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Higher Education in Sub-Saharan Africa and the Labyrinth of Dependency: Who Will Unravel the Threads?

Frederick Byaruhanga

*Learned institutions ought to be favorite
objects with Every free people. They throw
that light over the public mind which is the
best security against crafty and dangerous
encroachment on the public liberty.*

James Madison
Letter to W. T Barry
August 4, 1822

Introduction

Beginning, especially, in the 1980s, Sub-Saharan Africa's higher education has taken a precipitous downward turn, in many ways reaching crisis proportions, as resources have dwindled—and by extension, a declivity of its quality (Atteh, 1996; Giri, 1990). The immediate and most identifiable causes of this state of affairs has, for the most part, been identified as economic: Budgetary shortfalls due to reduced government funding as a result of declining economies; cut back on public funding as a result of World

Bank/IMF structural Adjustment policies; prioritization of basic education (citing higher rates of returns) as enshrined by the 1990 Jomtien conference on "Education For All," a stance that has cast higher education further into oblivion, running on very deficient resources. The results were daunting: A paltry of educational resources, such as textbooks and other instructional and research materials; erosion of student and faculty morale; fright of professors in search of greener pastures elsewhere in the world (brain drain) due to meager salaries; incessant student protests and demonstrations due to removal of some allowances; and inevitably, the flagging quality of education (Nkinyangi, 1991; Atteh, 1996; World Bank, 1997).

While the economic argument is undeniably legitimate—funding being a *sine qua non* for development and growth in all sectors of life, including education; underlying these economic and financial realities, is a web of dependency that has hamstrung the university since its inception, a web that needs to be addressed if the current efforts towards revitalization of African higher education systems are to reach fruition.

In this paper, I explore those dependencies, which include governance dependency, financial dependency, systems dependency, research and scholarship dependency, and cultural dependency. I shall in the end make suggestions for redress, highlighting also lessons to be learned from other higher education systems in the world, especially, those in the United States.

As to who will break these strings of dependency, I propose that it will necessarily be a concerted effort of all the stakeholders involved: national governments, universities themselves, the donor community, the business community (private and public); the global academic community; and indeed, civil society—via a conscious system-wide analysis and transformation, not just a palliative face lift (Wilms, 1996).

The Dependency Web

Before I explore the aforementioned threads of dependency in Sub-Sahara's higher education, I will first make note of this generalization: This paper addresses universities in sub-Saharan Africa in general; not unaware, however, of the fact that some systems, especially those in South Africa and other economically well-off countries have made a recognizable leap towards revitalization and independence. But because many of sub-Saharan African universities share the same colonial history (French, British and Belgian traditions), an analysis that approaches them in toto, may help identify general trends.

Governance Dependency

University education in sub-Saharan Africa is of colonial origin and was established under the rubric of the colonial governments' systems of higher education. The front-line purpose was to establish institutions of higher learning within the colonies (especially, following the end of World War I) to develop a native labor force to support the development of the colonies. Prior to that, (since the 16th century) African students were granted scholarships to attend universities in Europe, one of the earliest beneficiaries being the son of the King of Congo who attained university education in Portugal (BBC World Service website).

Forah Bay College in Sierra Leone, established in 1867 by the Church Missionary Society and affiliated to Durham University in London, was the first to be established and the only University College until 1948. Its mission was not different from that of the original European and American colleges: evangelical—especially, aimed at educating clergymen for missionary work in the

colonies. As well, it was argued that a college in Africa would address the danger of uprooting young people from their culture if they attended universities abroad; but its governance controls as well as its on-site administration would be European (Ajayi et al, 1996).

Colonial government-supported colleges came into the limelight, especially, during the 1920s and were founded as public universities with little religious influence. The British-founded colleges, Ibadan (Nigeria), Legon (Ghana) Gordon (Sudan) and Makerere (Uganda), were affiliated to London University in the 1940s; whereas the French universities such as Tunis (Tunisia), Dakar (Senegal), Tananarive—Abidjan (Ivory Coast), and Brazzaville (Congo), were assigned supervision by the different French universities (Paris, Bordeaux, D'Aix Marseilles). The Belgian Louvanium college in the Congo (Kinshasa) was supervised by its parent university of Louvanium in Belgium (Sangini, 1996).

Evidently, these institutions were established with almost exclusive control by forces outside of the university and, obviously, heavily dependent on the colonial governments as well as their European affiliating universities.

Aside from just a few universities (Khartoum, Makerere, Legon, Ibadan), most of the current universities in sub-Saharan Africa are post-independence institutions created by the new post-colonial governments as bastions of knowledge and powerful representations of independence and nationalism.

These new institutions were no less dependent on their government: With a few exceptions, such as Universities of Lesotho and Asmara, which were religious founded, many of the post-independence universities were created by a statutory act of parliament, an indication that politicians would have a high stake, or even an upper hand, in their governance, since they hold the key to the government's pulse. Especially in the former British colonies, the head of state (president) would be the

university chancellor, with invested powers to appoint the vice-chancellor, who would in effect be the chief executive officer with, supposedly, autonomous administrative powers (Curry, et al. 1987). But since the governments were the chief sponsors, they maintained control, affirming that because public institutions run on taxpayer's money, they must be "held accountable."

Eventually, some presidents infiltrated the universities with their political agendas, agendas that in some cases had a devastating impact on the process of education. One examples is former Ugandan president Milton Obote's maneuver in the 1960s, to establish the youth wing of his ruling party (Uganda People's Congress), whose acronym was NUSU (National Union of Students of Uganda) (Mudoola, 1993).

Former military presidents Bokassa of Central African Republic, Sani Abacha of Nigeria, and Idi Amini of Uganda are examples of African leaders who employed blatant military means to exert their influence on the university, strategies that very often resulted in clashes with students, faculty and administrators—and often with debilitating consequences: frequent closure of institutions, expulsion of students, fright of professors—and regrettably, even loss of life. Many African governments, even today, continue to assume their "big daddy" role, since their public universities still have to bow to their waist, awaiting their quarterly funding appropriations from the treasury.

Financial Dependency

Needless to mention, most universities in sub-Saharan Africa, both colonial and post-independence institutions were created as institutions that would financially depend on their governments. As the sample table below indicates, universities as well as the students and the community generated little contribution.

Students were provided with not only almost tuition-fee education, but also with free complete room and board, transportation to the university and back home as well as providing allowances for books and pocket money. Initially, government appropriations to the university were readily provided, as the numbers were relatively small, with a consistent inflow of funds from colonial governments.

FIGURE 1

Financing of Universities (sources of income by percentage)

University	Government Grant/ Subvention	Tuition and Fees	Other Grants (primarily sponsored posts)	University Services
Addis Ababa	59.8	0.2	-	40.0
Asmara	88.2	11.7	0.1	-
Botswana	57.7	14.7	5.9	21.7
Dar es Salaam	92.0	6.0	-	2.0
Lesotho	76.4	8.9	5.5	9.2
Mauritius	93.7	5.8	-	0.5
Swaziland	71.4	8.7	10.9	9.0
Zambia	78.6	16.0	-	5.4
Zimbabwe	90.0	-	10.0	-

Source: Curry, et.al, (1987)

After independence, the new governments pledged to continue the funding outflow as they heavily depended on the universities to train an African elite to take over the mantle of leadership from the departing expatriates. But as demand for higher education began to increase, especially, during the late 1970s due to expanded elementary and secondary systems; and as the economic earnings in several countries began to take a downward turn, governments quickly realized that the cost of education based on colonial standards, was

impossible to bear. For many countries the inevitable consequence was budget cuts, which resulted in removal of some subsidies and allowances as well as other educational resources, thus heavily affecting educational delivery processes and outcomes.

Systems Dependency

One of the most enduring criticisms of Sub-Saharan African university systems is their "Ivory Tower" portrayal—a colonial elitist model of university systems that was transplanted from Europe. The criticism today is not so much about this transplanted matrix, for most African governments have been independent for well over 30 years now; it is rather about the fact that, in their effort to Africanize the university, as exhibited in the formation of Association of African Universities established in 1967 and in the follow-up conferences, African universities are still far from achieving their goal of freeing themselves from the colonial stamp. Many scholars have observed that the African university systems as upheld, are not only archaic, foreign, centralized—and dauntingly bureaucratized, but are also, in many ways, irrelevant to the conditions of contemporary Africa (Mazrui, 1993).

The colonial ambitious view of a university (in Africa) with comparable standards to universities in Europe, without enough resources to sustain them, without a sound technology and research base for a self-propelling academic culture—has little resonance with the African condition. For example, a colonial university student provided with free education, three-course meals, free textbooks and allowances, is only a delusion of the mind, not only in Africa but also in Europe itself.

Furthermore, the vision that buttressed the creation of universities in the colonies set them on the road to dependency: to train a cadre of an educated elite who would serve as auxiliaries in administration and

development of the colonies (a problem-solving utilitarian view) that has robbed universities of their innovative potential, a linchpin for academic growth (Sangini, 1996). Students who were offered scholarships to study abroad (almost exclusively in Britain, France and Belgium) where they would be under strict surveillance, were encouraged to pursue careers in medicine, education, administration, and other vocational professions for the development of the colonies.

Scholarship and Research Dependency

As Mazrui (1993) has lamented, even after many years of independence, African universities—their curricular and systems—and indeed, their character is excessively Eurocentric. As earlier noted, the original colonial idea of a university in the colonies was an institution that would be of comparable standards with their counterpart European universities, both in teaching and research—and would focus on addressing the African condition. But the teaching strand of the trinity mission of higher education (teaching, research and service) was overemphasized to address the critical demand for labor, a demand that persisted even after independence. Research was, therefore, cast into oblivion, and was further devitalized by the budgetary constraints that affected the university beginning late 1970s.

For the most part, therefore, universities have been consumers rather than producers of research. As a result, unlike in American and European systems, research has played an exiguous role in defining the Sub-Saharan African academy. The little that has been done has been limited to basic research and some applied investigation, with a dearth of developmental research (Ngara, E., 1995).

It is not surprising, therefore, that Western scholars, have maintained a commanding presence—as compared to African ones—in the African research

agenda, given their access to research funding, as exhibited by the majority of the publications on Africa.

Another area of research dependence, one that is often unidentified, is the fact that universities, as educational institutions have done little education-based research on themselves. Much of the research on higher education has been done by political scientists, management scholars, public policy analysts, sociologists, among others, research that has informed those disciplines more than it has informed higher education. One reason could be the absence of higher education research as a field of study in many African universities.

Little data-based longitudinal research has been done to analyze and assess the outcomes of college, such as student cognitive skills and intellectual growth, identity formation, moral and psychological development, psychosocial changes, career choice and development, economic benefits of college and quality of life after college, among other things. Such assessments would form a solid base for understanding the impact of college on students and society—and hence, the value of higher education (Astin, 1993; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991).

Cultural Dependency

Scholars have consistently decried the current identity crisis in the Sub-Saharan African academy—its lack of an African character (Sangini 1996; Mazrui, 1993; Giri, J, 1990). One obvious reason is its European origin, a shade that has remained prominent. Pre-existing educational values which could have formed a backdrop for understanding the African people and their educational needs, were rendered primitive and effectively debunked (Ajayi, et al, 1996; Fafunwa, 1982; Tiberondwa, 1978).

All the planning and implementation was done the European way, and obviously, without any local input. Western values were considered preeminent and

a necessary condition for civilization and development. As a result, African universities have found themselves culturally encapsulated, a condition that has persisted despite the post-independence move to Africanize the university, as accentuated in the numerous conferences: Addis Ababa 1961; Tananarive 1962; Nairobi 1968, Kinshasa, 1969; the Lagos Plan of Action 1985; Harare 1987, and many subsequent ones—not withstanding, of course, the formation of the Association of African Universities in 1967 (Sangini, 1996; Ngara, 1995). Scholars have argued that little has been achieved in this direction because the curriculum; and indeed, the whole scholarship spectrum is still predominantly Eurocentric, saluting the western ways of thinking and world making, thus eclipsing African thought and culture (Mazrui, 1993).

Now, with the current wave of globalization, whereby the powerful governments, multilateral and bilateral agencies and corporations are setting the agenda, the African mind is left overwhelmed—if not mesmerized—by the explosion of the knowledge-based economy, as the computer is still foreign to well over 90% of the population. The cultural theories debated at the universities, the ideological frameworks that buttress university operations, the curricula required books, the background training of the majority of the professors, are all indicators that an African university may be a figment of the mind, at least in the near future. As Rwekaza Mukandara, the head of the political science department at the University of Dar-es-Salaam in Tanzania (as cited by Useem, A., 1997) has maintained “now we are run by the Washington consensus, politically, and economically;” and I would add, educationally and culturally—an identity crisis, indeed.

Who Will Break the Strings?

The above assessment was intended to highlight the

tapestry of constraining forces of dependency in the Sub-Saharan African university, forces that are for the most part beyond the universities' control, rendering them powerless and, therefore, limiting their ability to make a recognizable impact on national development. As earlier observed, some of those forces are, obviously, economic due to acute shortage of funding; others are historical, given that the systems were created dependent in the first place; others are political, since many African government are yet to loosen their tenacious grip on public institutions; and some are university-based, accruing from the often observed poor management as well as resistance to change.

As for the question of who will break the strings of dependency, this paper argues that it will be a result of stakeholders' concerted effort: national governments, universities, donor organizations, the business community, the academic family (global), and indeed, civil society.

National Governments

That governments should demand accountability from public institutions is unquestionable; but governments need as well, to refrain from subjecting the university to political manipulation and unnecessary bureaucratic controls, controls that have crippled the university's ability to create its vision as an independent academic institution. Some countries have taken considerable steps toward securing university autonomy—a recipe for transformation: Eduardo Mondlane University in Mozambique has succeeded in pressurizing the government to adopt a legislation that has granted increased autonomy, while its neighbor, University of Dar-es-Salaam in Tanzania is still lobbying parliament to that effect (Bollag, 2000)

The Ugandan parliament has recently passed the Universities and Other Tertiary Institutions bill, which

in effect would transfer the position of chancellor from the president to an academic who would be based at the university. If the bill is comes to force, the head of state will assume the title of "Visitor," thus granting the two government-funded universities (Makerere University and Mbarara University of Science and Technology) more leeway to design their destiny.

Governments will also need to review their stance on higher education, whose attention has been flagging, following the current crusade for basic education. Universities are viewed as expensive institutions with low rates of return, and serving just a small percentage of the population. But the role of universities in national development cannot be underestimated. As repositories of knowledge, universities have the potential for innovative development, the engine for the 21st century economy.

In the Unites States, for example, the inseparable partnership-in- development between the university and the development of the Union, can be traced as way back as the during the civil war with the inaction of the 1862 first Morrill act, which gave rise to the Land Grant colleges, and opened up avenues for higher education's involvement in extended areas of national development (Cohen, 1998).

The Morrill Act granted about 17.5 million acres of land to States for building universities, with the proviso for emphasis on science and research—giving rise to major research universities, such as, University of Illinois (1867); University of California (1868) and colleges across the country (Cohen, 1998). The Act specified that the Morrill program endow " at least one college where the leading object shall be, without excluding other scientific and classical studies, and including military tactics, to teach such branches of learning as related to agriculture and the mechanic art" (Hofstadter & Smith, 1961, p. 568 – as cited by Cohen, 1998).

University-based research was to play a pivotal role in the post-World War industrial era and the Cold War military innovation to check the Soviet military might, as reflected in the passing of the 1958 National Defense Education Act, giving higher education great impetus in the education of future scientists and engineers, a stimulation that would return the United States to the position of world supremacy in defense as well as technological development.

In the contemporary economy, such critical areas as computer designs, finding the cure for AIDS, designing new technologies, among others, are some of the many indicators that the university continues to be at the helm of national and global development.

In a similar manner, instead of playing the role of master and provider, African governments will need to play the role of partner-in-development. For example, the current crucial national development programs in Africa, such as economic recovery, poverty eradication, AIDS control and prevention, and universal primary education, among others, could employ the university's expert knowledge in research, assessment and implementation, a partnership that would not only be a source of income for the university, but would also further illuminate its indispensable presence.

Universities

Universities will inevitably play a big role in reshaping their vitality. A common criticism on African universities is that they have failed to follow through on their espoused post-independence mission of being the engine for shaping the development of the new independent nations; that they have only succeeded in the training of human resources for civil service, (Shabani, 1998) which has in recent years reached excess proportions—hence the current massive educated unemployed population.

In order to rise from the current crisis, universities will need to concentrate more energy in the area of self-reliance via research and other means of service to the public, to curtail over-dependence on the government, whose pulse is not only shrinking but is also overwhelmed by competing demands such as basic education, rural development, and health. In this age of knowledge-based economies, universities stand at a great advantage, since they are the citadels of knowledge.

The 1990s have seen some transformation on university campuses to address the shrinking government financial support: For example, in 1993, Makerere University in Uganda (which has won high World Bank appraisal) initiated a program of private sponsorship, whereby students who would qualify for admission but would fail to make the touchstone for government sponsorship,¹ would be admitted on condition that they pay their way as self-sponsored students. This program has since expanded to include returning students who attend evening classes. In its five-year strategic plan, the university projects to increase the student population from the current 22,000 to 35,000 by the year 2005 (Maseruka, 2000). The new program has not only expanded access opportunities, but has also become a considerable source of income. As a result, the university has been able to provide some of the needed resources as well as increases in faculty and staff salaries, among other things. While the program has attracted criticism, most prominent being that the drive to raise money might compromise the kernel academic value of quality of education, given the evident overpopulation as well as claims for preferential treatment in favor of the money-generating private students (Kilinaki, 2000), it attempts to address the critical issues of access and funding—a considerable impact, indeed.

University of Zimbabwe has privatized some of its entities, while the University of Dar-es Salaam has launched a system-wide study in view of the inevitable

transformation—all to address the issue of reduced government funding.

Universities in South Africa as well as some other African countries have in recent years recognized higher education research as a field of study to assess its delivery as well as its outcomes, much similar to higher education research in the United States.

Although the above university initiatives are great indicators for change—toward self-reliance, they are still very limited and palliative.

Donor Agencies

Donor agencies have been, and continue to be, major players in the life of universities in sub-Saharan Africa: The Ford Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, European Economic Community, the World Bank, USAID, UNESCO and many other agencies have shown commitment to advancement of education on the continent. For example, last year (2000) four American foundations, the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Rockefeller Foundation, the Ford Foundation and the Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation announced a \$100 million five-year program targeted for the support of higher education in Africa. Their main strategy is to support selected institutions, especially, in quality improvement and promotion of their relevance to their countries' social and economic needs (Bollac, 2000).

Through its Regional Bureau for Education in Africa, UNESCO has strategized different forms of university capacity building: enhancing research capabilities; strengthening the science and technological potential; setting up regional linkages among university for shared resources; developing post graduate programs on sub-regional basis; and establishing staff development programs, among others (Chitoran, D., 1990).

The World Bank has of recent reviewed its stance on higher education, a stance that was largely associated

with the 1990 Jomtien Conference's declaration of "Education for All", a priority for basic education, which has resulted in scant support for higher education. The Bank now believes that "urgent action to expand the quantity and improve the quality of higher education in developing countries should be a top development priority." (World Bank Task Force, 2000, p.10). The Task Force further points out that given the on-going 21st century knowledge revolution, "higher education institutions, as the prime creators and conveyors of knowledge, must be at the forefront of the effort to narrow the development gap between industrial and developing countries" (p. 33)

Like UNESCO and other donor agencies the Bank's strategy is university capacity-building via management training, provision of educational resources, curricular reform, organizational transformation, among others—a shift from the traditional strategy of providing scholarships for students to attend universities abroad.

Whereas the above consensus is, obviously, a viable approach on the way to addressing the current crisis in higher education, and might in the long run enable universities to be self-sustaining, universities should take the leading role in setting the transformation agenda, to avoid the current backlash on the 1980s Structural Adjustment policies designed and imposed on developing countries by the World Bank and IMF, as admitted by the IMF Managing Director, Horst Koehler and World Bank President, James D. Wolfensohn, on their recent trip to Africa (Los Angeles Times, February 25, 2001).

The Business Community (University-Industry Cooperation)

The university, being a knowledge powerhouse that pulls together professionals from different traditions and disciplines, is a great opportunity for business

advancement. The government as well as private sector will need to utilize more this pool of knowledge and skills.

In this age of competitive business and a globalized economy, an economy that is in constant flux as consumer demands increase and change frequently, the university's expertise in research, assessment, quality improvement, and projection analysis, will be an indispensable force. As the World Bank Task Force has pointed out, the university and industry will together play a crucial role of development through research, technology, development and adaptation as well as production and marketing (Task Force, 2000).

The Academic Family

The global academic family will also play a big role in reinventing the African university by, for instance, sharing resources, establishing scholarship and research partnership with African academics, as well as opening avenues for African scholarly publications and conference participation.

Conclusion

To conclude, in this paper I have attempted to uncover the dependency maze that has characterized the Sub-Saharan African university since its inception, a condition that has contributed to its state of deterioration. The identified dependency strands, which include governance dependency, financial dependency, systems dependency, scholarship and research dependency, and cultural dependency, have denied the universities their autonomy and self-determination, a component that has enabled universities elsewhere in the world, especially in the United States, to not only become self-developing but also to be the defining character in national development.

Currently, there are signs of renewed effort to revitalize Sub-Saharan African universities as exhibited

by the commitment of some African governments, universities, the World Bank, UNESCO, and the different Foundations. But for these efforts to materialize, the dependency strings need to be addressed, which will necessarily be a result of a conscious and collaborative effort of the different players in the Sub-Saharan African higher education agenda: national governments, universities, the donor agencies, the business community, universities around the world, and civil society.

Notes

¹ Currently the government sponsors only the top 2,000 students. The rest are admitted on self-sponsorship basis. For example, for the 2000-2001 academic year, 16,740 students were eligible for admission. The government sponsored 2,000 (12%) and the remaining 14,740 (88%) would be admitted only if they could afford to pay the tuition.

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