

RELEVANCE AND RESEARCH CAPACITY IN THE HUMANITIES

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Anecdote: **Albert Einstein** is said to have been asked by an anxious mother what she should do to get her child to become a good scientist; response: ‘read him/her *folk tales*’; asked again, he responded, ‘read more folk tales!’

Abstract

This paper maintains that the perennial focus on ‘relevance’ at UDSM has tended to stifle the researcher’s inquisitiveness and bias research activities i) towards short term, quick win research; and ii) towards the sciences at the expense of the humanities. Drawing on considerable experience in designing and implementing the research under the Languages of Tanzania Project, it shows how the various pressures for relevance shaped not just this small project but also the whole university. It is argued that emphasis on quick win and high impact research and results are not in the long-term interests of the poor person’s search for knowledge or of the need to maintain a healthy balance between basic research and applied research.

Introduction

As we celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the University of Dar es Salaam and pay tribute to the contribution of SIDA to a greater part of this history, let me take this opportunity to reflect on some of our experiences in conducting research during

*INTER-UNIVERSITY CONFERENCE ON CREATING FUTURES WITH RESEARCH
PARTNERSHIPS: 24TH – 25TH MAY 2011*

the past few years. First I will make brief references to some of the highlights of a SIDA supported project, namely the *Languages of Tanzania Project*. Second I will examine the concept of relevance in research and argue that there is a constant danger of stifling the inquisitiveness of the researcher and biasing research activity towards short term, quick win results and high impact technological solutions at the expense of the humanities.

The Languages of Tanzania Project

The Languages of Tanzania Project has received SIDA funding since 2001. The two main objectives have been, i) production of a language atlas for Tanzania, and ii) production of descriptive grammars and dictionaries for each of the languages of Tanzania. The project has published 26 books so far and one of these is *Atlasi ya Lugha za Tanzania* published in 2009. The training component attached to this project has so far supported 47 scholars for the Master's degree in Linguistics and the majority of these scholars now staff the languages departments not only at UDSM, but also at the new universities across the country. In our department it is these young scholars that now constitute the greater part of the human resource base for the project – several manuscripts for grammars, dictionaries, and general linguistics papers have been authored by them and will soon be published.

Some of the facts on the language scene in the country can be summarized in the charts below:

*INTER-UNIVERSITY CONFERENCE ON CREATING FUTURES WITH RESEARCH
PARTNERSHIPS: 24TH – 25TH MAY 2011*

Table 1.

TOP FOUR LANGUAGES			TOP TEN LANGUAGES	
Sukuma	5,195,504		Sukuma	5,195,504
Swahili	2,379,294		Swahili	2,379,294
Ha	1,229,415		Ha	1,229,415
Gogo	1,023,790		Gogo	1,023,790
TOTAL	9,828,003		Nyamwezi	959,832
			Haya	833,214
			Makonde	805,299
			Maasai	803,457
			Hehe	740,113
			Nyakyusa	733,020
			TOTAL	14,702,938

Table 2.

Language by size	Number of languages	Percentage
Above 1,000,000	4	3
500000 - 1000000	12	8
100000 -499000	47	31
10000 -99000	55	37
Below 10000	32	21
TOTAL	150	100

*INTER-UNIVERSITY CONFERENCE ON CREATING FUTURES WITH RESEARCH
PARTNERSHIPS: 24TH – 25TH MAY 2011*

Table 3. Dispersion across the country [20 DISTRICTS AND ABOVE]

LANGUAGE	TOTAL NUMBER OF SPEAKERS	NUMBER OF DISTRICTS
Swahili	2,379,294	98
Chagga	274,442	63
Sukuma	5,195,504	56
Maasai	803,457	36
Ha	1,229,415	34
Nyakyusa	733,020	33
Hehe	740,113	32
Nyamwezi	959,832	32
Asu	530,341	31
Haya	833,214	31
Gogo	1,023,790	29
Bena	592,401	28
Makonde	805,299	26
Kurya	423,511	25
Nilamba	386,098	25
Ngoni	258,218	24
Nyaturu	552,343	24
Sambaa	565,257	22
Yao	416,802	22

There are 150 languages in total; the top four languages, i.e. 2.6% account for 29% of the total population of the country (34 million as per 2002 census). The top ten languages, i.e. 6.6% account for 43% of the total population. The smallest 30 languages (20%), viz. those with less than 9000 speakers each, have a total of 119,569 speakers or 0.3% of the population! And in terms of spread across the country, the biggest languages are not necessarily the most widely dispersed! So, for instance, Gogo, which is in the top four, is beaten by Asu which has about half the population of Gogo speakers¹.

Relevance and “counting tribes”

The research design for the language atlas presented unique challenges. In some countries the usual path is to include a question or questions about language in the national population census (Gadelii 2001). In the case of Tanzania there was a precedent: Up to the 1967 census there was always a question on ethnic identity – though this is not a language question really because ethnicity and language need not correspond. A good example of such mismatch involves people born in urban centres who grow up without acquiring the native language of the parent(s) and yet identify themselves with the ethnicity of the father (usually). In that case ethnicity is treated as some kind of genetic property passed by the parent onto the offspring, whereas language is a socially acquired skill.

¹ The total number of districts was 130 at the time of publication of the atlas.

The elimination of the ethnicity question in the national population censuses after 1967 was part of a wider political agenda to promote ‘national unity’ and obliterate any perceived threats to that unity. From that perspective an attempt to introduce a language question in the 2002 census was – in retrospect – bound to fail: such a question was worse than being irrelevant; it was actually subversive (Rugemalira & Muzale 2008)². It may be noted though, that ethnic identity is still required in several government records including the police, hospitals, and some social security funds.

In Search of Relevance

The authorized history of the university has the title “*In Search of Relevance: a History of the University of Dar es Salaam*”, drawing its theme from the inaugural speech of the first Chancellor, Julius Nyerere (Nyerere 1973:192-203)³. Prof. Mathew Luhanga, the longest serving Vice Chancellor, writing in the preface, notes that the “authors have rightly found that the motive underlying all the transformation efforts defining the history of this institution has been the search of relevance” (Kimambo et al. 2008: viii).

On reflection, this agonizing search for relevance appears to be strange: For roughly the first half of its existence, the university’s history strikes me as the struggle of an alien institution to justify its existence in a society that did not

² “As it turned out, it was not possible to include language questions in the 2002 national population census questionnaires, because it was considered not politically acceptable. The Census Commissioner took the opportunity to make the point that Tanzania is past the stage of counting tribes and has made giant strides towards the creation of a homogeneous nation with one national language (Damas Mbogoro, personal communication). He maintained that any activity making reference to tribal languages is retrogressive in that regard” (Rugemalira & Muzale 2008)

³ The title of the speech is ‘Relevance and Dar es Salaam University’.

*INTER-UNIVERSITY CONFERENCE ON CREATING FUTURES WITH RESEARCH
PARTNERSHIPS: 24TH – 25TH MAY 2011*

invent or nurture it! One may be forgiven for characterizing the events surrounding the inauguration of the university in 1970 as the taming of the institution. Although the ideals of transmitting knowledge and advancing the frontiers of knowledge are acknowledged in the objectives, these are circumscribed with the general condition of advancing the socialist agenda and solving the problems of Tanzania. It is no exaggeration to say that the university would be evaluated with regard to how close it came to producing socialist engineers, socialist doctors, socialist writers, and so on (URT 1970).

Nyerere's speech was explicit on relevance of subjects to be taught at the university: "When determining whether a particular subject should be offered, the University should therefore be asking itself 'what contribution can a study of this subject make to Tanzania's future?'" p.200. He rejected the notion "that all the planning of teaching and research at the University can be left to the sole discretion of the academic staff. The community has too much at stake to allow any one group such complete control" p. 201⁴. One concrete manifestation of this lack of autonomy of the academic staff was that while at Makerere and Nairobi Universities (sisters in the former University of East Africa) the departments of Religion, Philosophy, Anthropology, and African Languages were allowed to thrive, this did not happen at Dar es Salaam. And while the Literature (in English)

⁴ Contrast this with what the University of East Africa Act (1962) provided for: ...'to preserve academic freedom and, in particular, the right of a university or university college to determine who may teach, and what may be taught and who may be admitted to study therein'. The University of Nairobi Act (1970) modified this by getting rid of the 'academic freedom' phrase but the spirit is still the same: ...'to determine who may teach and what may be taught and how it may be taught in the university'. The UDSM Act got rid of the whole concept of academic freedom and the chancellor went out of his way to rationalize this.

*INTER-UNIVERSITY CONFERENCE ON CREATING FUTURES WITH RESEARCH
PARTNERSHIPS: 24TH – 25TH MAY 2011*

department was allowed to function, the content of its courses provides a vivid illustration of the relevance imposed on this branch of the academy (UDSM 1980: 165). The basic *Theory of Literature* course (LT101) sought to provide the students with a “grasp of the essential nature of their subject from a committed socialist point of view”⁵. *African Literature II* (LT 202) was “to be studied from the viewpoint of and in relation to the African revolution.” *Sociology of Literature* (LT 207) wanted to get literature “properly comprehended as a factor that retards or promotes social change.” *Literature and Revolution* (LT 301) would “trace the fruitful interconnections between various **revolutionary socialist movements** in the 20th century and the outstanding revolutionary socialist writers from 1900 to the present ...[hoping to arrive at] conclusions about the specific features defining **revolutionary literature in our era and about the specific role of literature in the revolution**” [emphasis in the original].

It is clear that the Literature department positioned itself to produce socialist revolutionaries. I have often wondered whether the lack of literary giants of the Ngugi and Achebe class (or even more modest writers – in English at least) in Tanzania had anything to do with this taming of the academy. The literary artist’s creativity was circumscribed by the general requirement that it promote socialist values and the revolutionary fervor of the citizens. Short of that it would be branded as bourgeois and counter-revolutionary. In general the influence of the

⁵ Twenty years later the successor course Introduction to Literary Theories (LT 110) was non-committal, seeking to “enable students have a firm grasp of the major theories of literature and to enable students [to] use these theories in their critical appreciation of literary works of art” UDSM Academic Calendar Years 2000/2001-2003/2004 p.101

*INTER-UNIVERSITY CONFERENCE ON CREATING FUTURES WITH RESEARCH
PARTNERSHIPS: 24TH – 25TH MAY 2011*

state on the general intellectual life of the university was pervasive. As Mamdani (2011) notes, “intellectual work ended up being too wedded to a political program, even when it was critical of the state.”

For the second half of the university’s history (from the mid 1980s), the tale sounds like the endeavours of a lost sheep trying to return to the flock and follow the correct path home. The institutional transformation agenda has sought to redefine the university in the post-socialist context and enable it to survive and grow by responding to the needs of a liberalized political economy – and in this way become relevant! How has this latest chase for relevance shaped the research agenda?

Here is a narrative:

- i. “...authorities tend to view research as ‘academic’ and too slow in producing results. It is necessary to aim at high and quick impact research projects”. *UDSM Research Policy 2008*.p. ix
- ii. “there is [...] limited capability and experience in converting research results into useful processes, products and services.... COSTECH has identified seven key research areas for action by institutions and research centers to impact on poverty reduction: agriculture and livestock, natural resources, environment, social sciences, medicine and public health, industry and energy, basic sciences. ... Research has to be linked to development. ... The objective of research is to find better ways of solving problems which people face. It is, therefore, imperative that research findings should reach end users, and in this case it is the

*INTER-UNIVERSITY CONFERENCE ON CREATING FUTURES WITH RESEARCH
PARTNERSHIPS: 24TH – 25TH MAY 2011*

- people. ... Higher priority should be given to research that contributes to the reduction of poverty and to economic growth..." *SIDA consultative workshop report 2007*
- iii. UDSM application for SIDA funding should "define the role of UDSM as a change agent within Tanzania's development agenda strengthened through an increased volume of development oriented research and research training.... The proposed programme "should be assessed by UDSM with respect to [among other criteria] relevance from a scientific perspective and from a development perspective in relation to poverty reduction". *SIDA invitation to UDSM to submit a concept paper 12 September 2007*
- iv. UDSM research themes for SIDA support: poverty reduction and food security; environment and natural resources; globalization and governance; science, technology and industrial development; gender studies. *UDSM Future Research Programmes 2009-18: Concept Paper p.7 November 2007.*
- v. The policy "emphasizes ... innovation and commercialization of research results which are key in bringing about economic growth while at the same time solving societal problems". p9.... "only [a] few [research results] have been converted into tangible products, processes and services to date". p17 ... R & D institutions are charged with the task of "undertaking researches that meet the demand of market needs including commercialization of research results coupled with

*INTER-UNIVERSITY CONFERENCE ON CREATING FUTURES WITH RESEARCH
PARTNERSHIPS: 24TH – 25TH MAY 2011*

establishment of spin-off firms from research results. p34 *National Research and Development Policy 2010*.

It is surprising, in a way, that against this background the LOT project could obtain SIDA funding and hang in there for the last ten years! For this I think I should be grateful to certain officials within SIDA who deliberately sought out a humanities project for support. Part of this SIDA interest was effected in the form of a planning grant to the then Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences which resulted in “a comprehensive programme proposal called ‘The Humanities in the 21st Century’”. Of the three subprojects developed under this proposal, SIDA decided to fund the languages project, apparently on considerations of financial constraints. But we in the project and SIDA staff have had to respond to the demands for justifying the project, stating its relevance to the poverty reduction agenda, and spelling out some policy implications.

For instance, the project researchers framed the objectives in linguistics terms – language atlas production, documentation of grammar and vocabulary, and how these may inform linguistic theory, as well as broader considerations of preserving a people’s cultural heritage. But someone at SIDA added something more appealing to a non-linguistic decision making audience, i.e. “It may also provide basic knowledge to issues related to school enrolment, extension services etc.” In SIDA’s analysis of “relations between research programmes and SIDA’s development strategy” this project was slotted under two sectors: i) “Education – knowledge valuable to understanding of local languages and their relation to the

*INTER-UNIVERSITY CONFERENCE ON CREATING FUTURES WITH RESEARCH
PARTNERSHIPS: 24TH – 25TH MAY 2011*

education system”; ii) “Legal security – knowledge valuable to understanding of local languages and access to the legal system for the poor”.

Similarly in the various reporting and evaluation tasks the project researchers have been under pressure to show the relevance of their work for poverty alleviation. One shining example we have been keen to show off is the *Tanzania Sign Language Dictionary* – a significant contribution indeed to the education of the deaf and the promotion of this language of a disabled minority. The dictionary has been distributed widely among the deaf community and in the schools for the deaf. The original print run of 2000 copies sold out a long time back and a second printing was recently accomplished.

In order to make a stronger case for funding of the third and current phase we made a slight change to the name of the project – calling it “Empowering the Languages of Tanzania” – and made an explicit case for an advocacy component related to democratization and good governance. We argued that quite often the languages (English & Swahili) in which the various government policies and interventions are framed are not intelligible to the majority of the people they are supposed to liberate. It was noted that freedom of expression is devoid of meaning if the citizen is deprived of the right to use the language they are most comfortable with. So the proposal intended to include a research component to determine the relative levels of comprehension of government documents when these are presented in different languages. It was envisaged that results from this research might feed into a drive to review government policy and allow use of the

*INTER-UNIVERSITY CONFERENCE ON CREATING FUTURES WITH RESEARCH
PARTNERSHIPS: 24TH – 25TH MAY 2011*

ethnic community languages in some public domains – such as party political campaigns and the electoral process, health sensitization programmes, agricultural extension literature, and maybe in the school system.

The researchers' struggle to address the demands for relevance must have been clearly apparent to a reviewer of the proposal who assessed it as a bit too ambitious and advised "that from the point of view of linguistic science", and considering "that linguistics in Tanzania is a relatively poorly studied area, it is desirable to devote more attention to this particular area".⁶ We heeded the advice and are focusing on the grammar and vocabulary research component.

During the past two years I have become associated with a gratifying antidote: This is a scholarship scheme known as the African Humanities Programme funded by the Carnegie Corporation, and administered by the American Council of Learned Societies. It is deliberately intended to provide limited funding for junior scholars in the Humanities on the verge of completing their PhD dissertation or those who have just completed the PhD and need support for post-doctoral research. The instructions to application reviewers have this to say:

"Topics in core humanities disciplines – such as anthropology, history, languages and literature, philosophy, art history and studies of religion – are eligible almost automatically. Topics in disciplines usually classed as social science – sociology, political science, communication, international relations – are NOT

⁶ SIDA notes on the status of the proposals.

*INTER-UNIVERSITY CONFERENCE ON CREATING FUTURES WITH RESEARCH
PARTNERSHIPS: 24TH – 25TH MAY 2011*

eligible unless they use qualitative approaches and unless they are informed by the study of history and culture.

In assessing applications, you should look for the significance of the application for the academic study of our human world, its cultures, and the record of its past. You should *ignore declarations of relevance to policy, to development, or to advocacy*. Relevance of this kind is NOT one of the selection criteria”.

This way of presenting the relevance issue may appear rather dramatic and ominous for the humanities. But it appears to me that part of the pressure for relevance is also felt in the natural sciences by skewing the researcher’s inquisitiveness towards issues that seek to answer questions of immediate concern – akin to ‘how do I get today’s food’. The researcher is under pressure to produce quick results or he/she will starve! It is a trend that has been noted as pitying applied research against basic research and nurturing the consultancy culture:

“Basic research ...[is] a focused, systematic study and investigation undertaken to discover new knowledge or interpretations and establish “facts” or “principles” in a particular field. ...Applied research, which is also a focused systematic study and investigation, [is] undertaken to discover the applications and uses of theories, knowledge, and principles in actual work or in solving problems... Consultancy work which belongs to business firms, and not universities... is usually undertaken by universities as a fund raising exercise... In this university, a point has been reached whereby no distinction is made between consultancy and research” (Chachage 2008).

*INTER-UNIVERSITY CONFERENCE ON CREATING FUTURES WITH RESEARCH
PARTNERSHIPS: 24TH – 25TH MAY 2011*

“...the market-driven model is dominant in African universities. The consultancy culture it has nurtured has had negative consequences for postgraduate education and research. Consultants presume that research is all about finding answers to problems defined by a client. They think of research as finding answers, not as formulating a problem” (Mamdani 2011).

As Chachage puts it, “consultancies ... are already guided by Terms of Reference”.

If a marine biologist studies the nature of seaweed s/he is enjoined to make the findings a basis for economic activity that may liberate poor seaweed farmers. Similarly if a student of religion or social psychology proposes to study the rising phenomenon of miracle cures like that of the Rev. Mwasapila of Loliondo he/she is expected to make recommendations on how the government might control such phenomena. An anthropologist’s study of the so-called ‘perverse customs’ [‘mila potofu’] like wife inheritance or female circumcision is not considered complete unless it is graced with recommendations on how to eradicate them. Even the project dealing with the Laoteli footprints of our ancestors is sold to the public as a potential tourist attraction to bring in the sacred foreign currency!

In line with the thrust of my observations I will refrain from drawing any implications for the future of the university. Nor will I make any recommendations about reviewing research policies. But while some of us may smile with incredulity as we reflect on some of the concerns of the actors in 1970

*INTER-UNIVERSITY CONFERENCE ON CREATING FUTURES WITH RESEARCH
PARTNERSHIPS: 24TH – 25TH MAY 2011*

as they set about the task of creating a socialist university, we need also to visualize the verdict of our grandchildren fifty years from now when they reflect on our own market driven relevance drive.

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