

African Solidarity: A Catalyst for Knowledge Production in African Universities

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This year's Africa Month is remarkable in many ways, and the University of the Free State's theme for the celebration, namely 'Solidarity in knowledge production and recording', couldn't be more appropriate. The 58th Africa Day celebration presents another opportunity to commemorate the founding of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) in 1963 – now the Africa Union (AU) – and for us to recount the many reasons to celebrate the journey that the continent has undertaken towards the path of African unity. The pan-African ideals upon which the regional body was formed, were based on the liberation and solidarity of the continent and the promotion of the regional development agenda for a better Africa. The emphasis of this spirit of solidarity is no less important in higher education systems across Africa.

Since its inception in 1963, the African Union has made great strides towards achieving its original mandate of regional integration through a commitment to democracy, gender equality, public health, good governance, and the rule of law. For a continent that was knee-deep in colonialism only a few decades ago, Africa Month allows us to reflect on the transformation and progress that we have experienced as a people and continent. While the policies and protocols of the regional body towards African solidarity are laudable, they also give hope of a collective resolve of the African people to continue to fashion the best roadmap towards African development, despite the apparent hurdles. No doubt, the social and economic problems that all African countries face are similar; but confronting these challenges and sustaining our existing progress require collective efforts, particularly in the production of knowledge, and this is key to our future.

However, for Africa to rise above the pervasive current level of anti-development rhetoric, it is important to deliberately search opportunities for continental solidarity in areas of mutual coexistence, development, and in the spirit of Ubuntu. It is for this reason and more that the UFS Africa Month theme that resonates with the African Solidarity agenda of the African Union deserves some spotlight. We know that Africa's progress cannot be disconnected from the level of knowledge production available and accessible on the continent. In this sense, universities in Africa play a custodial role in the process of knowledge production and archiving. Library collections hosted in these universities and research centres are critical repositories of our African heritage.

Particularly, the recent fire outbreak at the University of Cape Town that engulfed the African Studies Library and Special Collection, among other buildings, presents that opportunity for African solidarity. It alerts all stakeholders to join hands to resuscitate the library to its former glory. We must intensify the call to academics and researchers all over the world to contribute all they can to the recovery of the lost archival records. More importantly, the regrettable fire outbreak at UCT is yet another marker of the importance to digitise and duplicate the continent's archival knowledge, history, and literature. When the knowledge that we produce are digitally processed and recorded in multiple sources, we can rest assured that none of our historical resources will be at risk of such similar disasters. The magnitude of the loss to the fire is incomprehensible.

Beyond this, stewards of African Studies libraries need to also seriously consider what lessons ought to be learnt from the UCT fire outbreak. As higher education practitioners and stakeholders of the repositories of African knowledge production, this ugly incident draws our attention to the need to digitise Africa's archival materials and important text. It is only through solidarity and collaborative efforts that the significant cultural and academic losses of the Jagger Library and its African Studies collections can be retrieved to some degree. The long rebuilding process will be fast-tracked through the solidarity of the global university library community, other stakeholders, and with the support of well-meaning patrons across the world.

Specifically, the kind of solidarity and support in retrieving the lost archives would require the joint efforts and support of UCT staff, students, alumni, and foreign academics and researchers who have previously obtained and used archival materials and other documents in the library. Sharing these images of archival documents and other invaluable materials that have previously been obtained from the UCT African Studies library in the spirit of solidarity and reconstruction of Africa's historic heritage, is perhaps the first step in this recovery process. The success will depend on networking with prospective donors at various universities, especially experts in African Studies centres across the world. Apart from the donation of previously accessed archival documents obtained from the UCT library, stakeholders can also build solidarity through fundraising and volunteering to assist in the digitisation of retrieved archival documents and those that were not lost in the inferno. Perhaps this also calls for a need to establish a unified digitisation protocol for all archival documents scattered across universities and centres in South Africa. With duplicates of the archival records available at other universities, it is easy to access or replace them.

Our universities are colonial relics of European creations, and their libraries also reflect this colonial mindset. In Africa, the custodians of knowledge production must take a decolonial turn of decolonised consciousness. For instance, this unfortunate event should force us to rethink how we store information related to African history, and particularly how we collaborate for knowledge sharing and the hegemony of access to archival materials. Very often, universities are so concerned about the international prestige that hosting rare and special collections of archival materials brings to their institutional ratings that they relegate the prospect of collaboration for knowledge production and archiving. Again, there is another issue of locking up the rich tapestry of Africa's history in a building where it is only accessible to a few and through formal procedures. Within the context that ethical, technological, and copyright matters permit, surely, we need to start relooking the issues of access and availability of important archival materials domiciled at our academic libraries in such a way that makes information easily accessible for those who need it most. The formalisation of knowledge production (through extension education) in Africa, as Professor Toyin Falola calls it, which of course is the offshoot of our colonial heritage, makes it almost impossible for many African people to learn and know about their history. We, therefore, need to look towards innovative historical methods of archiving information that is indigenous to Africa and how this can be supplanted into the already established knowledge organisation systems (KOSs) of our libraries. The library practices inherited from the United States and Europe are potentially unsuitable for Africa's cultural and historical contexts. This calls for a new approach of decolonial epistemologies of knowledge production and recording that deconstructs archives as intellectual projects to make them available to much wider local and global users. In this way, we would need to reflect more deeply on our ideas in a post-colonial way by building

capacities to intellectualise our history in an accessible way. The effect of the fire is the consequences of our disconnection itself from the established processes of knowledge production and recording. Returning to our African epistemes of knowledge sharing and archiving rooted in Ubuntu and African solidarity, is key to the recovery process of the UCT's historical archive lost in the inferno. As stakeholders of Africa's knowledge production systems, we must rise in common solidarity to counter the pervasive narrative of 'Africa without history', by rebuilding what was lost in the UCT fire.