



Editorial

Elísio S. Macamo*

Knowing It through the Diaspora

The days when Africans shunned their heritage seem to be gone, at least in academia – no more ‘Koomsons’. Koomson, a character from Ayi Kwei Armah’s (1968:147) celebrated novel *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, derives pleasure from ‘trying to pronounce African names without any particular desire to pronounce them well...’. Perhaps this embracing of an African heritage is due to the experience of African scholars who sought intellectual refuge and stimulation abroad. To paraphrase a trope, they left Africa, but Africa never left them. Indeed, there is a sense in which the very idea of a diaspora renders Africa visible. Not being there makes ‘there’ not only conceivable, but also visible.

Since one of the tasks of higher education is to train people to render the world intelligible, it is appropriate that those whose travails abroad help render Africa at least visible should be invited to be part of such an enterprise. They are not fulfilling a patriotic duty. Rather, they are doing what scholars do, namely lending their skills to the exhilarating job of opening minds, fostering curiosity and promoting a critical way of being in the world. A Mozambican saying states that those who do not travel end up marrying their own sisters. It is a variation on the idea that contact with different cultures forms character and opens minds. This is not to suggest that African diaspora scholars are ‘better’ than those who stay at home. However, given that others read Africa in their behaviour, demeanour and way of being in the world, African diaspora scholars cannot take things for granted and are in a position to critically engage with received wisdom. As they grapple with this challenge, they come to realise that Africa is neither prior nor external to our thinking about it. Africa is constituted in the very process of critically engaging with it.

* Professor, Centre for African Studies, University of Basel, Switzerland.
Email: elisio.macamo@unibas.ch

The African Diaspora Support to African Universities programme¹ is geared towards allowing the continent to profit from the expertise of African diaspora scholars. Many Africans in the diaspora are committed to their continent and to knowledge production. However, they sometimes lack the means to honour this commitment through practical deeds. Their potential must be harnessed if efforts to bring tertiary education in Africa to higher levels of excellence are to be successful. Having enjoyed the honour of participating in this programme at the invitation of Patrício Langa from the University of the Western Cape in South Africa, I can attest to its importance.

This special issue of the *Journal of Higher Education in Africa* does not simply document the programme. It bears testimony to a scholarly commitment to the continent, one of the last frontiers of knowledge, for it is only when the continent is known through the work of its own daughters and sons in discussion with others that legitimate claims can be made to knowledge of Africa.

Note

1. The programme is an intervention by the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA), supported by a grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York.

Reference

Armah, A.K., 1968, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.