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Religion, Morality and Boko: Students Training for a Good Life

Abdoulaye Sounaye

At its inception during the colonial rule and even in the post-independence era, in the 1960s, the university in Africa was part of a nation-building project. It was designed mostly for the needs of a public service that was organized around the state institutions. Grounded mostly in secular norms, as its name suggested, it had to be modern, democratic, open, and universal, while informing critical minds. Based on this vision, it was supposed to train generations of Africans who were then to insure independence, development, and progress of their respective countries. As social and intellectual fabric, the university actually reshaped knowledge production across the continent, introduced new cultural forms, opened up the way for new intellectual life and moral references. Most importantly, it has also produced sociocultural models, including an elite that took over and in many cases is still in charge in many countries.

What is left of this vision of the university as a future-making institution in a context where religiosity has become one of the main markers of campus life, and students' life projects? How does religious activism affect the university as a secular and educational institution (boko, in Hausa)? How do religion-inspired epistemologies interact with science, critical thinking, and secular epistemologies? What are the implications of such reconfigurations of the university campus? How do these epistemologies co-habit, interact, and inform the campus as a social fabric?

These questions are at the center of the research project *Religion, Morality and Boko: Students Training for Good Life (Remoboko)*, based at the Leibniz Zentrum Moderner Orient of Berlin, Germany¹ and funded by the German consortium of research institutes, the Leibniz Gemeinschaft.² Remoboko is a five-year project (2018-2023), which comes with funding for three PhDs and one postdoctoral fellowship. It seeks to provide insights into Pentecostalism and Salafism on university campuses, as followers of these trends promote moral values, life discipline, and norms expected to complement students' training to achieve a good life.

The project covers Niger and Nigeria, which will provide a ground for comparison in the study of a dynamic that clearly transcends academic traditions. In fact, many of the issues raised here are not exclusive to the two cases the project focuses on. On the contrary, they seem to be pervasive and are shared across countries and regions in Africa. They raise the question of the challenges that higher education faces in Africa today. As the campus also becomes the platform for Salafi and Pentecostal normative discourses, it is important to investigate how this process affects not only training, but also life trajectories. Furthermore, what does students engaging in religious activism say about their aspirations, especially in a context where they are portrayed as the leaders of tomorrow? How is this significance of religiosity in the public arena affecting academic epistemologies, learning cultures and ultimately the social status of the university?

Thus, beyond the issues that emerge with Salafi and Pentecostal co-habitation of the campus, this project engages the overarching question of the redefinition of the student as an intellectual and socio-cultural model. As the campus, lieu *par excellence* of the promotion of secular norms (boko) undergoes this change and transformation, a key goal of the project is to understand the re-entanglement first, of religious traditions, and then, of the religious and the secular. This will allow us to look at these sources of norms in the same setting and under new light. It will also help us understand how the university becomes in some African contexts an arena of competition for various epistemologies, conceptions of life and visions of the future. From this perspective, the problematic of Remoboko echoes preoccupations that have become central to the university in Africa, including those that raise the necessity to reform and decolonize such a major institution. Indeed, across the continent, and in various contexts, reforming and decolonizing the university have become major preoccupations. Are the religionizing trends of the university part of this agenda? How to make sense of these transformation trends? What do they say about the entanglement of values and norms that shape life in Africa today?

Remoboko seeks to contribute to a critical examination of these realities and provide insights into both the knowledge and moral economies that are transforming the university in contemporary Africa.

Notes

- ¹ http://www.zmo.de/index_e.html.
- ² <https://www.leibniz-gemeinschaft.de/start/>.

