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## BOOK REVIEW

**Idris S. Kikula, *Reflections on the Birth of the University of Dodoma*. Dar es Salaam: Mkuki & Nyota Publishers, 2023, 182 pages, ISBN 978-9987-084-78-4**

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The book, titled “Reflections on the Birth of the University of Dodoma” explains how the University of Dodoma, or in its famous acronym, UDOM, came into existence. It describes the arduous journey of establishing the new institution of Higher Learning in Tanzania from scratch to where it is now. The choice of the title indicates the intention of the author to portray a general picture of how the journey started, as well as the opportunities and challenges experienced all along. Since the author was the first Vice Chancellor of the University of Dodoma, it was easy for him to collect, organize, reorganize and present through writings the footsteps and ups and downs encountered during the journey. The book is organized into two main parts, as presented through thirteen chapters. Part one is covered by chapter one to twelve, raising issues related to how the University was established. That part discusses the original idea of the University, its location, the debate of choosing the name, chartering, facilities and the start of operations, among others. The remaining chapter thirteen makes part two, which essentially covers two main issues: the crises experienced and the conclusion. The author has tried to be genuine in his reflections about the journey to the establishment of the University of Dodoma. Using the words, *I thank God* several times in the book is a clear indication that he wrote the book with deep passion.

The author has managed to identify several pertinent issues relating to the challenging journey of establishing and running UDOM during its formative years. Among the critical issues raised include *illusion about the university coffers, sceptic culture, decisive decision-making, rumor-mongering, bureaucratic culture and endless promises*. Not only do I agree with the author regarding many issues raised but also a witness of what is presented and discussed in the book. The author explained how the University started without a budget alongside the lingering illusion from both the public and staff about the richness of the university coffers. That was a common challenge that public institutions in Tanzania face due to repeated budget deficits. People usually believe that there is plenty of money in the institution’s reserves, only to face the reality when they become the custodians of the office. The author also explains the dissatisfaction of the old public universities alleging that UDOM was favoured and that the government diverted all attention to this newly established university. Such perception persisted due to the well-known long-time challenges in those institutions. Probably, the perception, by old institutions, that they were abandoned by the government might have intensified the struggle for already meagre public resources, thus posing more challenges to UDOM.

On page 48 of the book, the author shows how it was challenging to start the University due to enshrined scepticisms among top government bureaucrats. The author quoted one of the most senior officials saying, "The University of Dodoma cannot start this year," i.e., 2007 by then. While their scepticism was somehow justified because it was in the middle of the financial year, it is a clear indication of bureaucratic rigidity. Because there are budget estimates in each financial year, the implementers become programmed to executing only what is planned in advance without flexibility. Contingency is something which bureaucrats wouldn't like to entertain unless it maximizes their self-interests. According to the author, the decisive judgment of the then Prime Minister, Mr. Edward Ngoyai Lowassa, turned the impossible to possible. However, what the author should have acknowledged is the potentiality of negative implications of such hasty decisions on governance and accountability, especially when the decisions involve mega projects like that.

Rumor-mongering is another pertinent issue discussed by the author. The author explains how he experienced both silly and serious rumours during his career and as the top servant of the University. This is a typical reflection of what is happening in public universities. Contrary to conventional wisdom, it may be a sad reality to learn that rumour-mongering has become a way how individuals in universities negotiate or advance their personal interests in their course of interaction with university management or top government circles. This kind of negative politics has continued to characterize UDOM. For instance, the sudden demise of the succeeding Vice Chancellor, only after nine months in office, sparked rumours from all corners of the University that some greedy individuals bewitched the departed boss! The situation became tense, triggering unprecedented staff transfers and top management reshuffles. Unfortunately, rumour-mongering became even more serious to the extent that the new university management succumbed to it, only to suffer a similar fate before finishing the first term. It was kicked out, and the new management was brought in. This shows that one of the critical challenges of UDOM is the failure to handle rumours. While the author managed to point out this institutional bottleneck, he does not provide specifically viable recommendations on that. Besides, he does not acknowledge the fact that the top university management shared the pie by entertaining the rumours, probably in an attempt to manage the internal constituencies.

The author highlights political and bureaucratic tests he had to face from the government, including delays in disbursing the funds as well as endless and unfulfilled government promises. This is a common challenge faced by heads of public institutions in Tanzania and most other developing countries. The author cites an example of the boiling demand for the scheme of service for administrative staff at that time which took forever to address despite government's admission that it was working on it. In author's own terms, sometimes the 'we are working on it' slogan is the polite way of the government to say no. Therefore, whenever there are staff demands, Heads of institutions are always caught in the middle of staff demands and government promises.

Even though many pertinent issues raised in the book correctly depict the history and dynamics within the University, there is a misrepresentation of facts for some issues such that the book may be misleading to readers who are not familiar with the context. One such issue is the alleged incompetency and political activism of union leaders and the academic staff association, namely, the University of Dodoma Academic Staff Association (UDOMASA), as the cause of the university crisis (Pages 114, 115 and 135). Such claims are based purely on suspicion and unfounded allegations. Neither are they based on credible nor triangulated evidence. The author deliberately understates or intends to cover such factors as poor governance and management as they manifested through issues like salary inconsistencies,

unpaid subsistence allowance, and poor working environment, which were integral to the University.

Such claims that; the association and union leaders were activists and campaigned on the ticket of tackling management by its horn to fulfil the political agenda and make the University ungovernable are completely unfounded and misrepresented. Instead, that is a typical representation of authoritarian attitudes, tendencies and strategies of African bureaucratic elites in dismissing the needs and welfare of lower echelons. The author should have acknowledged the fact that there were prolonged employee grievances stemming from unpaid entitlements, unjustified salary deductions, poor working conditions and unresponsive and non-democratic leadership, especially by the holder of a respective portfolio. Just to cite one example, Tanzania's labour laws entitle newly recruited staff to a settling-in allowance. Usually, such allowance is paid instantly after recruitment for staff upkeep as they settle into the new job. On the contrary, for four years from 2007 to 2011, staff were denied such entitlements until after they protested. Rather than politicking facts, the author should have known that it is well established in industrial relations literature that prolonged employee grievances coupled with poor dispute settlement mechanisms may trigger protests (e.g., see Edwards, 2009). Moreover, university protests and strikes are common practices even in advanced economies.<sup>1</sup> Another example of issues that triggered the crisis and probably militant unionism was unjustified salary deductions due to a lack of transparency in paying staff salaries. Rather than pointing the finger at union and association leaders, the author should have acknowledged that the University was running two parallel payroll systems: one from the Government Treasury and another constituted by the University. These two contained slightly different basic salary amounts with the former indicating relatively good figures than the latter-the one used to pay staff. It was the failure of the management to explain transparently why staff were being paid lower amount than approved government salaries and the use of threats, to silence voices and cover up management malpractices that triggered militant unionism. An objective reflection would hardly obscure this.

Besides some limitations in the content, this book is largely a narration primarily based on the author's personal experiences with limited critical reflections. Despite the fact that the author has a proven experience in university management, he is not value-free. The credibility of the book's contents could be improved if triangulated or corroborated with evidence from other sources. Notwithstanding the limitations, this book offers valuable insights into the challenges confronting university managers in Tanzania and Africa at large. It is a recommended piece for students of higher education management as well as the current and future university leaders.

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, recently in the United Kingdom, university staff threatened to stage assessment and marking boycott following a dispute over pay, working conditions and pension. It was called-off after a breakthrough in negotiations. The <https://www.bbc.com/news/education-59415694> (Accessed, 19<sup>th</sup> June 2023). Also see: <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2023/feb/17/strikes-by-university-support-staff-called-off-after-pay-breakthrough>

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### **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author declares that he is among the first employees of the University of Dodoma and he was a Chairperson of the University of Dodoma Academic Staff Association (UDOMASA) when the author of the book was the Vice Chancellor. His analysis is informed by in-depth knowledge about the University and a cordial relationship he shares with the author.

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### **References**

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