

ASSOCIATION OF AFRICAN UNIVERSITIES: REFLECTIONS ON DECOLONIZING MINDS

Presentation by Prof. Etienne Ehouan EHILE, Secretary-General (AAU)

Salutations

The Chairperson and Participants here virtually gathered,

I am Prof. Etienne Ehouan EHILE, Secretary-General of the Association of African Universities (AAU) and I stand on established protocols to send you all the fraternal greetings of the AAU, the apex higher education organization in Africa. Briefly to introduce the AAU, this organization was established in 1967 to promote interuniversity collaboration, and currently has over 400 universities as members. Our members are spread across 46 countries on the continent. We thus operate across all the political, geographical and linguistic divides of Africa and operate in four languages, namely: English, French, Arabic and Portuguese. It is our wish to have all higher education institutions in Africa join the AAU to strengthen inter-university collaboration on the continent.

Back on the topic: *Reflection on Decolonizing Minds*, my focus in the delivery will be on higher education given the perspective I will be taking in the delivery.

I see colonization as the second form of undermining a people's sovereignty, next after slavery. Etymologically, to colonize is to "appropriate a place or domain for one's own use". This is why decolonization is understood as the desire to regain independence, or freedom from dominance. In other words, why, how and under what conditions, can I truly become myself again without haven't been the puppet of another?

Africa is evidentially the original home of the human species, and the cradle of civilization. Kemet, the popular ancient name for Egypt or the 'black land' because of the fertile soil that the Nile produced, and Nubia (up to part of Sudan) had advanced technological knowledge that built the pyramids 25 centuries before Christ was born. During that time, there were no Greek nor Roman empires.

Historians allude that the first Greek philosophers may have all had some schooling in Africa. A century after the era of the known Greek philosophers, Herodotus (484 – c. 425 BC), Plato (424–347 BC) and Aristotle (384–322 BC), Africa gave birth to the university concept, as a community of scholars, with **an international outlook**. Even though long tradition of libraries existed in both Greece and in the ancient Near East, the famous Museum and Library built in the Egyptian city of Alexandria in the 3rd century BC became responsible for assembling more than 200,000 volumes of manuscripts of contemporary knowledge. It became acknowledged as the greatest cultural repository of its time.

Battles of supremacy and expansion centuries ago saw different regions of Africa subdued by the Persians, the Greek, etc. and later by the Arab, Portuguese, Dutch, English, Belgian, French and the German. The continent's greatest strength, its humanity, its hospitality, was used against her. The conquerors brought along with

them their religions, their cultures, their names, their languages, their thoughts, and their philosophies and imposed these on the Africans. They also brought along and deepened divisions and inequalities, with classifications such as European versus non-European; white versus native; national versus foreign; me versus other; Christian versus animist; urban versus village; dominant versus dominated, etc. The African became a commodity, and his Black body created wealth for the Caucasian, and the Asian. His skin colour became a definition of who has the power. He forgot what it was to be an African.

Today, the African continent is still under European, North American, Russian, Chinese, Indian and other influences in all spheres of endeavour. Being thus overtly and covertly subdued psychologically, physically, culturally, ideologically, socially, economically and religiously into adopting other worldviews as superior to hers, the African society has been indoctrinated to oppose her own traditional knowledge and science.

According to John Henrik Clarke, an African-American historian, professor, and a pioneer in the creation of Pan-African and Africana studies, "to control a people you must first control what they think about themselves and how they regard their history and culture. And when your conqueror makes you ashamed of your culture and your history, he needs no prison walls and no chains to hold you."

In opposing the quest to establish African universities, seen by Africans as the means to erode centuries of ignorance and end all forms of discrimination, the Church Missionary Society (CMS) operating in West Africa argued, rather falsely, that 'Africa has no past...how, then, were race instincts to be respected which either had no existence or which, if it existed at all, were fatal and soul-destroying to the Negro?'

The loss of the African identity was further deepened by the colonial partitioning of Africa into English-speaking, French-speaking, Portuguese-speaking, Arabic-speaking, Spanish-speaking geographical enclaves that did not take into consideration the initial ethno-linguistic configurations of the affected people.

The principal issue of the 21st century for the African is therefore the issue of identity. When you know who you are, it is hard for someone to oppress you.

The decolonization process begins with the mind, and the onus is on **education**. Our main challenge here in Africa is the Eurocentric educational system inherited from the colonial masters.

Education is supposed to create wholeness, content and socialization but this was narrowly used by the colonial administration to maintain law and order in the colonies, to facilitate commerce, and for missionary activities, particularly evangelization.

With the growing demand for intermediaries to promote rapid evangelization, the missionary societies realized that it was cost effective to train more African teachers and pastors locally than sending a limited few abroad at greater expense. The number of institutions of learning therefore grew rapidly but hardly were the

educational content used to foster social change, even in the French colonial administrations where the official policy was one of assimilation and racial equality.

Higher education after the immediate post-independence era was seen as a critical tool of social cohesion to give the African a true identity. Universities were also seen as symbols of national pride and sovereignty by the newly independent countries. The importance attached to their establishment is well summed up in the speech by the late President of Zambia, Kenneth Kaunda, at the Chancellor's Installation Banquet on July 12, 1966 who said:

We in Zambia are immensely proud of our university. The pride is not simply that this is our first and only university. It is also because the university of Zambia is our own university in a very real sense. The story of how the people of this country responded so enthusiastically to my appeal for support is a very thrilling one. Humble folk in every corner of our nation – illiterate villagers, barefooted school children, prison inmates and even lepers – gave freely and willingly everything they could, often in the form of fish, or maize or chicken. The reason for this extraordinary response was that our people see in the university the hope of a better and fuller life for their children and grandchildren. (Addresses at the Installation, University of Zambia, 1966, pg. 28)

The question however remains whether in our contemporary era, there is a true African university or what we have is a copy of European university. **Who do we learn for, or what are we taught? Does our education achieve any economic gains for our people?**

The rise in nationalism and pan-Africanism in the 1920s instigated by the likes of Marcus Garvey and of William DuBois led to the clamour for indigenous Africa universities 'whose degrees would have worldwide recognition, and provide access for its holders into responsible, decision-making posts in the civil service, hitherto reserved for Europeans'.

The envisioned African university, as described by J. E. Casely Hayford, a graduate of Fourah Bay College in Sierra Leone in his 1911 book entitled *Ethiopia Unbound*, was 'a (native) Fante University teaching in native Fante and making the development of African languages and cultures its major area of concern'. Later generations of academics, such as Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana and Nnamdi Azikiwe of Nigeria who had been externally influenced by the educational reforms in Europe and America, were encouraged to keep up the call for a more secular African university based on race consciousness and regard for African culture and traditions.

But the issue of race consciousness further beggars the question on whether the African curriculum creates an environment of enquiry for this at all. Celebrated modern historians like Molefi Kete Asante, a Professor at the Department of African American Studies at Temple University, USA, have queried why the curricula on philosophy, history, mathematics, etc. all starts with the Greeks when Greek was established some 1000 BC while there existed the Nubia and Kemet civilization in Africa several centuries earlier. He further questions how one can erode the notion

that the African has wisdom but no philosophy; the Asian have myths; the Native American has tales; and only Europe has philosophy. What about the notion that Astrology, Geometry and Medicine, for instance, started from Africa? Why do Europeans call African kings Chiefs, but even the smallest of kings in Europe is still a King? While transformative education requires that Africa needs to learn from good practices from anywhere in the world, has the African scientists ever concluded research on the pyramids of Egypt? What scientific enquiry has gone into researching on the technological design of the Sungbo's Eredo trench in Nigeria, a man-made trench built in 800-1000 AD that may have taken more energies to build than even the pyramids? **Who do we research for, what do we research for, and what do we research into?**

In essence, Molefi is emphasising the need not to ignore or deny the history of Africa but for Africans to channel their efforts into putting African people's interest at the centre of all they do to overcome the challenges created by intellectual warfare.

As newly established African universities in the immediate post-colonial era began facilitating the Africanization process, and establishing Institutes of African Studies to give more attention to African languages and oral traditions, the formation of the Association of African Universities in 1967 reinvigorated the need and gave more impetus to the promotion of the African identity through inter-university cooperation.

Despite these concerted efforts, traces of the colonial legacy and imprints still exist in African universities. In mostly West and Tropical Africa where the colonial administration was solely responsible for financing education, this legacy has seen most of the state-run and state owned higher education institutions heavily dependent on state funding, both in terms of recurrent and capital budgetary allocations. The transitioning into entrepreneurial universities has become more Herculean for these establishments and still remains a novelty for many.

Political interference, which were rife to assert the sovereignty of the newly independent state and as a means to control the institutions into making them more responsive to development plans, has become a tool of oppression and suppression as evidenced under military regimes in Burkina Faso in 1987, Niger in 1989, Zaire in 1992, Ivory Coast in 1992 and Kenya in 1992.

The ivory tower concept is still a colonial legacy with the academic gown visibly seen as separated from town. The locations of colonial university colleges had been mostly on the suburbs of existing urban centres. Except for University of Nairobi which was situated in the middle of town because it started as a College of Technology, University of Lagos, University of Ibadan, University of Lovanium, University of Ghana, Makerere University and University of Dar-es-Salaam, were all build away from the centre of town.

Discriminatory staff policies where remunerative packages (salaries and living conditions) are more generous for expatriates than for African staff are also a colonial legacy. But on the other hand, the post-independent governments of Africa are beneficiaries of international technical assistance and development aid, which has helped to finance the expansion of higher education in Africa. As more countries,

such as the Soviet Union, China and Eastern Europe continue to offer African students scholarships to study in their countries, these countries, on the other hand, contribute personnel and resources to teach their languages and cultures within Departments of Modern Languages in the African universities. Does this not smack of a new form of colonization?

To conclude, I am tempted to agree with one inspirational pan-Africanist who rhetorically asked: **What has slavery/colonization changed**, and answers that nothing has changed except the location of our chains. Instead of fetters on our hands and legs, they are now chains on our minds and spirits.

THANK YOU

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