



African University: To Be or To Become?

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DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15814940>

Abstract

This paper investigates the ontological and philosophical dilemma facing African universities: do they merely exist (“to be”) or are they becoming transformative institutions that reflect African epistemologies and sociocultural realities? Drawing on theoretical and historical perspectives, the authors examine the ideological contradictions within public and private universities, the Western domination of academic models, and the marginalization of indigenous knowledge. They argue that despite their proliferation, African universities have not yet “become” institutions of African identity and transformation.

Keywords: Ideological contradiction, sociocultural realities, historical perspectives, educational services, human capital.

Introduction

The role of education in the transformation of human society is illustrated by how crucial information and knowledge gathering are indisputable to innovative ideas in the human world (Juma and Yee-Cheong, 2005). This is stressed by how sacrosanct knowledge has been to development recorded in every domain of human engagements, and the various facets of the human life. But the acquisition of the said information depends largely on the infrastructure of knowledge erected by people across cultures as these often are the deciding factors that shape the level of information and the quality that are absorbed at different stages of their growth. Assie-Lumumba (2005) consolidates this assertion when he argues that developments recorded in all human societies indicate that they are intellectually conscious. To that extent, elementary and adult education infrastructures differ significantly. While the former is the foundation upon which the human figure is developed, the latter is constituted by educational services that would help in molding the human minds to determine how efficient or otherwise they would become. Manuel Castells gives an important overview about the significance of education in his submission that "We live in a global knowledge economy and in societies based on processing information, which is a primary university function. This implies that the quality, effectiveness and relevance of the university system will be directly related to the ability of people, society, institutions, to develop" (2009: 1). If university is believed to serve such important function in human and capacity building, controversies around knowledge production in the pre-imperialist and postcolonial Africa deserve more academic insights for obvious reasons.

Akilagpa Sawyerr's conclusion that the widespread of universities in Africa bears the mark of colonial projects compels a conversation that will illuminate the controversy around African capability in producing intellectually resourceful individuals before, and the aftermath of colonialism (2002: 3). That African countries began to compete in terms of human and personnel development with their counterparts in other continents after the end of colonialism raises concerns about their intellectual consciousness from time immemorial and more importantly, the construction of universities in postcolonial Africa in the pattern inspired by their colonialist makes it inevitable to interrogate the essentialism of the African universities. This therefore invites us to draw an inspiration from Ola Rotimi's inaugural lecture with the title *African Drama Literature: To Be or To Become*, as he interrogated the essentialism of African drama in the midst of its identity crisis occasioned by its overly dependence on Western dramatic patterns. Rotimi's suspicion of the subservient African drama comes from the awareness that it stands strongly in the way of true African identity in dramatic arts, the same way the current tilting of African universities towards the Western identity holds the similar danger for African knowledge production and the distribution of it. Sintayehu Alemu understands university as "a higher learning institution that brings men and women to a high level of intellectual development in the arts and science, and in the traditional professional disciplines, and promotes high-level research" (2018: 2011).

The above definition therefore mandates us to conclude that an African university denotes a higher educational institution that introduces people to a high level of intellectual growth across various disciplines where issues concerning Africa are primarily addressed and one that serves as hot-spot where ideas are generated and distributed to personnel that would in turn manage the resources of



the continent and alleviate challenges facing them. By the parameters employed by Lebeau (2000), one cannot but ascent to the fact that African university actually exists in terms of their occupation of a place in the realm of fact. In that case, they can be referenced as information producing centers where people are exposed to ideas that are required to address certain concerns in their domains of existence. However, the fact that such training occludes Africans from conversations that address the issues that affect them signifies the wide difference between existing and becoming. To that extent, we can argue that the African university exists, especially when it is realized that it has produced very vibrant manpower needed across different continents of the world, it however has not become in the sense that the *form* of university there does not address their identity concerns. In essence, it is a question of philosophical paradigms that govern higher educational institutions that exist in the continent. Since African universities have, despite existing for a long time, refused to evolve an intellectual-philosophical order that could address sociocultural, sociopolitical or socioeconomic dictates of the continent, its continued dependence on Western paradigms indicates that they are yet to become, especially in the sense that Rotimi meant it.

In line with the socialist philosophy adapted and absorbed in Africa in the character of their knowledge production before the intervention of colonialists, a higher educational program should ultimately respond to the concerns of its society by producing homegrown intellectuals that can develop systems which will alleviate people's endemic poverty and elevate them into exalted positions where they can challenge for dominance in global engagements (Ntshoe, 2002). The African situation is unique owing to the incredibly reactionary policies mounted after colonialism had brought about their creation of universities in the post-independence era. The incremental pace of creating universities in the aftermath of colonialism is surprising but not alarming. From the paltry of 52 universities all around Africa in 1960s when their independence was rife, to the unprecedented increase to 143 by 1980s and 300 by 2000s (Gibbons, 1998) there is an impression that the demand for university education is on the rise, thereby requesting for more universities that exclusively address their concerns and not necessarily developed in satisfaction of colonialist aspirations or in tune with it. The growing number of university education demands does still not communicate the actual realities for the surge in the universities regardless, many people still could not access higher education opportunities that can help them in shaping their lives or improve their engagements.

In spite of the geometric increase in universities, competition was stagnated because the available universities were state-owned and could not cater for the growing demands (Sawyer, 1998). The lack of market penetration by private universities until decades later reveals an underlying gap between state and non-state actors who are stakeholders in knowledge production. This lack of coordination would eventually give birth to an ideologically disjointed private university institutions which were disinterested in fulfilling what should have been the philosophical mandate that the government nursed. Meanwhile private universities with capitalist mindset cannot run away from establishing an academic culture that disengages learners from the cultural contents as its focus is philosophically incompatible with traditional educational models in Africa. This therefore further widens the gap between the public institutions which are themselves erected on the Western template, and the private universities that were out to accomplish capitalist ambitions. One of the enduring implications of such intellectual products is that while they receive educational ideas from citadels that are themselves clones of European schools, they also risk being

an agent of continued identity crisis by the time they graduate (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2017). Learners who are ideologically removed from African epistemic traditions cannot by themselves frontline the advocacy for non-Western knowledge models. The private universities inherit similar problems just like their state-owned counterparts, as they are concerned with provincial objectives that depart entirely from the general philosophy which governed African knowledge production before the adulteration from the West. The public universities refuse to evolve from disciplinary contents inherited, while their counterparts in private sector seek fiduciary gains.

Literature Review

Philosophical Disparity as an Albatross

State-owned universities are created with the intention to serve 'public good' but what constitutes public good itself is a subject of debate (Coleman, 1994). Public good, it should be emphasized, to African countries is not coterminous with what obtains in Euro-American world given their unidentical realities. By that conviction, the private-owned African universities are therefore expected to draw inspiration from their state-owned counterparts, but the tragedy of being perpetually in the subaltern bottom despite decades of knowledge production and personnel development, attests to the dysfunctional structure upon which African universities are erected. The duo of globalization and technology has constrained types of universities that are created in many continents of which Africa is one (Holtzhausen, 2002). Among other things, they are usually known to train learners in disciplines influenced by global trends. That therefore dissociate African universities from making or erecting higher institutions devoid of intellectual identity crises. Such market-responsive character of knowledge production centers therefore necessitates the implementation of ideas that are sometimes anathema to continental revitalization. While the policies around curriculum development in state-owned universities are rigid, the flexibility of programs in African private universities is meant to address capitalist aspirations and not their identity concerns that would have responded to the realities of their world. If the university institution in Africa is therefore expected to serve the public good, such is difficult to measure in private universities responding to market pressure, and impossible to actualize in public universities erected in line with Western models.

The extension of philosophical disparity in many private universities in Nigeria for example where white-collar jobs take the fundamental position in shaping the available programs underpins the inability of African university to carve specific identity and niche for itself. Vocational education in light of the current global realities have proved to help develop functional system with maximum potential for poverty alleviation but the acquisition of such knowledge does not demand fat capital as other scientific courses and discipline require. Private universities therefore do not provide such programs because of the potential financial implications, which may serve as an impediment to their capitalist aspirations (Mazzacuto, 2013). As such, the private university does not make itself relevant in producing education for public good but for private dreams. Making available courses in vocational studies which would radically increase the production of manpower needed in different blue-collar departments does not serve the interests of private universities proprietors, and for that reason, they would not compete in producing such knowledge to their students, thereby compounding the problems confronted by many African countries in terms of their knowledge production. By that condition, the configuration of African universities becomes a problem

because while they actually exist in the sense that they have physical and numerical reference, they however are yet to become because they do not establish a unique identity consistent with their cultural, political, economic and sociological realities. Trow (2007) submits that maintaining the existing structures means that they draw inspiration from Western educational culture, hence the result in Africa.

At least ten church-owned universities are in Kenya, not less than fifteen church-owned universities in Ghana, while the number of religious-inspired universities in Nigeria borders around twenty (Sawyerr, 2002: Varghese, 2006: Altbach, 2006). This shows a trend that the democratic space offered for knowledge production and distribution has ineluctably inspired an entry for faith-based universities into the business of intellectual making in the continent. Apparently, the concerns of such schools ultimately is the transmission of ideas that are within the moral circumference of the religious community that produced them (Levy, 1999). While this itself does not portend mortal danger to African intellectualism, it however stands to impede the possibility of carving a unique identity for African university systems because not only does the interest of the builders depart from the philosophical paradigm that necessitated university creation, it also does not care about the Westernization, Islamization or Christianization of African educational space for it would protest the Africanization of knowledge especially when such project proves to be an existential threat to their survival. Whereas without a philosophically integrative university education system, the possibility of decolonization or Africanization of knowledge would remain difficult, if not entirely impossible to accomplish in the light of emerging development. Again, this substantiates very plainly the argument that African universities still exist as a matter (physical entity occupying space) but they are yet to become, as they have no central identity.

Knowledge Distribution in African Universities: Western Prototype or Locally Integrative?

It is hard to identify any structural difference between the university systems inherited from the colonialists and those maintained six decades after independence. In terms of disciplinary makeup, African universities, both state-owned and their private-owned counterparts, have always derived their inspiration for disciplinary structures from continued assimilation of its Western prototype (Henkel, 2007). If the idea of university as conceived by Altbach (2006) is anything to go by, one will therefore understand why the extensive inferiorization of African knowledge systems in the sector would always be detrimental. One of the fundamental purposes of a university is to serve as a melting pot of ideas where individuals come to retrieve information and use it in ways that would assist in making them useful for the public service. Meanwhile such service is generally necessary so as not to alienate the community for which the knowledge is even meant in the first instance. Apart from the underlying impediment that the Western languages of instructions pose to African intellectual development and growth, the operation of Western knowledge systems alienates members of the community from knowledge engagements and creates an elitist mentality that isolates certain groups of people from the community of intellectuals which thus prevents flexibility in information exchanges. The African university structures are molded in Western archetype thereby giving access to information for only individuals who attend them. Meanwhile the existing knowledge structures before colonialism did not follow this ideologically strange pattern. Information acquisition during the periods was not rigid. Ajayi (1996) implies that by the



nature of the African reality occasioned by colonial experiment, it is obvious that postcolonial Africans have at least two models of educational structures which they ought to depend on for identity carving.

Except by our aversion to indigenous knowledge generation systems, we are conceding that information in a particular domain of knowledge in pre-Western history was ineffective and ineffable, only then can the ultimate dependence on Western university prototype make logical meaning. Otherwise, the appropriation of a singular approach to education in various African universities would have translated to the acceptance of the inferiority status projected by Western scholars about precolonial African knowledge system (Ruegg, 1992). Whereas this itself would have been questionable for it does not have logical and historical foundation upon which it can rest. As an example, the medical system of the precolonial African should not be completely jettisoned in the African university systems, otherwise, the knowledge centers in Africa would have remained an extension of their Global-Nort counterparts by which condition it would have relegated knowledge systems in Africa to the background. Walter Mignolo (2007) protests that such condition underpins the “colonial matrix of power” or “coloniality of power” which upholds the superiority of the universalists, while at the other end, denigrating those placed at the subaltern bottom over their assumption of and concession to inferiority status. This suggests that the appropriation of Western paradigms, theories and mechanisms in African universities seek to achieve a more impervious ambition, at the detriment of Africa and Africans themselves. The students in higher institution in medical discipline do not understand that there is African perspective to medical knowledge and without conducting a single research engagement about the potency of such alternative, they would condemn its models and approach under the illusion that only their assimilated Western approach is acceptable. Actually, such a Eurocentric ideology has been visibly jettisoned in a suggestive manner through dramatic presentation in James Ene Henshaw’s *This is Our Chance*. Henshaw, a medical doctor by profession, decides to discountenance orthodox medicine in favour of traditional medicine, through the symbolic snake antidote, a local discovery through research by an educated but non-medical practitioner. Ogunde (2010) also deemphasizes the European based university programme as he unequivocally states that if he had been educated to the university level, he would have ended up being an academic dramatist. Instead, he came up with the theatre of local contents that impacted positively on his immediate society and beyond.

If we are to concede to the position of Plato that the fundamental purpose of a higher education by which he meant university, is “the cultivation of the individual for the sake of the ideal society; the individual was to be helped to achieve inner happiness, which would allow the state to benefit from the harmony of satisfied citizens fulfilling their proper roles” (Allen, 1988, p.89), it would be easy to accept that African university systems which have excluded indigenous educational system and structures were rigged against themselves from the beginning. In that case, the individual raised in the institutions could find continued difficulty in achieving happiness because the foundation of the knowledge which they acquired is deceitful. This is foregrounded by the awareness that Western education prototypes alienate African from educational services and system with which they are indigenously familiar. This further strengthens the argument in a way, that as much as there are many African universities occupying space and controlled both by the state and the private sector, they have achieved existential purpose. But in relation to having their

own unique identity, they cannot be said to have become. We can immediately see the consequences of such quandary in African attitudes to global problems and how they are also related with by their contemporaries in the global community. During the spread of the covid-19 pandemic, African universities that proposed solutions were insignificant. This development is not a coincidence actually. It is one of the terrible consequences of having a university system that depends exclusively on Western educational approach, to retrieve information and distribute it.

Analysis: Public vs Private Universities

Apart from their perpetual refusal to meet up with the budgetary commitments instructed by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), many African universities, especially the state-owned ones are facing a great risk of funding research. It is sad to come to the reality that the get-rich-quick syndrome has percolated the academia so much that researchers are less interested in professional engagements, but more interested in what they get from research (Mamdani, 2008). Of course, it is a credible academic tradition that researchers enjoy substantial royalties or compensation from their research engagements, but once that ambition becomes the underlying motivation for research, it compromises the credibility of the research thereby exposing the undertakings to manipulations of some sorts. Countries like Nigeria have external intervention bodies that contribute to educational funding. Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFund) dedicates a fortune to funding research engagements in the country, but it has become a perennial problem that academics who are sponsored to acquire postgraduate education outside of the continent, oftentimes refuse to return and fulfill their bonding agreement to use their intellectual resources in advancing the collective aspirations of the country (University World News, 2023). This creates a difficult problem to address. If anything, beneficiaries of such schemes open the door for corruption that is capable of weakening the African educational system. The sense of reciprocity absent in the recent years has become a foreboding reason for declining funding of research.

More similar problems arise from the absence of collective identity which the university education system should have. That academics conceive opportunities for research as avenue to advance provincial intentions underscores the mindset of individuals towards a project which they do not believe in. It comes from the perception that university education is a means to be a means to end, when in reality it should be an end in itself. Whereas higher education in precolonial African system which equates the university level of education was used for the enhancement of transformative drivers inspired by those who have acquired substantial knowledge in their engagements (Cloete, 2012). Among other things, individuals who attain an educational insight at that level are considered the soul of their community because they would use their knowledge for the advancement of their collective courses of action. Although they may decide to acquire more education and insights from other places, they do not by that opportunity abscond their community in search of greener pastures. Whether there is an excuse for such commitment or the lack of it makes little difference. What seems indisputable is that precolonial intellectuals in the traditional African environment maintained such mindset because they have been conditioned to accept their responsibility as academics that would change the course of their society, and not as it appears today where academics are either undervalued or not accorded substantial respect as the case should be. Although the problem of undervaluing them remains one factor, but more deplorable is



the fact that African academics themselves barely recognize their place because their higher education system is in a state of existence, but yet to become.

Another problem which cannot be overemphasized is the dichotomy of ownership, and the mindset around it. State-owned institutions and private universities are considered as two agencies of knowledge transmission with different intentions. The former is viewed as fulfilling their democratic responsibility by providing the financial investment that will prompt the offering of quality education to the citizens while the latter is viewed differently (Varghese, 2006). Private-owned universities have two fundamental intentions. First, they are a capitalist establishment that seek to make maximum financial dividends by their investment. Of course, such intention is morally acceptable as far as they belong to the capitalist community that want to make profit. After all, they are a moneymaking institution with underpinning capitalist philosophy. Second, they intend to create a university education system that would depart from what they conceive as circular or worldly orientation so that they could educate a community of learners in line with their ecumenical philosophy. That way, their focus and vision depart from other educational establishments. By this configuration, the government see them not necessarily as institutions that complement already existing schools, but as institutions that set out to get a result. For that reason and more, there has been a limitation of financial assistance extended to private universities in terms of funding their research. The financial basket created for students in public institutions are not accessed by students in private universities, especially in Nigeria and Ghana (Addae-Mensah, 2000: Mayanja, 1998: Ajayi, 1996). Research undertakings either by staff or students in there thus becomes relatively difficult to some extent. Meanwhile without aggressive research funding, breakthrough research engagements will remain elusive.

Pathways for Reconfiguration: Repositioning African University on the Road to Become

Voices gathered for the reconfiguration of African university systems in recent history attest to the conscious awareness of radical African elites that the continent is lagging behind her contemporaries in matters of true development, and that portends mortal danger for the future of the continent. This has driven initiatives such as the ones raised in Dakar at an all-African higher education summit, 2015; at Carnegie Corporation of New York partnering with the University of Austin, Texas in Babcock Nigeria, 2022. Meanwhile the emphasis on the traditional fields such as humanities and social sciences, law, and arts, rather than in technology, engineering and science has further demotivated the political office holders to invest more into the services of their institutions. Whereas their intellectual confusion about the relationship between improved educational system and functional economy is hidden in their disdain for academics which they demonstrate by their apparent dismissal of opportunity to provide quality remuneration for the academics. Suffice to say that the absence of quality experience by the academics exposes them to moral behavior that potentially compromises their ethical and professional commitment (Douglass, 2014). To therefore reposition the African university system, a more serious focus is required for the funding of the universities so that there would be an aggressive establishment of science disciplines, increased engineering courses, and massification of technological education all of which would accommodate multiple angles in knowledge transmission and preservation.

By 1933, German universities have produced more Noble Prize winners in science than the United States and the United Kingdom universities combined (Watson, 2010: 35). Aware that such feats

could potentially displace them from front-lining academic qualities and possibly reduce their significance in international affairs, the United States of America alone surged exponentially by the end of the Second World War to displace German universities from that famous record. They achieved that feat by their assimilation of German scientific methods and research strategies, combining that with their own such that it gives them a unique identity. The duo of German universities and their American counterparts, by this history, reveal that the edge in academic engagements sometimes depends on the strategies through which information is sourced and the knowledge distributed. Whereas there is the African university that has abandoned its indigenous model scientific approaches in exchange for the inherited Western knowledge structures, therefore keeping an educational system that undermines, disparages and even emasculates their own intellectual traditions. It is by no coincidence therefore that African universities have refused to produce enough scientists that could rival their counterparts all across the world, even though their Asian counterparts are making impressive leaps in that trajectory. A cursory examination of the list of the African Noble Prize winners shows that majority of the candidates get their recognition from both literature and peace, leaving only a paltry number of them in biology and some other science courses. In fact, majority of those in the science category had their education outside of Africa.

There is an understanding that Africans who won the Nobel Prize in Literature achieve that feat because their literary engagement draw massive inspiration from their indigenous styles, patterns and modes of narrative structuring which accentuates the point that, like different approaches in scientific engagements promoted German scientists above a number of their Western colleagues in 1933, literary productions with undergarment of indigenous originality would propel the producers to a greater height (Maldonado-Torres, 2007). This is because it shows that they have a unique identity that gives results irrespective of its approach. By that understanding, the African university system would equally produce vibrant and relevant academics in the occasion that they integrate precolonial educational models in their contemporary knowledge engagements. It is basically good for it foregrounds a unique identity that would offer deepened understanding of subjects by people in that environment, and create in them a drive for cutting-edge innovations that can be exported outside of Africa (Henkel, 2007). With the deliberate desire for transformation, African university planners should impose specific functions to universities regardless of what their specialization is. Kerr (1991) emphasizes this by stating that the four key functions of the university cannot be satisfactorily accomplished by a specific institution. Therefore, the government should throw themselves on the available universities, whether state-owned or private-owned, and impose on them specific roles which they must take in building the society.

Conclusion

The problems associated with African university essentially begins from their failure to renegotiate the university system and structures inherited from their colonial imperialists. The problem is therefore not congenital in that these universities were created to satisfy European dreams primarily leading to the creation of elitist atmosphere whose membership is restricted and its approach one-sided. It follows from that pattern that they could not structure for themselves the university identity that can help produce the research engagements needed for both human and social transformation in the contemporary time. To the extent that traditional disciplines have



served an impressive purpose, they however should give ways to more scientific courses that would be dressed in their local approach so that African epistemic traditions and educational service to students at the tertiary educational level would not exorcise the potential contributions that could be made by non-Western educated people. As already indicated too, scholarship baskets should be extended to the private schools although with some controlling measures so that it would not be bastardized, abused or compromised. As countries, the African political class has the power to demand seriousness and commitment from students who benefit from their funding by preventing people who have benefited from government scholarship to abscond to other places in search for provincial objectives. If the tides of African intellectual engagements are perpetually determined by the waves of Western epistemic traditions, African universities would not have the stamina to determine the direction of the African civilizations, and for that reason, they would remain in subaltern bottom.

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