

Alienation, Gender and Institutional Culture at the University of Zimbabwe

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Introduction

This paper explores the issue of alienation in academia and the ways in which a small group of academics at the University of Zimbabwe manipulate their working environment to resist and imbue positive meaning to their work under conditions of social, economic and political crisis in Zimbabwe. This paper is based on secondary sources and original field research conducted at the University of Zimbabwe since 1989. As the paper was being written, undergraduate teaching in the largest faculties of Social Studies, Arts, Commerce, Agriculture and others, virtually ground to a standstill as academic staff undertook industrial action over salaries and conditions of service starting in January 2007. Teaching only resumed in late May 2007 after a protracted struggle between the university authorities and the Association of University Teachers.

Theoretical framework

Theoretically, the paper explores the alienation amongst academics at the University of Zimbabwe. Marx used the concept of alienation to refer to the loss of control experienced by workers over the nature, process and products of their labour. Marx and other theorists such as Braverman (1974) and Carbonella (1992) observed that when workers entered wage relationships, employers estranged them from the products of their labour and forced them to give up their ability to determine the intensity and duration of their work. Workers lose the capacity to organize, divide and allocate work and define the tools and machines they use. Alienation occurs as workers are estranged from themselves when the meanings and purposes of their work are lost.

Work, especially away from their domestic environments, also provides variety to workers, enabling them to interact with people with whom they can broaden and develop voluntary ties of affection not necessarily based on

affinal or agnatic relations. This is particularly true for women workers, who are usually expected to be satisfied with relationships and activities in the domestic domain. Wage work is also a contributory component to a stable social identity, especially for men, whose self-esteem is tied to the economic contributions they make to maintaining households most especially those of their wives and children.

African studies of academic work generally did not focus on the concept of alienation: Nyerere (1967), Yesufu (1973), Ajayi (1996) and Mazrui (1978) examined the role of the African university, the curriculum and structure of disciplines in cultural revival, improving relevance and nation-building. Later studies on the African university have focused on the alienation of African academics, the erosion of academic freedom and the increased political repression of staff and students in the African university, combined with economic and social distress (Diouf and Mamdani, 1994).

This paper theorises that all institutions are historical sites of cultural production and reproduction, and that these sites are gendered. In universities in particular, cultural and intellectual production are explicitly stated to be the missions of the institutions, privileging specific types of knowledge, frameworks, and ways of thinking and expressing intellect. Academic institutions are replete with tacit assumptions about masculinity and femininity. In situations of underdevelopment, national universities have been expected to produce scientific knowledge that can be deployed to fight imperialism and build nations able to resist the predations of other nations in scientific, social, political and other arenas (Sawyer, 2004).

This paper explores alienation in the Zimbabwean academic context by describing and analysing gendered aspects of academic work in Zimbabwe. It details the organisation of the University of Zimbabwe as a workplace, the experiences of academics and their adaptation and resistance to alienation. It draws on an observational study of two sites, the Senior Common Room and the Social Science Tearoom, to understand and analyse the ways in which leisure and recreational spaces, along with the lecture halls and residences, function as sites for intellectual production, reproduction, and contestation.

Research methodologies

The secondary data was collected by perusal of historical data such as biographies, the official history and founding documents of the University of Zimbabwe as it has evolved through different incarnations as, the University

College of Rhodesia and Nyasaland (UCRN), the University of Rhodesia (UR) and finally, the University of Zimbabwe (UZ). The primary data are derived from interviews with past luminaries of this university, observation, and focus group discussions amongst academics. This data set was gathered for the Affirmative Action Project that has run since 1999, and the Gender and Institutional Cultures Project in 2005–6. I also drew on my personal experiences and insights as a student between 1976 and 1978, and as a teaching assistant between 1979 and 1980. My knowledge of people and friendships over many years with many respondents helped me gain access to records, information and confidences on different events. The interviews and observations were necessary to procure research data on the leisure choices and recreational activities of academics because it was not possible to procure these kinds of data through other methodologies such as surveys. Observation was undertaken by me and two male research assistants in sports and leisure areas, notably the Senior Common Room and the Social Studies Tearoom in the Arts block. In total, we conducted 50 interviews and conversations with various key respondents in the university community.

The early history of the university

Gelfand (1978) provided the bulk of the data on the founding processes of the University College of Rhodesia and Nyasaland (UCRN), a federal institution established through a Royal Charter in 1955. This institution was supposed to be a beacon of hope and provide a place of respite from colonialism, racism and parochialism engendered by the environment and the stifling of learning, open debate and liberalism desired by some sections of the colonial communities. Originally intended to be a whites-only institution, the UCRN became a non-racial institution because of the intervention of the colonial government, which offered to fund halls of residence, the administration and library and other buildings.

In reality, while maintaining a non-racial formal identity, the UCRN was a white-dominated institution with a predominantly white student body and staff. The reason for the poor black student representation was that the federal government did not have a large number of black secondary schools from which to draw black students. Only the missionaries provided black secondary school education and the first government secondary schools for blacks such as Goromonzi and Fletcher were established only after 1946. Secondary schools such as Kutama and Empandeni, which were run by Catholics, and

St Augustine's and Thekwane, run by the Anglicans, had till then provided the only secondary schooling available to blacks. Even then, the mission-run secondary schools tended to favour black men and only a few black women attended them.

Before 1955, blacks desiring tertiary education went to South Africa, where they studied medicine, the arts and social sciences, and business. Secondary and tertiary education were limited in availability to blacks in colonial Zimbabwe, resulting in the first wave of black-educated people moving to South Africa for tertiary and university education.

Institutional cultures

The dominant racist culture was exclusionary of, and alienating to, blacks; and the gender culture of the university tended to be very white and masculinist, exemplifying settler/frontier militance, especially after 1965, the year of the Unilateral Declaration of Independence. This masculinist institutional culture was exaggerated by the war as the settler-dominated society gradually became militarised in the seventies. This culture co-existed uneasily with a more liberal, masculine counter-culture, which manifested itself in covert support for the liberation movements and a liberal curriculum in the arts, social sciences and education. Aspects of liberal culture and curriculum were advanced by lecturers, particularly white, male expatriates such as Terence Ranger and others, who then constituted the majority of lecturing staff. These lecturers – Terence Ranger, Giovanni Arrighi, John Reed, and others – were deported as soon as they became too flagrant in their liberalism for the regime to tolerate.

Amongst the black students, the masculine gender culture was dominated by peasant and working-class norms overlaid by liberal masculine values. The minority black student body comprised peasant and working-class men and women who had obligations towards their kin, and needed to graduate and secure good jobs that would enable them to support their extended families and kin. In this alienating environment, stressing achievement and upward mobility, they experienced pressure to graduate and secure good jobs while supporting the struggles against racism and class discrimination.

As the war intensified in the 1970s and more white men were called for military service, black student intakes increased. Nevertheless, despite constituting an elite in their racial group in colonial Zimbabwe, black students and academic staff remained a racially subordinated and culturally alienated group, and their gender and class cultures were suppressed or muted.

The institutional cultures of the colonial university were mixed, with liberal tendencies predominating in the first decade of the founding of the UCRN. The racial nature of campus interactions was established, with racially-separated residences, but integrated lectures and lecture rooms. Both races used laboratories and other academic facilities simultaneously. The student populations were predominantly white and they favoured policies and practices exclusionary of blacks in general and those whites perceived to be liberal or so-called “kaffir lovers”. In Rhodesia, liberal whites were despised and disliked for their stances, which were perceived to be pro-black and showing scant appreciation and gratitude for white privileges, for which their white pioneer forefathers had fought and sometimes died. One law professor used to intimidate black law students by parading on campus in camouflage rather than an academic gown. He demonstrated his politics and loyalties to all students and staff, and his wife too was a prominent propagandist for the regime.

The white exclusionary and racially anti-intellectual culture came under stress as the numbers of white men increased, and they could no longer be accommodated in the segregated Manfred Hodson Hall. Eventually, some white men had to join blacks, mixed race and Asian students in Carr Saunders Hall.

The black academic body at this time experienced conflicting expectations, since they were aware of racial and class discrimination, which disadvantaged all poor and black people, while at the same time they subscribed to those norms supporting achievement and upward mobility in the system. They therefore needed to devote a lot of their time to the serious intellectual activities necessary for good performance at university, and to steer clear of confrontations with whites, while supporting the struggles against racism and class discrimination by blacks.

Black academic men tended to take the more overtly political route, participating in overt and acceptable politics through meetings, class boycotts, pickets, pamphleteering, demonstrations and other activities that did not threaten their jobs too much or put their academic futures at risk. They were supported by a few black women and liberals from the white student and lecturing communities. However, most of the white community considered the black staff and students extreme nationalists and communists who did not deserve to attend a state-funded institution whose values and culture they opposed and attacked.

There were common gender understandings across the racial groups with regard to women. Women were not expected to take leading roles in academic

and institutional struggles, although their support was expected. White women staff occupied the positions of secretaries and treasurers of clubs and societies. The war provoked changes in the racial composition of the staff; more black staff were hired as teaching assistants, junior lecturers, technicians and tutors. These categories of staff did not have a significant impact on the intellectual or institutional cultures. If anything, they were keen to fit in and succeed on the terms defined by the institution. This was the situation during the period from my enrolment as an undergraduate student in sociology in 1976 until I joined the same department as a teaching assistant in 1979.

Intellectual cultures

The intellectual culture of the UCRN was dominated by the expatriate whites who presided over faculties and the administration, nurturing and maintaining the intellectual cultures and traditions of British universities such as London and Manchester, whose examinations were taken by UCRN students and whose degrees the graduates earned. There was a self-conscious effort to bring up black students to the standards of this culture, to nurture them so that they could achieve within it and to prove to the Rhodesian society that the non-racial intellectual and cultural experiment would and could work. As Mazrui (1978) observes, African universities have been the most dominant transmitters of western cultures in African societies. The UCRN might not have been African in reality, but the graduates of UCRN, the UR and the UZ have nevertheless played prominent roles in post-colonial Zimbabwe.

Amongst the men and women who attended and/or graduated from the UCRN and UR during the 1960s are prominent men and women such as Aeneas Chigwedere, current minister of Education; Mark Chona, a former Zambian minister; Fay Chung, former education minister; and many other members of the post-war Zimbabwean cabinet.

The UCRN was able to maintain a high quality of academic output and a metropolitan intellectual culture, complete with external examiners, sabbatical leave for staff, seminar systems to facilitate academic exchanges and continuing learning, all sustained under the oversight of the metropolitan universities. This intellectual culture privileged experimentation, field research and publishing of research internationally.

The intellectual culture after 1965 changed inexorably as the University of Rhodesia, as it became known, lost its international and militant flavour and became a more self-consciously defensive intellectual institution, attempting to

balance its position in a racist society that was under scrutiny by a supposedly liberal western world that had tried to institutionalise a liberal, humanist intellectual culture. Local, predominantly white lecturers were recruited to replace the expatriates and “leftist” academics were banned, as different intellectual tendencies sought to assert themselves. The sciences and law faculties became less liberal while the arts and social sciences attempted to keep up a culture of resistance and openness through intellectual production. There was continuous repression of those academic activists who fell foul of the Smith regime.

The chemistry department of the university was involved in research on poisons and toxins used against the guerillas of the liberation movements, while the law faculty had lecturers who openly supported the regime. Racism was overt, especially against black staff and students in enrolments, some classes and in some residences.

Leisure and recreation in the colonial university

In the first decade of the founding of the UCRN, the college was small and provided opportunities for intimacy between staff and between staff and students. For example, Gelfand shows that staff had access to leisure through the Senior Common Room, guest nights in halls of residence and staff to staff visits for dinners, drinks and tea in the private homes of liberal whites and nationalist blacks. A significant proportion of staff at the UCRN and the UR were expatriates and therefore, lived in campus-based housing. They interacted socially and sometimes politically with students.

Opportunities to mingle and share recreational pursuits with the local white population existed but the politics of racist Rhodesia alienated expatriate white academic staff from local whites. The liberals in the local population explored multi-racial initiatives that were often viewed with suspicion by the bulk of the local white population. Many of the liberal white academics were keen to explore friendships and relationships across the colour line. They were able to entertain their black friends and acquaintances in university housing and on campus, since the campus was, as stipulated by a condition for Federal funding, exempt from the segregation laws that governed and proscribed mixed residential and other contact across racial lines. The UCRN had to provide a complete social environment for its academic and student populations, since they were not able to live outside the university without falling subject to the racial legislation and practices of the host society. It was only possible for black students to live and attend classes in Mount Pleasant, a white area, as long as

they were confined to the campus, where they were not likely to offend the racial sensibilities of the neighbouring white population.

Black students and black workers servicing the university community and commuting from the townships faced many hardships because they could not use whites-only public transport to Mount Pleasant on a daily basis. Whatever black transport existed was scheduled for mornings and evenings only, when domestic workers, shop assistants and other service staff could be expected to be commute to and from work. Black students attending dances, fulfilling sports fixtures or lectures during the day could not expect to be given lifts by white motorists. In fact, the UCRN authorities advised black university students to wear their academic gowns when flagging down transport so that the motorists could tell that they were university students and not random black men and women who ostensibly had no business in a white area.

Thus, the UCRN became an exclusive community where residential, recreational, leisure and educational facilities had to be provided on site, a costly exercise occasioned by the politics of the day. In such a community, there was a very strong incentive to improvise on entertainment and to constantly situate leisure and recreational opportunities on the campus rather than have expatriate staff and black students seek leisure and recreation off campus.

Independence and growth

Independence was won in 1980 after a long and bloody struggle that claimed the lives of over 30 000 Zimbabweans. At the University of Zimbabwe, as it became known, there was a very exuberant atmosphere as Walter Kamba, the first black vice chancellor, was appointed in 1981. The national economy grew at about 4% per annum and welfare policies to expand access to health, education and housing were developed, resulting in the opening up of the public service and to a lesser extent, the private sector, to blacks, particularly men. The 1980s were a decade of transformation, as black lecturers were appointed to lectureships, curricula were revised to include African perspectives in arts and the humanities, and donor assistance for staff development was made available and utilised, mainly by junior black male staff. The existing contracts of white professorial staff were broken to enable blacks to occupy chairs and senior positions in the university. Due to the absence of black women in the senior ranks of the university, these changes benefited black males. The campus became a place of engagement, ferment and a centre of political, economic and other intellectual leadership.

In these years, the Social Science Tearoom and the Senior Common Room were popular sites for the airing of contending Marxist and liberal ideologies. The expansion of the UZ and the increase in the hiring of black staff resulted in the dispersion of staff from the campus to the suburbs of Harare, since there was insufficient campus accommodation for expatriates and locals. In any case, most of the black academics were then able to buy homes in the former white areas and did not have to live on campus. The campus-based places of leisure thus had an important function in enabling the expanded staff complement to meet each other outside their departments and to fraternize across disciplinary boundaries.

The UZ expanded its student numbers, from 2 235 in 1980 to 9 288 in 1989. After 1983, space constraints in the library, lecture rooms, laboratories and canteens became more acute as these growing student numbers outstripped available teaching, learning and leisure facilities. These developments created an alienating teaching and learning environment, stretching teaching hours; and crowding lecture rooms, halls of residence, laboratories, canteens and ablution facilities over the campus.

The decline of the university, and new sources of alienation

In Zimbabwe, the 1990s were characterised by economic decline, indebtedness and the beginning of the dissolution of the national social contract between the state, academia, civil society and labour. The university community, students and academic staff had been instrumental in opposing the one-party state project of the ruling party, ZANU-PF, in the mid-1980s. That project had been shelved, but the rift created by the issue grew in response to growing authoritarianism by the government. Students' demonstrations against corruption in the wake of the "Willowgate" scandal, in which party and government functionaries were discovered to have bought cars at subsidised prices and re-sold them at significant profit on the open market, led to the discrediting of the ruling party and government in the eyes of the populace. Students led the anti-corruption demonstrations and demanded higher grants and loans from the state (Cheater, 1991).

In retaliation, the government enacted two pieces of legislation, the University of Zimbabwe Amendment Act and the National Council for Higher Education Act in 1991 which, inter alia, whittled down the powers of the university. For example, the Chancellor (the President of Zimbabwe), was vested with new powers to appoint the Vice Chancellor after consultation with the council and the Minister of Higher Education.

The university's fortunes began to decline drastically as economic austerity eroded salaries. State repression of the university increased while working conditions deteriorated. In July 1991, during the graduation ceremony which the Chancellor and the Cabinet attend, Professor Kamba the Vice Chancellor announced his intention to retire on the grounds of what he termed “. . . unprofessional fingers interfering in the affairs of the university”. This announcement, timed for delivery on an occasion widely covered by the media, signaled open conflict between the state and the university. There was despondency and fear within the university community when a new Vice Chancellor was appointed – he was a party functionary with no higher education interest or experience. Student demonstrations against the state flared up in October 1991, resulting in the expulsion of all students and the closure of the university.

These and other factors contributed to the alienation and exodus of academic workers.

Exodus of workers and the economic crisis

In the 1990s, national debt, drought, a structural adjustment programme, unemployment and increasing poverty led to at least 25% of professionally trained Zimbabweans emigrating to South Africa, Canada, USA, UK and Australia. Significant numbers of staff leaving on sabbatical leave failed to return and the complexion of the university and its intellectual and institutional cultures changed as seminar activity declined and staff loyalty waned. This resulted in UZ's transformation from being an institution with a strong intellectual culture to the present situation – an institution dominated by junior, often inexperienced, academic staff.

By March 2006, the profile of staffing at the UZ showed that the UZ had 1 050 academic staff comprising 481 male permanent staff, 327 male contract staff, 142 female permanent staff and 108 female contract staff. Of the permanent academic staff, there were 44 professors and 10 associate professors, 64 senior lecturers and 435 lecturers showing the dominance of the junior academics on the staff. Amongst the 394 contract academic staff, there were 16 professors, 2 associate professors, 11 senior lecturers, 110 lecturers, 70 teaching assistants, 171 graduate teaching assistants and 13 graduate research assistants and 1 research assistant. The gender breakdown of the staff was not available for technical reasons but there are less than six females in the professorial grades, while women constitute one third of the senior lecturer grade. Women are bunched in the lecturer grades in the permanent staff category. Amongst

the contract staff, there are virtually no professors, and most women are in the lecturer and teaching assistant and graduate teaching assistant posts.

In mid-2006, there was a total vacancy rate of 31%. The specialized units and the College of Health Sciences, and Law and Science faculties have been hardest hit by the staff exodus, with vacancy rates of 51%, 50%, 44% and 30% respectively. The Arts, with 5% vacancies, is the least affected. Other faculties such as Agriculture, Social Studies and Education have vacancy rates of between 17% and 22%. In February 2006, academic staff went on strike for higher wages and better working conditions.

The physical environment

The physical environment of the workplace is an important indicator of the value placed on the workers in any workplace. The current degradation of the working environment at the university is characterised by litter all over the campus and overgrown grass on quadrangles and paths. Shortages of chalk, teaching aids, lack of resources for learning materials, lack of research funding and general degradation of the buildings and classrooms undermine the pleasure derived from the research, teaching and learning experiences. By February 2002, in most departments, there were no cleaning services in offices, corridors and other spaces, presumably because of lack of funds. Each staff member now swept their own office if they considered it dirty. Offices are shared by at least two people, but these offices tend to be very small and were originally intended for single occupancy. Consultations with students and members of staff and the public are not very private and the environment is so degraded that minimal time is spent on campus.

Safety on campus presents problems because of poor lighting and security. There has been no lighting in the humanities car park from 2000. Many academics, especially women in the humanities buildings have stopped working in their offices after 6pm every day because of poor security. In 2000, a female academic was attacked at lunchtime in this car park, which is supposed to be patrolled by at least two security personnel at any one time. This incident terrorised many people, particularly women students and lecturers, some of whom had witnessed the incident and the lack of security on a supposedly guarded campus. However, there has been no improvement in security since then.

Theft of computers, books and other teaching and learning equipment is so rife that academics dare not leave personal equipment and books in their offices. The materials for academic production are absent or in short supply. In the toilets, taps, door handles, toilet paper and cistern covers are habitually

stolen, necessitating extra expense for securing cistern covers and office doors with wrought iron screens. The over-burdened and degraded campus facilities present problems for academics and other workers because toilets are usually dirty and unpleasant to use. Given this working environment, it is preferable to visit the campus for the minimum possible time, and social interaction is curtailed. It is difficult to sustain an intellectual culture, and the sense of alienation intensifies.

Poor wages and salaries

Academic work is poorly remunerated at UZ. The wages are very low, currently at approximately US\$50 per month at the professorial levels, and massive staff losses lead to a sense of social disintegration.

Contraction of benefits

Permanent academic staff are entitled to contact leave every three years and sabbatical leave every seventh year. These types of leave were developed and institutionalised prior to independence, and were intended to accord academics time to renew their contacts with other academics elsewhere, and to update their knowledge through spending time in other universities and institutions. The UZ pays for academics' airfares and subsistence for 28 days for lecturers and 35 days for professors while they are on contact leave and for one month of the sabbatical year. Because of foreign currency shortages, academics are no longer assured of these benefits and many have been asked to take the benefit in weak Zimbabwe dollars, which at Z\$100 000 per US dollar on the parallel market, can afford an academic only three days' leave in South Africa or Botswana, the closest destinations, even on the most parsimonious budget! In addition, the contact leave benefit was extended to some administrators, who were never intended to enjoy this benefit. This has further alienated academic staff.

The erosion of sabbatical leave isolates academics, particularly juniors, who have fewer networks and contacts in other institutions, to avail them learning, teaching and exposure to diverse intellectual resources and traditions. They increasingly feel incapacitated in intellectual discourses and cannot market themselves as consultants to non-governmental and international organizations in order to survive and sustain some of their academic activities. In the absence of a sizeable cadre of senior academics to take academic leadership and mentor these isolated junior academics, the level of intellectual discussion, teaching and learning is negatively affected.

Despite the existence of a campus-wide computer network, all staff, including academics, are not allowed access to specific internet sites such as Yahoo! that offer free email services. Such sites can only be accessed before 8am and after 4.30pm, forcing academics to resort to other email services by subscription or to work on campus during the most unsocial hours, which presents security and other problems. This affects academic parents, particularly women, who have to cater for their children and spouses in the mornings before and evenings after work, making it difficult for them to use an important teaching and learning facility. The absence of research funds puts pressure on academics to raise money for their own research funding in a country under sanctions by the traditional donors to higher education.

The work process

Academics have more flexible schedules since their work is less structured than that of other workers in the university. This relative autonomy in the organisation of work is usually a source of satisfaction and promotes academics' commitment to their work. Their work is built around the schedules of their students, so lectures, tutorials and other interactions with students may be spaced out over many days, a few hours at a time. In the free spaces of a day, a lecturer has discretion to undertake reading, fieldwork, seminar and conference attendance and other activities. For many female academics, domestic responsibilities impinge on this timetable, necessitating the harmonisation of academic activities with fetching and transporting children, cooking, cleaning or supervising domestic and other workers. However, this relative autonomy and flexible scheduling of work has been eroded by the semesterisation of the university, and the increased student enrolment.

Semesterisation

The semesterisation of the university paved the way for delivering "fast education" in much the same way that fast food systems deliver cheap and poor quality meals (Ritzer, 1998). In higher education, operations such as teaching and examination, are similarly broken down and repackaged in standardised combinations suitable for mass consumption, resulting in uniform, mechanical curricula that leave very little room for creativity by lecturers and students.

At UZ, the great expansion enrolment from 2 500 in 1980 to 9 250 in 1989, and to just over 13 000 in 1995, increased the burden of academics many times over. Service departments in the social sciences have huge classes with over

400 students and only one or two lecture theatres into which they can all fit. This has a cascade effect on the second- and third-year classes, which have quadrupled in many departments, resulting in crowded lecture and seminar rooms, huge and unworkable tutorial groups and massive marking loads, particularly for the junior staff. The politically driven massification of enrolment was not matched by increases in resources, seriously overloading the system.

In these conditions, tutorials and essays have been reduced or abolished, confining assessment to the cheaper mode of one or two multiple choice tests that can be marked easily by junior staff. It is not uncommon for a class of 200 students to depend on one or two books and have very little access to a diversity of reading materials. In this situation, lectures and notes become the main means of learning. But the learning experience is as alienating as the teaching experience, as lecturers have little individual contact with or knowledge of their undergraduate students. Post-graduate courses that should be taught by senior academics are taught by junior lecturers as departments are hit by staff shortages. Finally, postgraduate students who have traditionally performed some teaching and tutoring work with undergraduates are now overburdened as their financial needs erode their study time, and research opportunities are scarce. This is particularly so in the Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities, which enroll the bulk of the undergraduate students.

Resistance to alienation

In order to create meaning and ameliorate the worst effects of an alienating work environment, academics at the UZ attempted to resist the deterioration of the teaching and learning processes in the late nineteen nineties. The Faculties of Arts and Social Studies held out for two years against the proposals to semesterise the university, until 2000. Immediately, academics started teaching shorter courses, setting and marking more examinations per year to accommodate more failed students especially at second and final year. It took over four years to change the degree regulations to fit the semesterisation. The exodus of academic staff increased, resulting in heavier teaching burdens for those remaining.

Nowadays academics are often forced to search for more lucrative work in the NGO and other sectors. There is greater reward for teaching short courses to private sector and civil service students so that too, has created a more mechanistic way of conceptualising intellectual labour, instrumentalising it and linking it to immediate cash rewards.

I now turn to examining the changing use of social spaces by academic staff working in this deteriorating and alienating environment.

The Social Sciences Tearoom

Before 1991, the Social Sciences Tearoom was operated by the university and provided a worker who made tea for staff at nominal cost. It was a very convivial space that attracted lecturers, teaching assistants and some professors. It linked academics from business, arts and the social sciences as they exchanged political news, peddled institutional gossip and kept in touch. Located on the Political Science corridor, the Tearoom drew lecturers from a department which included members of the ruling and opposition parties, pressure groups, economists, activists and creative arts fraternities. A few women from the Arts and Social Studies faculties also patronised it. In those days, the Tearoom resonated with raucous laughter and verbal jousting between members of different parties, creating entertainment and providing a relaxed atmosphere for discussing contending political and academic issues in a friendly and non-confrontational manner.

The structural adjustment program (SAP) of 1991 affected the tearoom negatively. The university withdrew the services of the general worker who ran the tearoom. Instead, a private tea club organized by two female junior lecturers from Arts and Social Sciences was formed and members subscribed to it. The club serves tea, bread with milk, peanut butter, jam, margarine, biscuits and *samoosas*. The membership of the club now comprises senior and middle level men and junior women from Arts and Social Studies. In particular, the club has attracted lecturers from African and Modern Languages, Political Science, History and a few members from Economics and Sociology. The Tearoom was a venue for informal organisation of resistance to semesterisation by Arts and Social Studies faculties in the late nineties.

Gender and the organization of conviviality

In the tea room, young academic women organise and run the tea club, ensuring that supplies are available and that subscriptions are collected. This role is in keeping with the caring roles that women in academic departments are assigned, formally or by default. Such roles include counseling students, career guidance and related functions. For example, in the Affirmative Action Project of the UZ, the coordinator organises all the project activities, research, seminars and other activities, in addition to a normal departmental teaching, research and university service load and with no extra remuneration or concessions.

This occurs in spite of the fact that the Affirmative Action Project is a university-wide project touching on gender issues affecting staff at the university. There is no formal recognition of these roles, which the women academics say they value. These roles spill over into informal interactions, which women undertake voluntarily as part of domesticating and reducing alienation in the workplace. In interviews, academic women mention their satisfaction derived from counseling and interacting with students. It was not surprising that in the tea room, junior women took on the caring roles to make an alienating environment bearable and to create a convivial space to help alienated academics remain connected.

Younger women took up these caring roles in the tea room for rational reasons. The UZ has a promotion system that favours research over teaching and community service. This effectively undermines the importance of teaching. Given the bureaucratisation of the university and its failure to provide teaching and learning resources, it is only the most daring chair of department or departmental board who will penalise staff for poor teaching. Therefore, the only activity avidly pursued by academics is research, especially if it brings funding that can ease an academic's financial woes. The tea room serves as a space for relaxation and a space for conducting academic business between junior and senior academics, namely, alliance building and networking.

This strategy can offset some of the other pressures experienced by women academics. Together with the combined pressures of academic performance and “mothering” of students, they tend to be overworked and “burnt-out” (Busari, 2000; Moncarz, 2001). This transference of maternalism into the work place costs women highly. They take on a multitude of social tasks which erode the time they can allocate to research and publication.

Over twenty of the forty academic women participating in an Affirmative Action Project workshop in 2000 reported exhaustion, emotional frustration and helplessness in dealing with young, mature, disabled and other students with problems that affected their learning. Junior women must cope with additional academic pressure: cooperative or collaborative work is risky, since credit tends to accrue to the dominant seniors who are well networked for finding funds and publishing outlets. The small proportion of tenured female academics and the sex-segregated nature of the society makes it difficult for many junior women, particularly those in faculties with very few or no women, to be mentored by senior academic women. These are the same women who have replaced the “SAP-ed” unskilled man who used to be responsible for

making and administering the Tearoom. They are now performing the privatised, unpaid and deskilled work of serving tea, effectively carrying over their domestic roles into the academic domain and losing out on leisure time. This work is unrewarded and unrecognised in the academic reward and promotion structure. It benefits the predominantly male and few academic women, who are exempted from such work and can continue with their academic roles, albeit at a higher price in the form of a subscription to the tea club.

However, the Tearoom work enables some junior women to build alliances, which are useful for securing information, support and mentoring, usually from the older males who know the system well. The casual nature of tea room interactions allow married young women to interact with men without experiencing problems relating to sexual decorum. It also creates solidarity between the men and women in a very difficult working environment. It gives meaning and structure to work by providing an opportunity for academics to experience some pleasurable experiences in a workplace which is degrading and degraded.

Competition and cooperation

The Tearoom interactions enable junior and senior academics to handle competition more successfully, foster cooperation and build academic and social solidarities within an alienating environment.

In December 2006, a senior academic member distributed offprints of his latest publication to the tea-mates amidst comments and laughter around the “new farmers” of the national resettlement program and their lack of success in feeding the nation. There was an exchange about the wage problem and the possibilities for a turbulent semester in 2007. In January 2007, amidst discussion around the new semester, there was an exchange between a junior female in Arts and a senior female in Social Studies regarding the tenure assessment of the junior woman. The exchange ended with referrals to three journals to which the junior woman could submit articles, and advice not to send articles to another journal. There was also a discussion about the impending strike and the opportunities it presented for completing articles for publication.

Given the often “hawkish”, individualistic nature of academic work (Mars, 1982), the Tearoom functions as a space for tempering the worst effects of the competitive work environment by facilitating mentoring, networking and building connections within and across gender and disciplinary lines. Information about securing the cheapest fuel, meat, fish and other commodities is exchanged. Connected tea-mates facilitate the renewal of passports for travel to conferences.

Lifts to town are offered if a person has no transport on that day. In the Tearoom, there are some successful “hawks” that do not compete with or exploit junior academics who may or may not be their protégés. Informal mentors often explain organisational histories and cultures, introduce their protégés to successful colleagues, procure recent literature, publishers and publications, write recommendations and references for research grants and steer opportunities their protégé’s way. Mentors also defend their protégés from the possible malice of other senior “hawks”. In 2006, these solidarities enabled four Tearoom academics to publish articles on gender in an edited volume involving five Tearoom habitués across the Arts and Social Studies faculties.

National Politics

The Tearoom culture has succeeded in transcending political divides in the university community. The Tearoom still attracts members of the ruling and opposition parties and of pressure groups; they still discuss political issues amidst a lot of banter and mutual ribbing. Given the polarised nature of contemporary Zimbabwean society where opposition and ruling party adherents are often in conflict, the relatively safe space of the Tearoom has historically provided space for amicable co-existence and support for colleagues termed by the late Professor Masipula Sithole, himself an opposition politician and tea-mate, “political gladiators”.

Given the long history of association amongst these academics and their experience with colleagues who have ascended into high political office, politicians are not held in awe and interactions are not marred by political allegiance. In fact, the exploits of ex-colleagues who have become powerful politicians and civil servants are drawn on in demystifying the powerful and to caution those vying for power. The Tearoom has players who have access to both the ruling and opposition parties, creating a platform for intellectual analysis of political parties and providing an understanding of the current political, social and economic crisis. The politically engaged academics also comprise a group that has stayed precisely because they desire to struggle and effect democratisation in Zimbabwe, to reduce the alienation and disempowerment that afflicts the majority of academics and instead create purpose and imbue meaning to their deprivation. The university is therefore a suitable place of work because it allows them to pursue their interests without curtailing their freedom of expression and association and to define themselves as people engaged in building a better future for their country.

Conclusion

This paper has illustrated the changes that have occurred as different types of institutional and intellectual cultures have prevailed at the national university in Zimbabwe. Through observing leisure and recreation, the processes of academic production and reproduction have been explored. The paper has outlined the history of the UZ, its gendered traditions and the sources of alienation for academics. It has outlined the political developments that have intensified alienating working conditions and experiences for academics, resulting in the brain drain. It has explored the circumstances under which academics in the university adopt different strategies to deal with their alienation.

Academics using the Tearoom overcome alienation through creating a nurturing community and activities, which add positive meanings and produce pleasurable outcomes and interactions. They humanise their workplace in order to sustain their pride in their work. In the absence of significant material rewards and remuneration for their intellectual labour, they create meaning and support each other through their voluntary association. Since it is difficult to separate their work from their leisure, it is hard for them to turn their backs on the UZ. Those who have studied, lived and worked away from Zimbabwe understand that alienation may intensify if they leave academic work to pursue less meaningful work in other organisations. Some of these academics may also stay because of their marital circumstances or their advanced age but it is also clear that they have chosen not to pursue other occupations and activities, which are available to them in Zimbabwe. One cannot ignore the fact that academic work still accords them a high status in Zimbabwe and that those academics who do leave, are forced to do so because they need to provide for their families. Academics are interested in the work that gratifies them and contributes to their social, emotional and intellectual wellbeing. Academic work is perceived to be and experienced as challenging, fulfilling and worthwhile especially in an environment of strife, resentment and high stress. Thus, the Tearoom environment may exemplify traditional gender relations but it also provides a sanctuary in which academics of different genders, specialisations and political persuasions can express solidarity and conviviality with each other, humanising their environment and making it bearable in the context of a society undergoing social, economic and political crisis.

At present, the Tearoom has remained a space where men and women voluntarily create a community that accommodates both academic men and women. Gender differences and disparities facilitate the mixing of the young

academic women and the older academic men in the Social Sciences Tearoom, as women were not perceived as and did not perceive themselves to be excluded or in competition with the men. The serving role of the women in the tea club was congruent with the expected gender roles of women in the society. So in that respect, these women did not transgress the accepted gender boundaries and spaces despite their participation in the intellectual discourses.

The importance of and processes of knowledge production at UZ have suffered as academics have become alienated and isolated not only from each other but from the state, the university and society. Academics have lost status and interest in functioning as knowledge producers at a time when knowledge production has gained more importance. Instead, the imperatives of survival and reproduction dominate their thinking and actions. Only those academics with disposable time and access to resources – through their families and through organisations that may not necessarily be interested in national projects in path-breaking knowledge generation – are able to sustain their academic engagement. This situation also discourages students from choosing academic careers, which can be perceived to be unrewarding and unimportant.

This in turn exemplifies how national difficulties can imperil the capacity of African universities to produce knowledge that has strategic value and importance in the global knowledge market. While the “drain” of intellectuals into other African countries may not always be a negative phenomenon, the conditions in which this “exchange” occurs are negative. Alienated intellectual labour is not as attractive as willing and motivated labour. Those academics that migrate to the north will service other knowledge producers under varying conditions of alienation, motivation and contentment.

It is imperative that further research into the trajectories, conditions and circumstances of knowledge production are explored so that efforts to revive and revitalise universities in Africa can be re-focused. Knowledge is not produced or generated only in classrooms, seminars, libraries and conferences. It is contested, digested, refined and changed through both formal and informal institutional processes. This study has shown how different players, affected by gender, class, age and other hierarchies also acquire agency and acquit their roles and places in knowledge production through the informal intellectual and institutional settings in which they operate. It will be crucial to continue to study how these processes operate to advance or frustrate the processes of knowledge production in the contemporary African university in ways that minimize the crippling social alienation described here.

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