NATIONAL OBJECTVIES AND INTER-UNIVERSITY COOPERATION IN AFRICA: AN UNRESOLVED DILLEMMA

By

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1. INTRODUCTION

I shall consider co-operation among African universities strictly as a means to an end. This enables me to ask shamelessly whether such co-operation ever serves any useful purpose. It is commonly presumed to; so I am led to ask what these purposes might be. The list is well-known. It includes economic, political and social advantages of the «together we stand, alone we fall» variety. But while its advantages are thus clear, co-operation among African universities nevertheless remains conspicuous for its absence. I ask, why? The first main conclusion to which this sort of enquiry will lead me is the need for a greater and more candid appreciation of the fact that over the past decade especially, virtually all African universities have been nationalized (in the sense of being tooled into instruments of change suited specifically to the aims of national economies and polities). There is a clear corollary here: this nationalization of universities should not be expected to have paved the way for transnational inter-university co-operation. On the contrary, I expect it to have erected obstacles
For virtually all African universities, the 1970s were a period of self-reappraisal and active redefinition. Whether on their own steam or in response to government pressure — often it was the latter — nearly all of them modified their roles (albeit in varying degrees) and sought greater congruence between their aims on one hand and national objectives on the other. This realignment of university aims with national objectives has then resulted in a greater specificity of university functions, tending to particularize each university to prevailling local circumstances. I may point out here that much of this has occurred under the banner of *relevance*. I shall show later, that one of the consequences of this occurrence has been the narrowing down of areas of possible inter-African convergence of interests among universities. For the time being, therefore, we seem to have passed the watershed in inter-university co-operation. In the years to come I expect inter-university co-operation to be limited in reality if not in rhetoric.
There has been one other relevant development. What started out in the heady sixties as a euphoric conviction in the utility of inter-African «brotherly» co-operation gave way in the seventies to a skeptical attitude. Much of this skepticism was born of bitter and disillusioning experience suffered in past attempts at co-operation that aborted. (Recall the cataclysmic collapse in 1974 of the East African Community — comprising Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda — that ended in uproarious acrimony that smoulders on to this day.). By and large these attempts at forging partnerships have been made by adjacent states. Their failure may explain,

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at least partly, an embarassing irony in inter-African relations that cynics like to cite, namely, that such relations tend to be warmest between states farthest apart and to be chilliest between nearest neighbours. But be that as it may.

What would seem to be incontrovertible is the fact that now African states are considerably less enthusiastic about mutual-assistance agreements than they were in the intoxicating sixties. It could even be argued that the self-reliance strategies espoused today by countries like Tanzania (Nyerere 1968, p.267 f) ultimately contain a fend-for-yourself modicum that reflects disappointment with past international partnerships and, consequently, also a certain degree of disenchanted inward withdrawal. I think that as a rule African states are now wary of co-operation agreements among themselves. There is much temporizing and protracted agonizing before such agreements are finally signed. Significantly, signatures are affixed only after the clauses that prescribe ways of disposing of the spoils upon termination of the agreements have been scrutinized and found acceptable. Each country now attends to its own interests, and may find in this enough reason not to pay membership dues it once undertook to pay. This «what is in it for me» attitude is considered to be distinctly vulgar, and one seldom hears it advanced publicly as a motive for entering a partnership. Instead it is common to skirt around it and trade pleasant but largely irrelevant platitudes. I suspect no one is really fooled. A second main conclusion to which this enquiry will lead nevertheless is the need to take into serious consideration the residue of self-interest in inter-university co-operation and to ensure that there is a real coincidence of interest, in terms of «broad and butter», before embarking on such co-operation.

2. THE CASE FOR CO-OPERATION

The arguments for inter-university co-operation are already familiar. But I think they can bear repetition. Foremost among them is the unique possibility such co-operation offers to pool resources together and achieve «economies of scale» that otherwise would for ever remain unattainable. As an illustration, one might observe that the majority of physics departments in African universities, largely because of chronic penury, are not likely to have particle accelerators for many years to come. Of course, may be they should not have them, but one could substitute for particle accelerators other devices which are definitely desirable but which are equally costly. At any rate, the point is really this: the chances of having a particle accelerator (or any other expensive, but still desirable, equipment) would be greatly improved if African universities teamed together, making its purchase and maintenance a joint venture and sharing the costs. Other illustrations often cited, and about which consensus seems to exist, are university presses, technical journals, research institutes, and information centres (Yesufu 1973, p. 85). If they embark upon them singly, individual universities (or even individual countries) are likely to fall short of the respective «critical masses» these activities require. As single-university projects, each of these activities is bound to prove unbearably burdensome and to require heavy and continual subsidies. If, on the other hand, several universities marshal their resources and launch these activities jointly as co-operation projects, the activities may well turn into viable, self-financing and even lucrative thereby ceasing to be a drain on scarce resources.

Likewise, and for much the same reasons, few African universities are fully self-sufficient in their staff requirements. However, more of them could at least attain collective self-sufficiency in this regard if they formed aggregates and established complementary sets of staff-recruitment policies which, through the exchange of staff, avoided duplication of efforts and made it possible for the strength of one university in a particular discipline to make good the deficiency of another in the same discipline, and for the strength of the second university in another area to compensate the deficiency of the first in that area. Without this, I submit, each university has no alternative but to go it alone and strive for individual self-sufficiency. In a bid to stretch limited resources and meet numerous competing obligations, this is then likely to come down to the appointment of one specialist in each speciality. This «one speciality, one specialist» device may be maysatisfactory for teaching purposes. But in research «one is a lonesome number», and the device obviously fails to meet one important research requirement: it does not offer the possibility of mutual reinforcement among colleagues with allied research interests.

To the advantages of inter-university co-operation already mentioned may be added the fact that a number of problems that ought to be the subjects of universities' studies and investigations know no national boundaries. Some of them are intractable unless joint assaults are brought to bear upon them. One might cite as examples the containment of epidemic diseases, the exploitation of shared water and other resources, the control and extermination of locusts, and the prediction of weather-induced and other natural disasters. These examples could easily be multiplied. In these, as in other related cases, inter-university co-operation has the distinct advantage of providing opportunities for mounting the concerted efforts that problems of this nature require.

Inter-university co-operation offers political dividends, too. As is well-known, political alliances (and, so far only to a modest extent, «power blocs») in Africa are usually born of personal rapport existing among heads of state. Often these alliances are co-terminous with the principals' tenures in office. I am not being flippant! Relations that once were warm do in fact tend to sour up when the principals fall or retire. This principle may be extended beyond presidents to lesser public officials. The point, then, is this: since in general university students are their countries' future leaders, as their Vice Chancellors like to tell them, opportunities to establish rapport among them are not to be missed. I observe that Universities' student-exchange programmes offer excellent opportunities for establishing such rapport. For there is what I might call the «schoolmate effect» that predisposes former schoolmates favourably towards subsequent collaboration. It establishes in advance a familiarity among them which occasionally may breed contempt, but which always minimizes mutual suspicions and eliminates the necessity of long explanations at negotiations. And when differences flare up, as they only too often do in Africa, such familiarity may provide an atmosphere conducive to speedy rapprochement.

It is not surprising therefore, that inter-university co-operation has been seen as one way of promoting African Unity (Yesufu 1973, p.85). I claim, however, that it would be equally natural to except the Organization of African Unity itself to promote inter-university co-operation (as indeed

it attempts to). So, as in the case of «the chicken and the egg», I ask which comes first? This is a Gordian knot, and a fitting reply may well be the resoundingly ambiguous answer «Both!»

Finally, inter-university co-operation also offers certain social advantages. It facilitates mutual enrichment through cultural crossfertilization. (In this connection, I cannot resist the temptation to remark parenthetically that, as an example of cultural crossfertilization, transnational inter-marriages, of which a disproportionately large number occur among university students, are a case of a biological matephor gone literal!)

But how seriously is one to take social advantages? In my view, social advantages scarcelu constitute a compelling argument for inter-university co-operation. When as we shall see later, tribalism remains a disquietingly important divisive force in a number of countries at the individual university level, it strikes me as gratuitous seriously to hope that ethnic rivalries can be set aside at the even higher, and thus more fragile, level of inter-university co-operation. Still, this does not detract from the fact that inter-university co-operation, *once established,* can bring certain social benefits. But as an argument for establishing such co-operation, I contend that those benefits do not amount to anything decisive. Please understand me. I do not say that mutual cultural enrichment has little worth – merely that it lacks the motive force required to overcome the inertia of nations and move them towards the co-operation that would bring it about. I believe that the actual behaviour of nations in their dealings with one another confirms my claim. All of this may already be clear. If I seem to have belaboured a point that is obvious, it is because mutual-assistance agreements place so much premium on this point. In fact some of them are called *cultural* agreements. The danger is clear: the seeming of a desirable agreement to be something less desirable, conducive to being it, could end by influencing subsequent action.

3. OBSTACLES

We may repeat that in real practice the purely social advantages of inter-university co-operation are seldom seen as being compellingly persuasive. Far more important are the bread-and-butter arguments about financial savings. Far more important also are the political considerations, which, I might add, can be invoked by the principals to brush objections aside and impose inter-university co-operations. (Recall what I said earlier about presidential rapport.) If there can be compelling arguments about inter-university co-operation, why, then, has its history over the past decade been checkered, if not altogether dismal?

To a certain extent this has been the result of its previous failures, which have then generated some kind of «negative feedback». This explanation, of course, begs the question. The past poor record of inter-university co-operation may also be attributed to sheer inertia. But, again, this is an evasive answer. I rephrase the original question and now ask: What *specific* obstacles has inter-university co-operation encountered over the past decade?

The first of then, as I indicated earlier, has been the fact that African universities have increasingly come under direct government control.

The traditional idea of a university as «a group of scholars and students living together as a community, financed by the public, but claiming a large measure of autonomy to regulate its internal affairs» (Ajayi 1973, p.11) has been called into question. Often it has been repudiated. «The exhortation that an African university must be demonstrably relevant for, and totally committed to, national development has now become so incessant and all-engulfing that it saturates all speeches, studies, debates and discussion on the *raison d'etre* of the institution» (Coleman 1977, p.22). For their part, governments have not been content with mere debates. Those that are ideologically committed have steadily been introducing changes with an eye to transforming their universities into tools suited to what they perceive as the goals of national development. Even governments that have not articulated the need for such changes explicitly still show in their actions a tendency to regard the universities as agencies that could be used to further their aims.

I do not propose to include here a long disputation on how all of this has come about. But I might mention some of the factors I see as having been at play. First, here has been the financial dependence of universities upon governments. Since governments pay the piper, they have increasingly demanded that they also call the tune. Often universities have acquiesced. For example, «the general view of a workshop of academics on the emerging issues confronting African universities in the 1970s was that... the university in Africa occupied too critical a position of importance to be left alone by government to determine its own priorities» (Yesufu 1973, p.45). Second, there has been the threat universities present to governments. This has moved governments to so select the universities' administrative leaderships as to «pre-empt the risk of a university becoming a locus of anti-regime activity and to ensure the responsiveness of the universities to government-defined priorities» (Young 1978, p.45). Third, there have been the universities themselves. They have helped bring direct government control upon themselves either by so conducting themselves as to reinforce their image as «ivory towers», scrutinizing their environs from an «olympian remoteness», thereby inviting society «to scale the slopes and seize the citadels» (Young 1978, p.1), or by «claiming too much concerning the putative functions of universities so that they are now being held to account» (Foster 1978, p.20). Fourth, and finally, there has been the enabling condition that governments have the physical means required to impose their will upon universities. Consequently, given the «seemingly in-exorable and inevitable movement in Africa toward more authoritarian, unitarian, etatistic, and nationalistic political systems» (Coleman 1978, p.4), government control of universities was all but certain to come.

One result of such control has been the governments' demand that universities direct their activities toward national development. I do not say that how this demend is to be fulfilled has always been specified explicitly. I would claim, on the contrary, that only rarely have statements of the demand risen above the level of imprecise exhortation, a circumstance that has led some commentators to regard the demand as yet another example of «development by exhortation» (Coleman 1978, p.18) of which African countries seem to be so profoundly enamoured. Still, universities have made a attempts to meet the demand. A number of them now pay greater atten-

4. CONCLUSION

The case for inter-university co-operation is a relatively strong one. But the obstacles to such co-operation appear to be formidable. I have argued that the trend for universities to «go local» is to be considered one of the greatest hindrances. Doubtless certain elements of this trend stem more from a rebellion against Western education than from an affirmation of any particular local tradition. I expect these rebellious elements to be ephemeral. I remember how in the early seventies a few brave souls at the University of Dar-es-Salaam used to receive their degrees in goatskins, instead of the prescribed (Western) academic gowns. All of this has ceased now. Now all graduates without academic gowns look and feel so freaky that they prefer not to attend the graduation ceremony at all. In retrospect it looks as if the goatskin episodes were the antics of a few rebellious pranksters. Nevertheless «going local» has also wrought permanent and irreversible changes which for ever will make co-operation among universities more difficult in the future — especially as each university is now more apt to insist upon the «delivery of goods». For many years to come, therefore, the localization of, and the co-operation among, African universities will remain an unresolved dilemma.

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RESUME

La coopération entre les pays africains a été considérée comme l'un des moyens les plus importants capables de libérer l'Afrique politiquement et économiquement. Dans l'article de Paul B. VITTA, l'auteur essaie d'analyser les résultats de cette coopération dans le secteur particulier de «la coopération inter-universitaire» en rapport avec les objectifs nationaux que les différents états s'étaient fixés après les indépendances. Son analyse tourne autour de deux points essentiels.

1. Les avantages théoriques de cette coopération inter-universitaire ;
2. Les obstacles à cette coopération.

Les principaux avantages qu'il a trouvés à cette coopération sont :

a) Elle permet une économie des moyens à utiliser dans le fonctionnement des universités.

b) Elle permet aussi d'avoir une auto-suffisance collective en matière de personnels enseignants et de chercheurs.

c) Elle facilite la recherche commune sur les problèmes qui dépassent les frontières des différents pays africains.

d) Elle favorise l'établissement d'ensembles politiques solides durables grâce à un échange continu d'étudiants, ce qui constitue un avantage politique.

e) Elle favorise le brassage culturel qui comporte des avantages sociaux certains.

Les obstacles qui ont empêché la réalisation de ces objectifs sont les suivants :

a) Les dirigeants africains ont vite fait après les indépendances de changer la conception classique de l'université qui en faisait «un groupe d'intellectuels et d'étudiants vivant en communauté, financés par le public mais réclamant dans une large mesure une autonomie pour régler ses affaires internes. Pour eux l'université devait être au service des pays africains et devait aussi être liée au développement national. Ainsi la plupart des universités africaines accordent plus d'importance aux problèmes locaux qu'aux questions globales. Traitant donc de problèmes fondamentalement différents, les universités africaines coopéreraient difficilement entre elles.

b) Les mécanismes même de coopération (mise en place de secrétariat par exemple) n'est pas chose facile. De sérieux problèmes surgissent souvent pour le choix du lieu et du personnel du secrétariat.