Interview with Prof. Mogobe Ramose
Interview conducted by Prof. Catherine Odora Hoppers on 21 May 2021

Catherine Odora Hoppers: This aim of this interview is to explore the kinds of universities that are needed to ensure that Africa can rise up and meet the challenges it faces. In this context, could you describe your actual relationship with higher education on the continent?

Mogobe Ramose: First, I think words have power, real power and I would like to concentrate on the word "university" which etymologically compromises two words: "unius", meaning "one", and "versus" or version. So, the word gives the impression that a university is actually a site where there is only one version of knowledge that is predominant. Yet, when we look at the concrete aspects of these institutions, we find that universities have got different departments. There is a plurality of fields of learning. So, the word "university" does not fit or suit the facts on the ground.

My second point related to this is that actually it would make better sense to remove this word and replace it with what we see on the ground, which is a "pluriversity". Universities are actually pluriversities – that is, sites where a plurality of knowledges coexist and should infuse one another, thus challenging the problematic and prevalent fragmentation of knowledge. In this way, a pluriversity would speak to the idea of interdisciplinarity, multi-disciplinarity and a pan-epistemic pursuit of knowledge.

Under pluriversality both those who receive and impart knowledge should have a pan-epistemic orientation towards knowledge. The key question here is: Since colonialisation, what is a university in Africa? In his book, *Political Values and the Educated Class in Africa*, Kenyan scholar Ali Mazrui describes a university in Africa as a transmission belt of

knowledge, especially from Europe to Africa. Although Mazrui does not use the word "epistemology", it is quite clear that he is saying the epistemology of the North is actually dominant. This dominant epistemology has to be questioned because it does not necessarily speak to what Kwame Nkrumah would call the "African experience". So, this is the area of tension.

In this regard, this idea of a "university" is actually an epistemological imposition which has only recently begun to be questioned from the point of view of the epistemologies of the South, which seek justice against epistemicide at all educational levels, including in higher education. At present, the epistemology of the North is so predominant that what are called "African universities" are African in form only but not in terms of their epistemological substance. The point here is not that epistemologies should not feed one another. The point is one of justice. Epistemologies must speak with one another on an equal level, not on the basis of superior and inferior. This problem has been with us for too long and it has profound implications. We cannot in Africa really argue for freedom in economic and political terms without at the same time insisting upon epistemic justice.

I can illustrate the problem through example. When I was teaching philosophy and development at Addis Ababa University in Ethiopia, I walked around, I travelled the country. A common sight was old women carrying loads of wood on their back – not to build pyres for their own martyrdom as took place in Uganda in 1886 and as is described in Alfred Howell's *The Fires of Namugongo* – but still as a matter of life or death, to deliver wood and thus ensure their survival and that of their families. These women do not rest; they chop the wood, deliver it to their children or grandchildren and then go to chop some more, their backs so bent by the labour that they can no longer stand upright.

William Easterly, who worked for the World Bank, described a similar scene in *The White Man's Burden: Why the West's Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done So Much Ill and So Little Good*, in which he criticises the paradigm of development founded in Western epistemology which has been imposed relatively uncritically in Africa.

While in Ethiopia, I also saw how camels and donkeys literally carried the burden of the economic development there. For example, at market, the donkeys run all day, carrying luggage on their back for this person or that; and the camels do the same.

So, having presented these observations, I asked the class I was teaching: "In all the books that you are reading on development, have you found one which discusses the meaning of the camel and the donkey or of the old ladies in Ethiopia's development?" And, of course, there is no such book due to a paradigmatic subordination which leads to the production of knowledge that is of no immediate use and relevance to us.

Higher education on the continent also fails to address the issue of the prevalence of religion in African societies. For example, I noticed that some of the donkeys at market were actually hurt. They were bandaged and could not move properly because they were injured but they were still forced to carry their burdens. So, I asked my class, appealing to their sense of religion in what is quite a Christian country: "In ill-treating the donkey like

this, do you not recognise that this is the beast of burden which carried the mother of your Lord out of Egypt? The religion that you so venerate today was saved by a donkey. And yet, you show such great disrespect for sick donkeys. You do not give them time to recover." Of course, some of the students in the class began to cry.

But the key points here are: the issue of epistemic dominance; the issue of the relevance of the epistemology that we are teaching; and the influence of religion, whether Islam, Christianity or whatever, with regard to what we are teaching. The question then is: Now what exactly should we do within higher education to deal with this?

However, instead of addressing these profound concerns, universities are being systematically compelled to make a choice between promoting technological education or the humanities and the social sciences, with the latter receiving much less funding than they deserve. And the universities are failing to challenge this paradigm. They are failing to say that those who are producing this trend are effectively dehumanising not only the students but also the teachers, who simply become mere instruments in a system that is controlled remotely from elsewhere for the benefit of others.

Such an approach to the education system must be critiqued at the epistemological level. It must be critiqued because it is not true that, from this time on, every child, whether in Africa or in Europe, should be born with a screwdriver or a hammer in their hands – although this is the imagery that best describes the probable outcome of the present educational trajectory.

At the same time, it is important to stress that education cannot in the end suppress the complexity of humans, who pray, investigate and ask "why?". In other words, it cannot suppress philosophy, humanities, and the social sciences. So, why then do university managers seem to comply so readily with attempts at such suppression?

For example, efforts to address the indignity of living conditions in informal settlements in South Africa, which are home to many students, require an understanding of what drives development in these areas that can only come from the social sciences and the humanities. This is an ethical imperative. The social sciences and the humanities must complement technology and commercial subjects such as economics to produce inclusive development.

Odora Hoppers: What is the possibility of *ubuntu* – that is, ubuntu heuristics that combine ontology and ethics – transforming the curriculum?

Ramose: For a long time, it has been clear and it has had to be made clear to the youth that obtaining an educational certificate, whether it is from a technikon or a university, does not guarantee finding a job. It is possible that notwithstanding such qualifications a graduate can remain unemployed for an indefinite period. The long-standing question then is: What are universities doing to address this reality? They are producing people ready to work, yet who do not find work when they have finished their studies.

In 1985, Pope John Paul II levelled this criticism at universities in a document called *Laborem Exercens*, or *On the Dignity of Labour*. He noted that the youth must be made aware that actually obtaining an educational certificate is not the key to immediate employment and expressed his concern about the frustration that may arise among the youth as a result – as if there were nothing that could be done about this unemployment problem. Similarly, South African professor Sampie Terreblanche identified unemployment as one of three key problems facing the country in his book *Lost in Transformation*.

In order to address this problem, it is important first, to ask: What is the difference between labour and employment? and second, to ask: How is the marketisation of education actually enabling unemployment?

It is important to note that labour on the continent under colonisation was always forced. For example, in most African countries, a so-called "hut tax" was imposed. In addition, cattle owners were obliged to buy medicine for their beasts to combat rinderpest, even if there were little prospects of them contracting the disease. Since most people did not have the money to pay for any of this, they were forced to go and work to get the cash. On a grand scale, there was also the trans-Atlantic slave trade, under which people were uprooted by force to go and labour as slaves for the benefit of others. In all of this, labour was forced or compelled to satisfy the interests of the coloniser, which has important ethical implications – in particular, the question of whether forcing someone to work for another or for the benefit of the other can be justified. In this regard, the 18th-century German philosopher Immanuel Kant argued in his theory of ethics that a human can never be a means to an end. Every human being is an end in themselves, never a means to an end, or an instrument or a tool. At the same time and notwithstanding this position, Kant actually condoned and even espoused philosophical racism, thereby justifying and allowing slavery and slaves (as had the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle, millennia earlier).

The problem is that these issues are not highlighted at all in curricula at African universities. For example, do we have something like slavery studies in the syllabus? There was slavery in the Cape; in the trans-Atlantic slave trade, in Mombasa, in so many parts of Africa; and, in the language of the West, such practices contradict the right to physical integrity – and yet the curriculum does not highlight this. The problem is that the psychological oppression that accompanies physical enslavement and which was highlighted by the philosophy of black consciousness philosophy which emerged in South Africa in the 1960s and 1970s has persisted – despite the recognition that it must be addressed in order to achieve authentic liberation.

In the language of the epistemologies of the South, the present drive for justice against epistemicide addresses precisely this psychological oppression. It also addresses the oppressive nature of the reality of contemporary employment in which universities are complicit as producers of credible employees.

The inhumanity of the Holocaust during the Second World War in Europe is commemorated in detail at the main sites where it was enacted including the concentration camps at Buchenwald, Dachau and Auschwitz. The lesson is that the horror of the

attempted genocide and mass killings must be remembered so that it may never happen again. Memory becomes a crucial repository of education and liberation. In addition, the educational curriculum in Israel includes Holocaust studies. In a comparable vein, Mazrui once noted that Africa has got a short "hate memory" – although I would amend this phrase and assert that "we have a very short love memory". In other words, a common view is that even those who inflict injustice upon us should be loved on the proviso that we make them see nakedly and truthfully what they have done, that is, the injustice they have committed.

So, the question in this context is: Why are we so shy? Why are we unwilling to infuse our syllabus with slavery studies? After all slavery has led to where we are today. In this regard, slavery studies or "conquest studies" should be very present and alive in the syllabus, rather than absent. At the same time, it should be noted that the ethical sensitivity on our side is growing and there seems to be a revival of interest in studying slavery. In this context, ubuntu, the ethics of ubuntu, should become a core aspect of the syllabus. Just as Israelis cannot complete their education without studying the Holocaust, so the epistemologies of the South, referring to slavery studies, conquest studies and ubuntu, must form the basis of the African curriculum.

The ethics of Kant and Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* have historically formed the basis of the philosophy curriculum taught in Africa – but we are absent from, or subordinated by, these texts. So, the demand now is to let us be present regardless. This is not a request. It is an urgent ethical imperative.

In South Africa, the 1996 Constitution, or what I prefer to call the "Conqueror", makes no mention of ubuntu, although the previous draft constitution of 1993 made a passing reference to the concept. However, the idea is now being used as a basis for what is called reconciliation in South Africa. This is problematic in a number of ways. One is that the idea of reconciliation in the abstract, with an unidentified person has little meaning and sidesteps the actual challenges faced – including, for example, the continuing animosity between Afrikaner and English settlers, as well as the particular experiences of Indian immigrants. In this context, rather than invoking ubuntu, should not the participants in the process find terms that make more precise sense to them, such as from Afrikaans or the English language, or drawing on the concept of Satyagraha promoted by Mahatma Gandhi? In this way, everybody can come to the table with their own concept for a dialogue of epistemologies to promote an ethical consciousness that can forge a country and human relations which speak to everyone. In this context, the concept of ubuntu has tended to be used as a way of *not* identifying the actual steps that may need to be taken and is thus used merely tactically. Similarly, the notion of reconciliation as embodied in the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act 34 of 1995 which gave rise to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) has been deployed to skirt the issue of the importance of justice as an integral aspect of the process.

Against this background, I question the use of the word "reconciliation" and instead prefer to borrow the concept of "reconfiliation" – becoming brother and sister again – introduced by Nigerian Catholic archbishop Anthony Obinna. Becoming brother and sister again is not the same thing as settling scores, which is what a process of reconciliation implies. We

should love even those who have done injustice to us. We must reconfiliate, not reconcile. Reconfiliation may be achieved on the basis of our recognition of our common humanity, transcending notions of race which have no basis in genetic science or the lived reality of so-called Coloured people. It is in this context, that the concept of ubuntu, which sees the human being first, should be invoked.

Beyond male and female and skin colour. the concept proposes that our nature as human beings should be the epistemological starting point. And yet this concept is absent from the 1996 Constitution and only a footnote in the 1993 draft. It was relegated to the sphere of customary law only, and its effects were to be considered illegitimate if they contradicted the precepts of the Constitution. So, there was no dialogue of epistemologies; no attempt to address the issue of epistemic injustice in the establishment of the present South African Constitution, the ethics of which should, as a result, be considered profoundly questionable.

Ethics stand on the side not only of ubuntu but also of anyone who claims to be a human being. Yet the concept ubuntu has not been taken seriously as is shown by its absence from the Constitution. The absence also speaks to a lack of critical reasoning in addressing the big questions of our time such as how to forge a genuinely inclusive nation and how to respond to a fundamentally unjust socio-economic system. A lot of universities purport to promote critical reasoning, but there needs to be more evidence of such reasoning in action, producing new ideas and articles among the students and academics.

If such reasoning were in the ascendancy, then there would be more criticism of how Kant's ethical position may be seen as compromised by his philosophical racism. Furthermore, adopting Kant's maxim that no human being is a means to an end, there may have been greater opposition to the current commonly accepted idea of employment in Africa, given that it is based on a history of force.

In addressing this concern, the papal document, *Evangelii Gaudium*, or Good News, which was produced by the present leader of the Catholic Church, Pope Francis, in 2013 may be seen as offering some guidance. This pope, who named himself after a saint known for his identification with the poor, comes from Latin America where there is deadly structural and systemic poverty similar to that in South Africa. He has seen it in person as we have seen it living here. In naming himself "Francis", he was also honouring the tradition of liberation theology which has historically prioritised the interests of the poor in South America, but which had been effectively silenced by the papacy more recently. And for Pope Francis this solidarity with the poor was not something in the air. When he was asked to go and stay in the Papal Palace of Castel Gandolfo, which is an official summer residence of the Pope, he refused. He said: "It is too much for me. I cannot forget the poor." This is the sign of an active practical ethical consciousness. Similarly, in *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis describes the present socio-economic system as "unjust at its root".

The point is that the system needs to be addressed at its root from an ethical standpoint – injustice needs to be replaced by justice. But as long as this doesn't happen, the students that we produce will become prey to what is called corruption. By contrast under an ideal

paradigm for education, criticism and ethical consciousness would be practised and ubuntu as an ethical economic perspective would have a crucial role to play. Ubuntu says: *feta kgomo, o tsware motho* ("the human being first, wealth afterwards"). This ethos stands in direct opposition to a socio-economic system that is unjust at its root. So, why then should we set ubuntu aside as if it were not part of the syllabus, when the ethical imperative is that ubuntu must become part and parcel of the education system?

Odora Hoppers: If you were made vice-chancellor of the kind of university for which you long, how would you go about implementing the ethical imperative of ubuntu?

Ramose: First of all, I would question the word "university". In the context of Africa's history, I would, on the ground of pluriversal thinking, propose a dialogue of epistemologies so that we can move together away from subordination of the other, and move away from a university to a pluriversity. The epistemologies must actually speak to one another on the basis of recognition of the principle of human equality and the principle that actually no human being is a means to an end. Even the natural sciences, which have historically become instruments of those in power, would not be exempt from this process.

So, we would have to have a dialogue or, if you like, a polylogue of epistemologies for a number of profound ethical reasons which have a basis in history. These include the way in which history has generally been his-story, but needs instead to be her-story or a dialogue with her-story; and also, the way in which history, or her-story, must also tell the story of the conquered people, that is, those who continue to suffer under epistemicide. Such an approach would produce a new kind of history, which we may call "our-story". Meanwhile, amid this new polylogue the issue of preserving human dignity would no longer be something spoken about in the abstract, something that we learn from the books; but something that was practised as ubuntu in everyday life.

To offer a small example of how we may practise this: before the Covid-19 pandemic, I used to travel in the people's taxis, the unmetered *matatus*, where I was able to access first-hand the knowledge of the so-called common people. When I travelled in these taxis, I would wear a beret over my eyes, so that the other passengers would think that I was asleep and not engage me in conversation and ask me for my opinion, as they would otherwise do. In this way, I was able to listen freely to what they were thinking – and then take notes when I returned home.

Travelling in these taxis provides a lesson in the common understanding of togetherness and how this is practised. Each taxi driver should only take 15 people, which is the capacity of the vehicle, but will often want to take more, because the overload means more fares, more money. However, the driver will ask the passengers "nisanang" – that is, "together with" them – before doing this. Thus, although the driver is helping himself, he is also approaching the passengers from an ubuntu perspective – that is, by inferring that they are not left out. This dynamic can also work strongly in the favour of the passengers. For example, if a passenger does not know where she is going and the driver knows, he will ask the passengers: "Shall I go drop her there?" Now the extra money he may have made by

taking on extra passengers is being lost by adding kilometres and time to the trip. So, you can see that in practice in everyday life, ubuntu is already there.

Another interesting contradiction relating to *matatus* concerns the epistemology shaping their operation compared with that of the university as an institution. The taxi driver, who may not know how to read or write, provides a ride from A to B but will not provide a receipt for that, although the fare is known and agreed. Meanwhile, at the university a receipt is required for anyone wanting to claim back the fare, although the fare is known here also and the reliability of the passenger is not in question. But if a receipt is not forthcoming, is the person in authority then going to say: "Well, since there is no receipt, then the claimant did not pay", even though this is not true. Such issues may only be resolved by addressing the issue of the discourse adopted at university in the hope that it becomes more rather than less pluriversal.

Odora Hoppers: In brief, what do you think constitutes the crisis of universities?

Ramose: Well, universities are research institutions. Research is about the pursuit of truth, which must be the central concern of a university. Such research requires a commitment to truthfulness and whether each individual researcher has that commitment is a question which they must answer. However, it must be said that you cannot talk the language of truth without at the same time recognising a commitment to truthfulness and it is around this point that the present crisis in South African universities, as well as those elsewhere, is constituted.