

Below: The University of Ghana.



In October 2020, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation extended a new grant to the IAS *Humanities across Borders: Asia and Africa in the World* program (HaB) and its 18 partners in Asia, Africa, Europe and the Americas, to support the program's consolidation and institutionalisation.

<https://humanitiesacrossborders.org>

<https://www.ias.asia/programmes/hab>

Advancing humanist pedagogies

Principles of academic freedom at The University of Ghana

Kojo Opoku Aidoo

The IAS *Humanities across Borders* program (HaB) arrived at The University of Ghana in 2017. The University of Ghana (established in 1948) has always been quintessentially encyclopaedic with a tradition of bounded disciplines.¹ It has consistently placed a very high premium on rigorous, performance-oriented, test-dominated pedagogical approaches. Such approaches have tended to dismiss, even refute, the humanistic pedagogical approach. Even though more recently there have also been indications of a movement towards community engagement, and possible rectification of the colonial pedagogy mind-set, the university's initial response to HaB was nevertheless ambiguous; simultaneously welcoming and hesitant.

The civic role of the University

The University of Ghana, the premier and largest university in Ghana, was founded by and for the British colonial regime in the immediate post-WWII era. It was built on a model of scholarship developed in the United Kingdom. The university's self-stated key objective and functional role is to conduct research and to pursue new truths and scientific methods, so as to advance social progress. To do this, a comprehensive system of scholarly freedom is embedded in the university's statutes. The university's Academic Freedom Guideline states that "... The University of Ghana by the nature of its core business should provide an environment that fosters the free pursuit of knowledge and artistic creations through teaching, learning, research and dissemination of knowledge and artistic performances. The assurance of academic freedom is critical in pursuance of this goal". Further, "...academic staff have the freedom to pursue their research and artistic creations, subject to the universal principles and methods of scientific enquiry, without

interference from the university or the state".³ This guarantees that both faculty and students can engage in intellectual debates without fear of bowdlerisation or retribution, thus establishing faculty members' right to remain true to their pedagogical philosophy and intellectual commitments.

Two significant problems emerged, however. First, the university has over the years been insulating itself from the wider society, thereby excluding local voices, and in so doing, has been maintaining and encouraging a coloniality of education. The university is clearly embedded in a contradiction, between the lofty ideal of advancing social progress and the apparent exclusion of locally-generated knowledge and voices, which are equally legitimate. This lopsidedness amounts to what Nyamnjoh refers to as "... unequal encounters and dogmatic propensities in the production and circulation of meaning and value, which has received far less emancipatory scholarly attention beyond proliferating spurious rhetoric and prescriptive lip service".⁴ The second problem is that the university, based on the rational scientific method, appears to be acting against its and our own best interests. Humans act irrationally, as observed by behavioural economics, for example. Rational science ignores such long-established fact.

In this regard, Ndlovu-Gatsheni admonishes the African academy, and calls for "a radical turning over of a new leaf, predicated on decolonial turn and epistemic freedom".⁵ Diagne appeals to African academics "to go beyond the simple denunciation of epistemic coloniality or the demand for epistemic freedom to produce affirmative, positive

assertions that lay clear the presence of Africa and Africans in the production of an enlightening and liberating knowledge".⁶ For this to happen, the historical processes that have framed the African academy and intellectuals, the issue of autonomy and democracy have to be at the fore and centre of the discourses on scholarly freedoms in Africa. To better comprehend the nature of the research environment in Africa and to reflect on the social and material context of research as an intellectual activity, CODESRIA co-organised a major conference on academic freedom and research in Africa in Kampala in 1990.⁷ Claude Ake, touching on the material base of academic freedom, maintained that the democratic aspirations of the nationalist movement were betrayed when most post-colonial African leaders decided to inherit the colonial system rather than transform them democratically. And, in the course of dealing with the alienation and resentment that this produced, they became authoritarian, repressive and coercive.

Academic freedom and the coloniality of education

Academic freedom is basically embedded in the right to education. First, it means that both faculty and students can engage in intellectual debate without fear. Second, it establishes a faculty's right to remain true to their pedagogical viewpoint and intellectual commitments. It is a preservation of the critical norm of intellectual integrity of the educational system. Thus, not only are debate and dissent critical to the pursuit of knowledge, but so also

is the freedom to search for truth and to publish and disseminate what one holds to be true. This in itself is intrinsically linked to the notion of the rule of law and fundamental rights, most notably, free expression and free speech in general. It is important to point out that questions have often been raised about the role that coercive authoritarian governments may play on universities campuses, presumably believed to be strongholds of academic freedom outside their reach. Today, in parts of Africa, the 'rule of law' has become a code word for allowing governments to supplant 'scholarly freedoms'. And this is accomplished by resorting to colonial laws that remain in the statute books of many post-colonial states.

I would like to share a personal experience of how due process of law stifles academic freedom in contemporary Africa. On 17 May 2012, I was due to present a seminar paper at the Institute of African Studies (University of Ghana) on 'How incomplete capitalism encourages capital accumulation via predatory trajectories: the case of the Woyome scandal'. This was a preliminary sketch, a contribution towards the view that underdeveloped capitalism engenders a primitive accumulation of capital via predatory, corrupt trajectories. The Woyome scandal in Ghana, described in the media as financial malfeasance, involved a leading financier of the then ruling National Democratic Congress, who in connivance with politicians and state technocrats managed to secure and pay judgment debts running into millions of Ghana Cedis. A day before my presentation, a group of lecturers and administrators at the university called for its cancellation on the grounds that since the

"In a world structured by global coloniality, there is no African future without epistemic freedom"

Ndlovu-Gatsheni²

matter was before a court of law, we could be cited for contempt of court. The seminar was called off.⁸

Clearly, the rule that was cited to me as law was one used by the British courts to stifle the Irish during the height of the British-Irish war. Imported without thinking, and applied quite rabidly and opportunistically by the courts and by a coterie that stepped into the shoes of the British when they left, this rule was clearly unconstitutional vis-a-vis the freedom of speech and academic freedom provisions of Ghana's 1992 Constitution and the University of Ghana Act. It is unfortunate that we are still colonised in almost everything.

The rule of law is being used to stifle scholarly freedoms in contemporary Africa. In the past, coercive authoritarian governments employed violence to silence debate and dissent. That was easier to identify, classify and contest. The new trend seems to conceal the attack on academic freedom and free speech under the cloak of democracy and due process of law. This new development is slight and subtle and difficult to perceive or understand. Nevertheless, it constitutes a veritable abuse of academic freedom. For now, we can only take refuge in Bertrand Russell's admonition, in praising Karl Popper's 'The Open Society and its Enemies' to be "vigorous and profound (in our) defence of democracy".⁹ It is on the basis of such dynamic and reflective democracy that we will construct a humanistic system of education in which the academy and communities, hand-in-hand, would co-create knowledge that liberates. How then can Africans begin to ponder, theorise, interpret the world and write from where they are located, unencumbered by Eurocentrism certainly, but beyond that, by inimical colonial laws that remain in the statute books? This remains the biggest challenge yet to academic freedom.

Advancing humanist pedagogies

Structured along the lines of Cambridge and Oxford universities and established by ordinance in 1948, the University of Ghana has been a quintessential encyclopaedic one with a tradition of 'bounded disciplines'. Seen largely as an 'ivory tower', the university, since its inception, has placed a very high premium on rigorous, performance-oriented, test-dominated pedagogical approaches. Such approaches have tended to peripheralise, if not entirely negate, the humanistic pedagogical approach.

Nonetheless, two specific developments profoundly altered university-community relations. The first event was the establishment in 1963 of the Institute of African Studies as an autonomous body within the University to "engage in the regeneration of Africa and her peoples through knowledge production, dissemination, application and preservation". Allman noted that Ghana's founding president, Kwame Nkrumah, sought to transform both scholarly and public understandings of African history and culture locally and globally through the Institute of African Studies and the *Encyclopaedia Africana*.¹⁰ During the launch of the institute, Nkrumah declared: "When we were planning this University, I knew that a many-sided Institute of African Studies which should fertilize the University, and through the University, the Nation, was a vital part of it". It was W.E.B. Du Bois who conceived the *Encyclopaedia Africana* idea, as a scientific and comprehensive work on Africa and peoples of African descent that "would refute the Enlightenment notion of blacks as devoid of civilization and the hallmarks of humanity".

The second development was the establishment of the radio programme 'Interrogating Africa', broadcast weekly on 'Radio Unvers' since 2013, in which Institute of African Studies faculty share their research findings, and important developmental and educational messages, with not only the university community, but also members of the neighbouring communities. 'Interrogating Africa' is an interactive radio show that allows callers to contribute to discussions. An emergent system of co-creation of knowledge is, as a result, being institutionalised,



HaB at The University of Ghana

Project: 'Mobilities of Grassroot Pan-Africanism. Memory, migration and communities'

A defining feature of post-colonial West Africa is increasing cross-border migration, making the region a quintessential 'social laboratory' through which to interrogate and heighten our comprehension of memory, migrations and pan-Africanist ideals. The Ghana project relates to memory, migration, communities, and new ways of Pan-Africanism in connection with the historical, comparative and contemporary issues such as the Nigerian, Malian, Burkinabe and Senegalese diasporas in Ghana, and mobility in West Africa in general. The migrations have tended to challenge the nation-state and also xenophobia. And, in some instances, they have even led to the construction of parallel political economies different from those under the

influence of the states. Two things stand out, namely place-making and meaning-making. The project explores the existing body of knowledge on memory (itself contestable and manipulatable), migration and new ways of pan Africanism. <https://tinyurl.com/HaB-MGPA>

Methodology workshop

The HaB Methodology Workshop, 'Mobilities of Grassroots Pan-Africanism: Integrating Community-Generated Knowledge into a Pan-African Curriculum' took place on 12-13 June 2018 in the western regional twin-city, Sekondi-Takoradi, Ghana. <https://tinyurl.com/HaB-Mworkshop>

Radio interview

Kojo Opoku Aidoo discussed the HaB Project on 26 October 2017 on Radio Unvers' 'Interrogating Africa' on air show at University of Ghana. <https://tinyurl.com/HaB-AidooRadio>

Project update

<https://tinyurl.com/HaB-MGPAupdate>



Photos taken during the workshop: Above, Dr Amponsah interacting with participants. Left, Mr Arjee sharing his lived experience.

Below: Dr Kawlra and Dr Aidoo at the Kokrobitey Institute.



thereby enriching the theory and praxis of humanistic knowledge production. Despite the proclivities towards coloniality of pedagogy, the University of Ghana seems to have made efforts at decolonising education, even if progress remains meagre. The establishment of a radio station is an indication of a movement towards community engagement, and possible rectification of the colonial pedagogy mind-set.

The Humanities across Borders program

In 2017, the *Humanities across Borders: Africa and Asia program* (HaB) arrived at The University of Ghana, a colonially created

encyclopaedic academy. The university's initial response to HaB was ambiguous; simultaneously welcoming and hesitant. For the University of Ghana, HaB was intellectually potentially disruptive of its elitist history and standing, or even 'revolutionary'. The biggest challenge was to get the university to buy into this new, pioneering, humanistic pedagogical model. Whilst the Vice-Chancellor of the university, the Director of the Institute of African Studies, and the Association of African Universities were generally receptive to the new programme, most faculty members remained incredulous, if not in total opposition. Two solutions presented themselves. First was the slow process of explanations required to highlight the efficacy of the humanistic pedagogy.

Second was to call on the principles of academic freedom on which the university was originally established: the freedom to pursue and disseminate knowledge and to determine the worthy object of the humanistic knowledge.

The *Humanities across Borders* program represents an intellectually and methodologically disruptive and radical departure from the pedagogical practices that I am familiar with. In the course of developing a humanistic pedagogy, I encountered griot-like figures (migrants in Ghana, Togo, and Benin) during field stints, who build their knowledge through their analyses of how the world is. They are regarded for their reflective philosophical knowledge, as 'walking libraries' with up-to-date knowledge and histories of their communities. With wide-ranging historical knowledge, they demonstrate unlimited possibilities for the formal educational establishment. They tell their stories from memory extemporaneously, elaborating on actions and events. These experiences challenge the conventional pedagogical paradigms and call for alternative frameworks. The formal classroom setting with its structural limitations and trappings of scripted literacy curriculum can benefit immeasurably from such wise, knowledgeable griot-like figures.

In a very practical way, this short article reflects my divided self, but also a growing synthetisation that I seem to be experiencing: me as a traditional educator and me as a humanistic pedagogue in the setting of a typical encyclopaedic university. Tensions, opportunities and restrictions exist between these two selves. To confess, my pedagogical practice, until I became part of the *Humanities across Borders* program, failed to meet the stringent standards set by Paulo Freire,¹¹ or the key objectives of HaB, which include 'to go beyond classroom and textbook-based pedagogies and to deploy embodied teaching and learning practices'; 'to seek non-textual, lived sources of knowledge and their modes of transmission'; and 'to work with local communities and civil society actors to jointly formulate research agendas'. Thankfully, a clear prognosis is that as HaB enters its second phase, we at The University of Ghana will be able to consolidate, institutionalise, and build upon the achievements made so far.

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Notes

- <https://www.ug.edu.gh/about/university-history>
- Ndlovu-Gatsheni is referring to the epistemological turn in the movement to decolonise education.
- 'The University of Ghana Guidelines for the Assurance of Academic Freedom, Creativity and Innovation', accessible from <http://tiny.cc/GhanaUniAcademicFreedom>
- Nyananjoh's review of: Ndlovu-Gatsheni, S.J. 2018. *Epistemic Freedom in Africa: Deprovincialization and Decolonization*. Routledge.
- ibid., Ndlovu-Gatsheni.
- Bachir Digne's review of: ibid., Ndlovu-Gatsheni.
- 'The Kampala Declaration on Intellectual Freedom and Social Responsibility', 29 November 1990, Kampala, Uganda; <https://www.codesria.org/spip.php?article350>
- <https://humanitiesacrossborders.org/blog/due-process-law-and-academic-freedom-personal-narrative>
- Popper, K. 2011. *The Open Society and Its Enemies*. Routledge.
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- Freire, P. 1993. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum Book.