makerere also aims at achieving something else: muzzling independent scholarship and stopping Makerere from being a ground for exercising unfettered intellectual freedom. Given its authoritarian tendencies, the Museveni regime cannot stand an institution where academics are adequately remunerated as to be fully committed to their scholarly pursuits, with the latitude to independently ask big questions affecting the country.

Finally, lest I am misunderstood: the interdisciplinary PhD in Social Sciences at Makerere Institute for Social Research (MISR) is an excellent initiative. It will undoubtedly make an invaluable contribution. But the reasons that Mamdani proffers to justify the program are either outright wrong or blithely ill-conceived.

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