THREE GENERATIONS OF AFRICAN ACADEMICS: A NOTE

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Introduction

In the current debates about the crisis of African universities and what to do about it considerable emphasis has been laid on the institutions and their physical dilapidation, much more than on the people animating these institutions. Yet one interesting feature of institutions of learning is that while they are sources of new knowledge and labour-saving technologies, they themselves are relatively 'labour intensive' or 'human capital intensive' operations. This note presents a brief generational profile of this labour. The purpose is to inject a little historical perspective into the on-going debates about the future of African universities, if only to counter some of the ahistorical approaches or institutional amnesia so common in debates about policy in Africa.

Since independence there have been at least three generations of indigenous researchers in Africa. Each has witnessed changes in their countries' economic fortunes and political trajectories, as well as cultural and societal transformation. All of these factors have impinged on the nature and meaning of their academic careers.

First Generation

The first generation was largely produced abroad through such programmes as the African Students programme in American Universities (ASPUA) and other cold-war induced 'airlifts' of African students to especially the United States. This author was a beneficiary of one such programme. Many of these students went to some of the best universities in North America and Europe and significant numbers of them returned to their respective home countries, usually after completing post-graduate studies. They were to provide the first set of indigenous scholars in the 'indigenisation' of African universities.

Their return was motivated by both material and moral incentives. Living conditions were at that time good and morale was high, what with the euphoria of independence, the 'intoxicating mystique of emergent Africa' (Coleman and Court, 1994:90), and the exhilaration of edifying entirely new institutions. In most cases, the scholars came back to reasonably well-functioning and rapidly

expanding institutions to which both donors and governments still allocated considerable resources. In addition, in some cases donors like the Rockefeller Foundation provided financial support to facilitate the integration of returnees into local universities. There was, furthermore, a political atmosphere that was largely favourable (although one could detect the seeds of the authoritarian rule that was soon to infest the African political landscape). Most intellectuals shared the state's 'developmentalist' ideology and some even rationalised the authoritarian cast with which the 'developmentalist' ideology was to be moulded by pointing to supposedly universal exigencies of development.

The academic standing of a considerable number of this group was high, having had articles accepted in major journals and books published by international publishers attracted by the vibrancy of their work and the financial well-being of 'Area studies' in American and European universities. They and their expatriate counterparts also initiated and sustained a number of periodicals most of which have folded or, as in the case of the Makerere-born *Transition*, simply left the African shores for better climes. Thus, members of this generation enjoyed international recognition and even to this day those still academically active continue to have access to the international academic community.

Scattered all over the continent, cut off from research networks dominated by expatriates and isolated in small departments or institutions, this first generation strove to set up continental and sub-regional organisations. It was this generation which was responsible for the setting up of such pan-African research networks and institutions as CODESRIA and AAPS, and in the early years these networks reflected the understanding and the needs of this generation. It was much later that some of these networks were to devise programmes specifically geared to later generations or that new networks were created to serve the needs of new generations. This first generation was self-consciously anti-neo-colonial and considered decolonisation of national institutions, and of the intellectual terrain, as major tasks. Not surprisingly, this generation was profoundly pre-occupied with problems of nation-building, of economic and intellectual dominance and the continued dependency of their respective countries on their erstwhile colonial masters. Today, this generation occupies key positions and still constitute the pillars of African society. It has also increasingly become pre-occupied with the problems of its reproduction as an intellectual community.

Second Generation

The second generation of African researchers was also trained abroad usually after undergraduate studies at their national universities. Unlike the earlier generation, however, many of this generation stayed abroad while those that

returned, did not stay long.

Nigeria is an interesting case here because there the process took place with a noticeable time lag. Most members of the second generation did come back, attracted by high salaries and the dramatic expansion in the university system underwritten by the fabulous oil returns. Indeed, at the time even those Nigerians who had been forced to stay on abroad by the Biafra war abandoned their tenured jobs to return home. A significant number of this second generation have left Nigeria or are on the lookout for greener pastures. Francophone countries also continued to be attractive much longer than their Anglophone counterparts partly because of the strength of CFA. It was easier for them to pull out than their predecessors whose professional and social commitments rendered them less mobile. They constituted the first wave of the African 'brain drain'.

The reasons for their disenchantment were many. First, in a number of countries, especially those in West Africa, by the time this generation was ready to return home, the indigenisation programmes had been virtually completed. This meant that promotion would be more competitive than for the first generation. Furthermore, with this new African professoriate being relatively young, upward mobility would also be slow. Second, there was the economic crisis ravaging African countries. High inflation rates and the massive devaluations of currencies had, by the 1990s, so reduced local salaries that only a few African scholars abroad could be persuaded to come back or stay on. And as if this was not bad enough, by the mid-1970s and certainly by the 1990s, academia and the state were virtually at each others throats (literally in the case of the throats of the former). Growing political repression added academic political refugees to the growing stock of academic 'economic refugees'.

Overall, however, these two generations did have access to institutions abroad and were therefore relatively mobile, although perhaps less so with the passage of time. In the case of the first generation, family, professional and moral commitments considerably reduced both the capacity and will to move. It was therefore more of the second generation than the first that the comments below by Mamdani in a CODESRIA Bulletin are most apt:

> In our single minded pursuit to create centres of learning and research of international standing, we had nurtured researchers and educators who had little capacity to work in surrounding communities but who could move to any institution in any industrialised country and serve any privileged community around the globe with comparative ease. In our failure to contextualise standards and excellence to needs of our own people, to ground the very process and agenda of learning and research in our

> conditions, we ended up creating an intelligentsia with little stamina for the very process of development whose vanguard we claimed to be. Like birds who cross oceans when the weather turns adverse, we had little depth and grounding, but maximum reach and mobility. So that, when the going got rough, we got going across borders.

One effect of this trend is captured in the observations about historians by Philip Curtin in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (3 March 1995):

> For Africa the decline in the quality of the universities over the past two or three decades has been sad to see. A half dozen of the best African historians under 50 years of age are now pursuing their careers in the United States or Canada. The older generation of historians in Africa, the first generation trained in the West, has now largely retired. The absence of others at the peak of their research potential will make it hard to maintain the standards that the leaders of the field have set.

This article provoked an angry response from Black historians, many of whom I would classify as part of the second generation.[1]

Third Generation

The failure by members of the second generation to return home after completion of their studies, the brain drain and the setting up of local graduate school programmes has either undercut much of the rationale for sending students abroad or obviated the need to do so. It has even led to doubts about the wisdom of insisting on high standards in local universities if this only facilitated the brain drain. For example, in a recent study of academic freedom in Ghana, George Hagen (1994) quoted the Ghanaian head of state as suggesting that high qualifications only encouraged professionals to seek 'greener pastures'. He goes on to argue that doctors should be given:

> ... no more training than the training he would need for healing the sick in Ghana, and let the doctor go abroad later and acquire the extra training that makes him or her so attractive.

The serious foreign exchange shortages and debt servicing problems plaguing African countries and the loss of interest has conspired to drastically reduce facilities for study abroad. And so the third generation of African social scientist is increasingly produced locally. For instance, in Nigeria by 1982, 64 percent of 3000 scholarships provided by the Federal Government of Nigeria were tenable in Nigeria.

The first generation is now retiring from academic life and the few members

of the second generation that came back are furtively looking for ways to get out of the universities into consultancies or to leave their respective countries. It is therefore the third generation that is assuming the reins of power in the universities and beginning to constitute the medium to senior levels of the academic hierarchy. They are also often required to lead post-graduate programmes, develop local research programmes and provide inputs into national political debates and programmes.

At the risk of extreme generalisation one can list the following as characteristics of this generation. The first is that a number of them, especially the ones entering graduate schools in the latter part of the 1980s, received their training under extremely difficult circumstances. One such difficulty was the extremely repressive environment within which this generation lived its adolescence and entered its adulthood. 'Born free' in the sense of being products of independent Africa, it has spent much of its life under extreme political repression and restrictions on academic freedom. A second difficulty has been the scandalous material conditions within which they studied and taught.

A third difficulty is related to the identity crisis that African universities face. Having achieved their mission - 'meeting the high level manpower needs of the nation' (read 'public administration') - African universities lost their original *raison d'etre* in the eyes of the state and sometimes the public. Compounding matters about the ambiguity of their academic status was the swarm of experts that came along in the wake of structural adjustment programme and the resumption by donors of control over key economic functions of the nation and the consultancy missions. These visiting teams either brought 'our own Africans' or often employed local ones whose degrees and certificates they could decipher (US or European-trained were key words). Those with local degrees were generally disadvantaged and in many ways, were victims of the same disdain to which national institutions and endeavours were now held. Add on to all this, the argument that the 'rates of return' of African universities were much lower than that of primary and secondary education, and the results is a beleaguered academic community fighting for every ounce of respect and resources coming its way.

A consequence of the above is that members of this generation lack international exposure, having not acquired a sure footing in the international research world and are much less 'marketable' internationally than their predecessors. One reasons for this is the shameful collapse of libraries. No sight is so shocking on African universities as the nearly criminal neglect of libraries and the total absence of modern means of communications and research technologies. A second reason relates to the limited numbers of visiting scholars

and the limited opportunities for African scholars to study abroad.

One effect is that the work of this group exhibits little familiarity with major theoretical debates abroad and tends to be excessively descriptive. Part of this descriptive work is essential especially when it is about a continent which has often been debated by analogy or anecdote. However, no longer anchored in a theoretical framework, it remains poorly collected or marshalled. Under such conditions intellectual reflection is bound to be hampered by a sense of being engaged in what is an embarrassingly demode intellectual life. This feeling is reinforced by the almost routine rejection by international journals of articles written by these scholars usually on the grounds that their bibliographical references are hopelessly dated. This produces the bizarre situation where 'Africanists' publish materials with the latest bibliographical references but dated material while African scholars include the latest information on their countries but carry dated bibliographies. One solution to this problem could be the encouragement of African publishing houses to generate an 'African bibliography' that will valorise the knowledge of African researchers about the situation in their respective countries. Another, and under the circumstances, remarkable quality of this generation is that, aware of this terrible legacy, it is seriously committed to research and uses any opportunity for self-improvement offered to it.

It is this generation that is attracted to most of the regional and pan-African research networks which constitute their only international contacts. Their interest in these networks is not so much to break their isolation, but to exploit whatever opportunities exist for self-improvement in the academic sphere. It is not surprising that it is from this generation that such networking organisations as CODESRIA draw their most ardent devotees. Indeed, the most vibrant research networks in Africa are the ones which have embraced this generation of researchers, sought to cater to its specific needs, harnessed its potentialities and broken the monopoly of the first generation of researchers over research institutions and networks. Activities aimed at enabling this generation to broaden and deepen their reading and investigation have a very high pay-off and, given the strategic positions this generation is beginning to occupy in the universities, can be expected to have extensive positive externalities.

It is also this generation that is beginning to take the fate of their universities seriously in a political way. It is leading the first wave of public actions (strikes, demonstrations, appeals to the public etc) over purely academic matters - teaching loads, libraries and the general working environment and its members are consciously seeking to bring the problems of the university to a larger public.

Born after independence or largely brought up in the post-independence era,

this generation is less enamoured by ideologies where blame is placed on external actors or the 'colonial past'. Indeed, where the first generation can be accused of advancing excessively 'externalist' explanations of Africa's problems, this third generation runs the risk of committing the opposite error of advancing excessively 'internalist' explanations of the crisis by ignoring the global structural contexts within which the prospects of their respective countries are embedded. It is also the third generation that is likely to initiate an autonomous discourse and reflection on Africa - autonomous not in the sense that it is isolated but in the sense that it takes the specificities of the African experience seriously and has a proactive rather than reactive relationship with non-African scholarship. In many ways, much of the early African scholarship operated within the parameters defined by Africanist discourse so that in its critical form it was essentially reactive - 'debunking' colonialist or neo-colonialist interpretations of the African experience, while, in its non-critical form, it tended to assume a mimetic mode that stifled originality. Getting out of both of these stances may be the greatest challenge to the current generation of African social scientists.

Implications of the Analysis

In such a brief presentation distinctions may have been overdrawn. Academic 'generations' are not, for example, neatly separated into such discrete groups as I have suggested here. However, with the caveats in mind, I will proceed to draw some conclusions and implications of the analysis fully aware that more nuanced ways of proceeding are both possible and desirable.

Firstly, support to this generation must take into account the material conditions within which it is being produced. The new attention being devoted to university infrastructure is to be welcomed therefore, although here one senses the danger of patterns of expenditure and support that may not be replicable, let alone sustainable. This is partly because some of those who have come to the rescue of the university may be tempted to do so outside the ambit of the state.

Expenditure on higher education should be set firmly in the national budget as an essential line item in the budget of any state bent on the development of its country. The current calls for the 'independence' of African universities from the state can be fatally misleading if they give the false impression that African universities can rely entirely on private funding or foreign grants. Forms of support that supposedly seek to avoid the putatively corrupt and inefficient African state or university bureaucracies are unlikely to survive the departure of the donors from the scene. In the 1970s, for example, the World Bank set up special authorities for its agricultural development projects. These were

supposed to be more efficient and less encumbered by local bureaucracies. These authorities now lie littered all over the continents as monuments to extreme arrogance and naivete. Strangely, although their failure is now widely accepted, these arrangements seem still to attract attention. This is now done in the less visible but no less insidious form of topping-up salaries of some civil servants attached to donor-driven special programmes. This is contributing to even more incoherence in the already deficient African bureaucracies. The lesson for donors is that they must learn to dialogue and negotiate with the state, university authorities and the university community.

Secondly, support must also take into account the socio-intellectual context of this group and give it every support so that is does not fall victim to despondency, self-pity and self-deprecation. This will demand the creation of research and scientific environments that can generate self-reinforcing cultures of intellectual exchange, collective self-awareness, peer review and mutual respect. Research networks - national, sub-regional or continental - have a special role given the smallness of individual institutions or faculties in most universities.[2] It needs to be stressed, however, that such arrangements are not substitutes for universities. They can mobilise, organise or channel researchers but they cannot produce them. That still remains the exclusive role of the universities.

Thirdly, if the mission of the first generation was to produce the human resources needed for the indigenisation of African institutions, that of the third generation will be the conversion of African universities from training colleges into veritable generators of knowledge through research and teaching. This means that post-doctoral programmes to enhance the teaching and research capacity of staff will play a much more important role in African universities than hitherto. These programmes may be national, sub-regional or continental.

Fourthly, the debate that pits universities against 'independent' networks is not particularly meaningful. Successful networks have been those linked to universities and that have respected and enforced the academic standards that universities demand or would wish to meet. Universities increasingly find these networks as useful instruments of staff development, sources of reading material and means of evaluating their own staff (through peer-reviewed journals, conference invitations etc). Academics themselves seek affiliation to these networks because for many of them, this may be the first form of international contact they will have and are an important stepping stone in their careers. 'Networking' and professional associational life are so much a part of virtually every scientific community that it is no surprise that African researchers have created similar organisations.

Finally, now that some of the major donors, including the World Bank, are

showing interest in the rehabilitation of African universities, it may be wise for such agencies as SAREC to concentrate their comparative advantage and considerable experience on support to activities that are directly related to research, taking into account some of the issues raised in this paper.

NOTES

1. 'The significance of race in African studies', *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 7 April 1995.
2. On the basis of this understanding of the situation, CODESRIA has initiated a number of programmes, some of which have been so successful that they have been imitated or taken up by other institutes. The programmes include intensive methodological workshops in research networks, grants and fellowship programmes and special thematic 'institutes'. All these are modes of intervention at a crucial point in the research career of the researchers. These programmes have produced articles, monographs and books that constitute a valuable contribution to African-generated material on Africa. The material has been well-received. More significantly, these publications have sustained and stimulated interest in publication at a time when little stimuli to, and few opportunities for, publication exist. More significantly, however, is their contribution to the creation of a social science community that is aware of itself.

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