

Ode to an African intellectual giant: Kaseke, the champion of indigenous scholarly work.

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Abstract

This article recalls the life and work of the late Professor of Social Work, Edwell Kaseke, who passed away on 24 August 2017. It also sheds light on the work that this author had collaborated with him. The paper is both a tribute and an acknowledgment of the immense contribution that Professor Kaseke had made towards the advancement of social work not only in his country of origin, Zimbabwe, but in Africa and globally. He had also raised African scholarship through his various academic papers, book chapters, books and research projects. This writer had known the late Professor as a colleague for close to 17 years, in the academic circles of social work and social development. For most of this time, this author was a younger scholar whilst Professor Kaseke was an older colleague who would advise and guide him in matters of scholarship and other issues. Later, as the author grew academically, he collaborated with the late Professor on some academic projects. Professor Kaseke was very passionate about building theories and bodies of knowledge in social work, social policy, social security and social development that were Afrocentric and relevant to Africa's development.

Key words: African scholarship, Kaseke, social security, social work

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Introduction

Like a thief in the night, death comes upon us, unexpected and unannounced, and robs us of our loved ones. Once this happens we are reminded of our frailty as and especially our mortality. As such, when death visits us, we begin to ponder on our legacies and muse over our lives. We ask questions about our humanity and what we did or could have done better on our life's journey. So, when someone of eminent stature, we are close to or even know of, passes on, in most instances we are comforted by the thought that he or she left a legacy which will endure well into the future. Such was the life of Professor Edwell Kaseke who I had the privilege of knowing and interacting with for close to two decades. I had also had the honour of engaging in some wonderful as well as thought provoking debates with him. Professor Kaseke passed away on 24 August 2017. Immediately the academic fraternity in South Africa knew of his death, there were shock-waves that reverberated across the country. Tributes poured in from all over South Africa. And later, as the news of his passing spread, tributes poured in from overseas. Professor Kaseke was indeed an intellectual giant and scholar of note. He came from that distinguished line of African scholars who contributed immensely to their countries of birth, Africa and humanity.

The Southern African Social Protection Experts Network (SASPEN) (2017:1) on its website, paid tribute to the late professor in this manner:

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Lusaka office and Southern African Social Protection Experts Network (SASPEN) Trustees, Board of Directors and Secretariat are deeply saddened over the death of Professor Edwell Kaseke. Professor Edwell Kaseke was the Chair of Social Work in the School of Human and Community Development at University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, as well as a member of the SASPEN Advisory Council, until his death on 24th August 2017. SASPEN and the broader social protection community have lost an intellectual giant with an immeasurable passion for the continent and the improvement of the well-being of its people. Furthermore,

SASPEN has lost a trusted colleague, a sincere and gentle friend, teacher, mentor and a wise humble giant, a person in whose life we could see God's love and compassion. To the surviving spouse and the children, we pray for God's blessings and peace to be with the family in a very special way in this difficult time. We thank you most sincerely for sharing Edwell with us. The burial arrangement for the late Professor Edwell Kaseke will take place in his home country Zimbabwe. SASPEN will miss him dearly.

One Zimbabwean on-line news-blog also paid tribute to Professor Kaseke in this way:

One of Zimbabwe's most prolific academics, Prof Edwell Kaseke is no more. The former UZ lecturer who was now at the University of The Witwatersrand in South Africa, passed away last Thursday (ZimEye, 2017:1).

There were also numerous individual tributes from social work academics and their messages were posted on the website of the *Association of South African Social Work Education Institutions* (ASASWEI) which constitutes all schools of social work in South Africa.

The measure of the man

The ancient Greek philosopher Plato once asserted: "The measure of a man is what he does with power." I guess the question for me is: What did our dear departed colleague do with his intellectual power? I would argue that he used it to build, mould and shape younger academics and scholars as well as students. He also used it to advance African scholarship. I am reminded of Plato's quote after reflecting on my interactions with the late professor. Despite his position of senior professor and having so many accolades to his name, when he had engaged with younger scholars and even students, he did not intimidate them with his powerful appendages or illustrious credentials. He was humble, approachable and eager to help students and colleagues, especially the younger ones. I

recall the last assignment Professor Kaseke had worked on with me and other scholars from the regions of Southern and West Africa, where the cited attributes of the late colleague had shone through. This was a research project that focussed on indigenous social security systems. The former undertaking had started off as an idea relating to the documentation of indigenous social security systems in the two regions. Another older scholar and mentor, Professor Emanuel Boon and I were thinking about how we could begin to generate research evidence around indigenous social security systems in Africa. Professor Boon is originally from Ghana, but he is based in Belgium where he has lectured at Vrije University for many years. I had previously collaborated with Professor Boon on several academic projects related to Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) in the context of Africa. Incidentally, Professor Boon and I had initially met in Johannesburg, South Africa in 2002, at the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD). After conceptualising the research study, we had decided to invite colleagues to be part of this research agenda.

The first person that came to my mind was Professor Kaseke. When I asked him if he would be interested to be part of this effort, he had not hesitated and had been eager to bring his intellectual gravitas to the project, despite having other commitments. After a concept note which spelt out the objectives of the project was finalised by Professor Boon and I, I had set out to source funds for purposes of convening an international workshop. This workshop was supposed to have fleshed out and crystallised all the issues related to indigenous social security systems in Southern and West Africa and then afterwards arrive at a clear research agenda. At the time, I was an Associate Professor at the University of Johannesburg. The University of Johannesburg's Faculty of Humanities was very generous and funded the workshop. We had several participants from Southern and West African countries who attended the workshop and presented different papers that highlighted the state of indigenous social security systems in the

respective countries. The information pertaining to the workshop can be found on the SASPEN website. What was striking during the workshop is how Professor Kaseke had got stuck in and participated in the deliberations just like an ordinary academic. I am raising this issue because we had deliberately invited younger scholars to provide them an opportunity to participate in such an academic endeavour. There were also postgraduate students who participated in the workshop. The late professor was eager to engage with the young students even if he was the Head of Department of Social Work at the University of the Witwatersrand. He was comfortable and participated freely in the deliberations with everyone. This work culminated in the writing of an edited book which is now in press. This book will be dedicated to Professor Kaseke. Indeed, Professor Kaseke had used his intellectual prowess to build, empower and groom others.

Another good example I can cite when Professor Kaseke came through for me was when I was writing a book entitled: *Public policy-making in the Mbeki era*. I had asked him to review the book's manuscript. He had made some critical comments which I had followed through. These inputs had enhanced the book when it was completed. Professor Kaseke again saved the day, so to speak, when he agreed to be one of the keynote speakers at the launch of the said book. His speech was well-received by the audience and I was truly grateful for his collegiality. True to form, as being a versatile scholar, he provided insights regarding the public policy-making agenda during the period when the second democratically elected president of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki, was in power. In his blurb on the back cover of the book, Professor Kaseke surmised:

This book advances the discourse on public policy-making. Lessons from the Mbeki era point to the fact that public policy-making is about responding to human needs with a view to creating a more inclusive society. The book also drives home the point that public policy-making requires decisive leadership which was provided by Mbeki when he was President of the

Republic of South Africa (as written on the back cover of Noyoo, 2015).

On another academic level I had also the privilege and honour of being an external examiner for some his postgraduate students. I had a chance to mark their theses and mini dissertations. He had the confidence in me and did not see any challenge in letting me grade his postgraduate students.

In pursuit of African scholarship

One thing that the late professor always sought to do was to advance African scholarship and African perspectives, especially from his areas of expertise. Nevertheless, he did not confine himself to only theoretical aspects of academia, but he was keen to see how theory translated into practice. In this way, he had applied himself holistically. This is what we need in Africa, because nowadays it seems as if some academics are so specialised that they end up having a binary approach to scholarly pursuits. The late professor is the type of academic we need in Africa, who is not only a critical thinker but who also understands praxis. On that score, Professor Kaseke was not divorced from the realities of Africa. His search for African theories and models to Africa's challenges such as poverty, social exclusion and all forms of ill-fare made him stand apart from those African scholars who seem to be pre-occupied with rehashing Western thought - without seriously interrogating such theories. In this regard, he was unashamedly Afrocentric, even if he did not refer to himself in this manner. I can speculate that he was also solution-driven in that the academic projects he was involved in were primarily focused on bringing about change and/or providing alternatives that could benefit Africans. In one of his works he had written:

Thus, the provision of social assistance should be part of programmes that empower the beneficiaries of social security to achieve self-reliance. This developmental function will enhance the effectiveness of social security as an instrument for poverty reduction (Kaseke, 2010:166-167).

Professor Kaseke was not an 'Ivory Tower' academic and therefore he always tried to find better ways of effecting positive change in the lives of the citizens, whether in Zimbabwe, South Africa or other African countries. One way he did this was to influence policy-makers and politicians through his writings. Thus, he took on the role of an advocate in some of his writings. For example, he had argued the case for social security to become a citizenry right in this way:

It is thus clear from the two cited international instruments and the regional instrument that the right to access social security is a basic human right. The right to social security also extends to social assistance even though the right is overshadowed by social insurance. It can be argued that from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, it is not obvious that the right to social security also extends to social assistance. However, from the perspective of the SADC Social Charter, social assistance is an integral part of social security. Consequently, one can infer that from a SADC point of view, the right to social security extends to social assistance (Kaseke, 2012:3).

A patriot and true son of Africa

Professor Kaseke loved his country of birth Zimbabwe and was always optimistic about its future. Despite a mismanaged economy, blatant political misrule and outright tyranny in Zimbabwe that were championed by Robert Mugabe and his cronies, the late professor did not abandon his country. The last time we discussed, at great length, about the shenanigans in Zimbabwe was in August 2014 when we were invited to participate and present lectures at a Social Work Summer School in Erfurt, Germany. This was at the Erfurt Faculty of Applied Sciences, Department of Social Work. On this trip we were also in the company of Professor Lengwe Mwansa who is based at the University of Botswana's Department of Social Work, but is originally from Zambia, and Professor Letlhokwa George Mpedi from University of Johannesburg's Faculty of Law. Incidentally,

Professor Mwansa was my undergraduate lecturer at the University of Zambia (UNZA), when I was pursuing a Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) Degree at the same university, from the late 1980s to early 1990s. The four of us were all on the same flight to Germany.

In our discussions with Professor Kaseke, my colleagues and I had referred to the Zimbabwean malaise and generally the deplorable situation across Africa. What had again struck me about the late professor was his sense of optimism about his country and Africa. However, he was also very clear about the destructive nature of dictators or those leaders who plundered their country's wealth. He seemed to say that such people should not be regarded as patriots. He seemed to argue that a patriot or a person who professes to be such should not only love his or her country but should make sure that whatever he or she does results in the uplifting of his or her country. Therefore, as his argument went, whatever we do in our various countries, we must add value to them. Another issue we discussed at length with my colleagues was the phenomenon of Africans being seen by Europeans as potential nuisances - when they came to Europe. There is a general misconception by Europeans and North Americans that every African who comes to their lands wants to stay there forever. They seem not to even be aware that many Africans who go to the West to do their business want to, and do come back to Africa. My colleagues and I had a light moment when we arrived at the passport control area in Germany. We all took out our passports: Professor Mwansa's and mine were Zambian; Professor Kaseke's was Zimbabwean and Professor Mpedi's was South African. We all had a light laugh when one of us said that the immigration officer will not care that we were all professors and will initially treat us as potential illegal immigrants because we were Africans. Maybe he would be lenient on Professor Mpedi because he had a South African passport one of us quipped. As we made our way to the passport control I saw my colleagues linger a bit behind and I ended up being the first in our little queue of professors.

I looked back at my colleagues and smiled knowingly, and they also flashed back mischievous smiles. I walked to the counter and was asked the usual question by the immigration officer: “What is the purpose of your visit to Germany?” After the immigration formalities, and as we were heading to the carousel to pick up our bags I shot back at my colleagues: “I see that you wanted me to be the first one to take the heat”, I said. They all laughed and said “yes, that is what we wanted.” It was a successful trip and we all presented our lectures which were all well-received by our German colleagues and other international participants. As I am writing this section I cannot help but recall that gentle and booming laugh of the late professor. Since we all resided in the same hotel we had a little ritual that we practised. Every morning we met for breakfast before we strolled to the venue of the conference. During breakfast we would chat about life and almost about everything. The older colleagues, Professor Kaseke and Professor Mwansa always had a tip or advice for Professor Mpedi and I who were younger. After the day's deliberations we would all stroll back to the hotel while we chatted amiably. I really enjoyed this interaction with the late professor and the other colleagues. However, I must say that one reoccurring theme in our discussions hinged on how Africa was well endowed with resources, yet its people suffered grave indignities because of poverty and a plethora of social ills. As we strolled and looked at the clean streets and well-planned city, we always asked the question: “You mean we cannot do this in Africa?” And almost on cue one would follow-up with this observation: “Surely this is not rocket science.” At times we would ask: “What do our leaders see when they travel abroad?” ... “Are they not ashamed when they see how other countries have advanced?” Sometimes one of us would laugh and say: “If they cannot think for themselves, why not just copy these things when they get back home?” This was how I had easily interacted with the late professor and the other colleagues on this trip.

African scholarship and a stance against academic imperialism

As I reflect on the life of Professor Kaseke and on some of the moments I had shared with him, I cannot help but think deeply about academic imperialism. According to Chilisa (2012:54) academic imperialism “refers to the unjustified and ultimately counterproductive tendency in intellectual and scholarly circles to denigrate, dismiss, and attempt to quash alternative theories, perspectives, or methodologies.” I would venture to say that the late professor and some scholars from his generation had tried to resist the onslaught of academic imperialism. Professor Kaseke did this through his teaching, research and publications where he advanced African-centred positions. Another way he did this, which I think is of critical importance, was being part of an African-based academic journal of excellence. He was for a long time involved in this journal: *Journal for Social Development in Africa*. I believe that the biggest challenge we face in Africa is not finding enough outlets and spaces where our ideas are printed and disseminated. So, we end up sending our write-ups to Western publishing houses and by the time our work is published it would have been so watered down and changed to suit the 'reviewers' world-views. In fact, in most cases African works are rejected by many European publishing houses.

I can argue that in certain instances some reviewers go beyond their mandate and suggest things about our life experiences even if they do not have any idea about them. For instance, I grew up in Zambia in the one-party state dictatorship of Kenneth Kaunda. I was one of the 32 University of Zambia (UNZA) students who were detained by Kaunda's authoritarian regime in 1990. I was part of the group of students who had mobilised the country and ignited a country-wide uprising against Kaunda and the ruling United National Independence party (UNIP) in 1990. Due to biased and uninformed accounts relating to the 1990 revolution or so-called food riots, by various commentators and writers, the actual people who paved the way for the one-party state's demise - the students – are rarely

mentioned by scribes. In fact when they are mentioned, it is just in passing. However, I have made it my mission to write about the UNZA students' critical role in the removal of Kenneth Kaunda and UNIP from power. When I write from my own experiences as a former student activist and former detainee of the one-party state dictatorship and submit such work to a European publishing house, a reviewer may reject or seek to change my account. I may even be asked to quote a European scholar who is an 'expert' on Zambia. Another example would be when we write about how we as Africans experienced the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP), we might by all accounts be told by some reviewers to cite a European scholar or 'expert' on SAP, but who never suffered the pain of SAP. Otherwise our papers will not be published. This is what I mean by academic imperialism.

The prevalence of academic imperialism in present times has spawned almost an arrogance on the part of the West, where researchers, young scholars and students make their way to Africa and undertake all manner of research because they have the resources to do so. After a couple of weeks or months, these individuals go back to their lands and report their 'findings' about us and become 'African experts'. While on the other hand Africans are dissuaded from narrating their experiences in the guise of upholding 'rigour', 'objectivity' and so forth. Hence, we cannot narrate our African experiences, which are treated as spurious by some Western publishers. However, people from different cultures can come to Africa and assume that they know all about Africa and its people, and be given platforms to talk about us and tell our own stories? That is how academic imperialism works. There is also a worrying trend that is gaining momentum in academic circles, especially at international conferences, which focus on African issues. In my experience, I usually see mainly Europeans presenting on various issues about Africa. They do this with so much confidence because they have 'evidence' about Africa. At such conferences there are few black faces. The same 'African experts' will again go and publish in journals and write books about

us. And yet if it were Africans writing about European circumstances they would be challenged by 'reviewers' to show if and how Africans understand Europeans' 'lived' experiences or asked if they even do 'understand' European culture.

This lopsided type of reality extends to African countries like South Africa which is still battling to erase the legacy of nearly 350 years of colonialism and apartheid. Arguably, due to resources and other networks, white academics in a country like South Africa are now leading the pack and writing books, book chapters and articles on 'decolonisation' of higher education or curriculum. And yet, three years ago university students across the country had ignited mass protests challenging their universities and lecturers about the course content they were offering which did not reflect or speak to the realities of black South Africa. Often, black university students feel alienated in their own country. Strangely, white academics are the ones who are busy publishing about 'decolonisation' due to the historical legacies of South Africa where whites continue to enjoy a privileged position in a post-apartheid era primarily due to colonialism and apartheid. Curiously, the students had loosely referred to 'decolonisation' without substantively unpacking it. That is why I will not proffer a definition of 'decolonisation' from the perspective of South African students who had staged country-wide protests. Strangely, the same white academics now turn around and use a genuine grievance and make it into an academic fad. Some of the white academics who are writing of 'decolonisation' need themselves to be decolonised before they can even start writing on this subject. Furthermore, academic imperialism has become so brazen these days that even articles that defend colonialism are being published in 'renowned' journals. Recently, an equally 'renowned' European scholar published an appalling article in the *Third World Quarterly* entitled: *The Case for Colonialism*. How such an article could have been allowed to be published in a 'respected' academic journal is not only mind-boggling but infuriating. This situation is like allowing an article entitled *The Case for the Holocaust* to be

published in an academic journal. If this was not enough and adding insult to injury, when the article was finally withdrawn after an international outcry, the publishing house, Taylor and Francis, put up this notice on its website:

Abstract

WITHDRAWAL NOTICE

This Viewpoint essay has been withdrawn at the request of the academic journal editor, and in agreement with the author of the essay. Following a number of complaints, Taylor & Francis conducted a thorough investigation into the peer review process on this article. Whilst this clearly demonstrated the essay had undergone double-blind peer review, in line with the journal's editorial policy, the journal editor has subsequently received serious and credible threats of personal violence. These threats are linked to the publication of this essay. As the publisher, we must take this seriously. Taylor & Francis has a strong and supportive duty of care to all our academic editorial teams, and this is why we are withdrawing this essay (Taylor and Francis, 2017).

In the above-mentioned statement, there is not even the slightest hint of an apology or remorse. There is no mention of academic bankruptcy that comes with supporting repugnant human actions such as colonialism, crimes against humanity, genocides and holocausts, all in the guise of scholarly work. The main issue for the publishing house is that the author of this article was threatened with violence and that his paper had undergone a double-blind peer review process. What kind of reviewers were these individuals? Moreover, what does this stance say about the millions of Africans who had suffered colonialism's brutalities? What the millions of Africans who were maimed, killed, humiliated, exploited, denigrated and de-humanised by the colonialists? But oh no, that was just fine according to the author who wrote the article on colonialism and the 'reviewers' of his article. The message from the publishing house is almost saying something along this line: "This was a peer-reviewed paper that had undergone a rigorous assessment process and passed" ... "but since the author was threatened with violence, we have chosen to withdraw the article." It is like saying to those who complained

about this article: “get over it”. This is what I am getting from the above statement. I might be wrong.

However, what I am clear about is that academic imperialism is emboldened by African countries' poverty and lack of resources. More importantly, institutions of higher learning are deliberately neglected by African leaders and their governments. They see the intelligentsia as a problem and not national assets. African leaders are notorious for letting their institutions of higher learning degenerate into states of disrepair and decay. They would rather pillage their countries and go and build mansions in Europe and not invest in the institutions of higher learning in their countries. In the end, there is no money to fund research, establish publishing houses at universities and elsewhere or for academics to go and present at international conferences. I am of the view that African leaders have let their people down with their myopic approach to governing countries. Through their greed, incompetence, brutality and corrupt practices, they have literally brought many African countries to their knees. In the end, Africans look ridiculous and live in sub-human conditions because of selfish leaders. Due to this, that is why the world does not seem to take Africans seriously. And that is why a European scholar in the second decade of the 21st century can pen an outrageous article defending colonialism. Therefore, we need more scholars who are fearless and can stand up against tyranny in Africa. We need more academics with integrity like the late Professor Kaseke to take Africa forward despite the numerous obstacles the continent faces.

I have digressed somewhat because Professor Kaseke knew that I was and continue to be militant. But he never preached to me. He always showed me another side to issues that I might have thought needed militant action. I respected him a lot for that. Hence, he knew that I had been a long time-critic of Robert Mugabe – at times coming across as if I was a Zimbabwean myself. But like I have always explained to people, the pain of Zimbabweans is my pain as well. Equally, the pain of South Africans, Namibians, Mozambicans and Angolans is my pain. The fact of the matter is

that when I was growing up in Lusaka, Zambia, in the 1970s and 1980s, Zambians lived with all these nationalities when they were fighting for their independence. Zambia had hosted all the freedom-fighters from these countries. When Zimbabwe got its independence on 18 April 1980 I was 11 years old. We were so happy in Zambia as if it was our own independence. We celebrated with the few remaining Zimbabweans in Zambia. Many of them had already gone back to Zimbabwe to vote. The only damper was that many Zambians had supported Joshua Nkomo, the leader of the Zimbabwe People's Union (ZAPU) – Patriotic Front (PF). Professor Kaseke knew where I stood on Mugabe's tyranny. I cannot help but think what he would have made of the removal of Mugabe by the military and the subsequent swearing-in of his former Vice President, *Emmerson Mnangagwa*, as the new president. Ironically, Mugabe had sacked *Mnangagwa before the military putsch*. How the future will unfold and take shape in Zimbabwe, only time will tell. Being the consummate builder and optimist, probably Professor Kaseke would have worried about the country's transition not descending into chaos as people move on from the Mugabe era.

Conclusion

That is all I have to say about our departed colleague, the late Professor Kaseke. I will surely miss him. He was a good man. May his soul rest in peace. We all must go someday and when our time on this earth is over we should at least have left something positive behind. For the late professor, I would argue that his noble deeds are so many and that his legacy is intact. His works live on in the many students, colleagues and numerous lives he touched. As we would say in my mother tongue, siLozi: *Zamaya hande ndate Kaseke*. Go well Prof. Go well.

Endnote

The workshop's proceedings can be found on SASPEN's website at: <http://www.saspn.org/home/en/workshop-on-indigenous-social-security-systems-and-government-policies/>

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