

The Staffing dilemmas of African Universities

by Bessem Enonchong, B.A.

INTRODUCTION

With the last decade having seen the astonishing transformation of the African continent from a number of colonial territories and only four independent states to only a few remaining colonies and thirty-nine independent states, the awareness of unfulfilled educational needs has risen enormously. The French, the British, and Belgian colonial powers, by far the most important imperial powers on the continent, each had their own particular approaches to educational policy as well as differing philosophies of colonial rule, which manifested themselves in varying degrees of industrialization, different qualities of the national economic infrastructures, dissimilar legal systems, and uneven degrees of preparedness for the new roles that independence would thrust upon the new nations. As great as the differences may seem, however, the imperial powers all shared the policy that the colonies were mainly for the economic exploitation by the Metropole and not an exercise in philanthropy.

It comes as no surprise to us, therefore, that economic progress of colonies was retarded and indeed feared by the imperialists as it would jeopardize their own national interests. One might even point out, with considerable foundation, that even the capital cities of the colonies which are often pointed to by indignant Europeans as having made splendid progress from rude beginnings, were primarily developed by the imperialists for the imperialists to make African inhabitants. And there is hardly any need to mention the plight of the more remote areas which, for the most part, were casually ignored unless they offered some immediate likelihood of exploitable wealth.

This is all familiar enough, and I need not belabour it. It is one of the tragedies of our day and continent to be forced to begin nearly every treatise of a current issue with what must appear

ABBIA

by now to be a routine attack on colonialism, but a problem is rare that is not directly or indirectly related to it. We are all hopeful, of course, that one day we will have the power of being largely responsible for having made our difficulties ourselves, but at present we must be faced by the problems—and crises—which we have inherited.

The record of the colonial powers in the field of education for the colonies is shameful. Even primary education was left mostly to missionaries, in many colonies secondary schools were virtually non-existent, and institutions of higher learning were extremely rare indeed. And naturally, the schools which were established were generally forced to adhere to the system of the Metropole. It is easy to perceive, therefore, why establishing a viable system of higher education in Africa would be extremely difficult. When one considers the problems involved in establishing a new university even in developed areas, with apparently favourable conditions, the fact that there are any respectable universities in Africa today may be more astonishing than the fact that they by most standards seem so pitiful and so scarce. This situation is rapidly being changed with hopeful plans, gained experience, and more working capital.

Now, once an African nation has decided that a university is an essential part of its national development, the university administrators and planners are confronted with multiple dilemmas. One of these, of course, is the question of who is going to staff it. Will the teaching staff be largely built of nationals, or expatriates? What will be the criteria for selecting professors?

NATIONALS, OR EXPATRIATES ?

The question of whether an African university is better served by highly-qualified expatriate professors than by less-qualified nationals is of far-reaching importance. The assumptions underlying this problem—and they almost invariably hold true—are that the expatriate professors are, on the whole, better prepared to teach in their field at the university level than the Africans, and that there are simply not enough sufficiently educated Africans to teach at the university and fill the other posts for well-trained personnel that a young nation so desperately needs besides. The latter assumption is the more generally true: there is simply not a large enough bank of intelligentsia from which to draw a full native teaching staff.

Objections to Expatriate Professors

One of the prime objections to expatriate teachers in the majority of the professorships is that, as foreigners, the expatriates do not have a long-term stake in the future of the country in which they are teaching and would normally not have as compelling a motivation to make the finest effort possible in imparting intellectual energy to the nation's future leaders. Also, because of the fact that the bulk of the expatriate professors are nationals of the ex-colonial government, there is the inherent distaste for things imperialistic or reminiscent of the colonial regime, which is often manifested in the belief that the European professors would teach in an unhealthy, biased fashion to the detriment of the young country's national ambitions. Often, of course, this would not be the case, but it is easy to predict the reaction of Frenchmen, for example, if it developed that the overwhelming majority of teachers in French universities were British, or German, or Cameroonian. Even though they might be eminently qualified professors, the very fact that they were foreign would be considered as a handicap to the students. Even broadminded people would find it difficult to accommodate themselves to such a state of affairs. Admitting the advantage of differing national points of view being exposed in a university setting, it would seem that the African point of view would be entirely underrepresented at a point in history when the assertion of *négritude* and «Africanness» is not to be taken lightly.

Another related objection which usually holds true is the fact that these expatriates might be outstanding professors in the context of European society and learning, but the African needs a different slant on his education. The education suited for a European—steeped in European history, geography, culture, and intellectual heritage—is simply not as appropriate for the African who needs and craves a better understanding of his own heritage and way of life. And it is within these fields that the European is invariably handicapped: he may be only hazily aware of the poetry of Senghor, the political theories of Nkrumah, the local traditional theory of the ownership of property, or the rich mythology of the Amhara. As beneficial as European-oriented and - styled education may be, is it not equally important to cultivate and refine the raw and eager awareness of one's own culture? It would indeed take an extraordinary expatriate to involve himself in and to under-

stand the life of his African environment so thoroughly that he could contribute very considerably to such a need. This becomes even more important on the university level when one considers that, for most of the students, at least their primary and most probably their secondary education was cast largely in the European mould and they may be quite knowledgeable about say, the Industrial Revolution in England, but be sorely underinformed about the economic state of affairs in their own countries. The expatriate professor can offer only minimal assistance in ameliorating such a situation. Worse, he might even unconsciously propagate the attitude of assumed inferiority of the African culture.

Another, less important consideration, is with regard to the tenure of the expatriate professors. They might be willing to teach in Africa for a variety of reasons—a personal sense of dedication, an interest in travel and different ways of life, a change of climate, attractive provisions—but most do not intend teaching here permanently. They would of course have their own academic community in England or France, families to consider, or other reasons why even the most appealing of living conditions would not satisfy them for more than a relatively few years. If a new teaching staff had to be recruited every three, or five, or even every ten years, the expense would be staggering and the university itself would suffer because of the rapid turnover. The *esprit de corps* of the teaching staff would be difficult to build and maintain, because the loyalties of the professors to the university would be only temporary and, chances are, secondary to their loyalty to a European institution. Moreover, the university would forever be "breaking in" new professors and lose valuable time before the new teacher could be optimally effective in his new position.

Advantages of Expatriate Professors

Our most basic question remains unanswered: if there are not enough Africans to teach at the university level, how are the young Africans supposed to receive higher education without having to study abroad? The only reasonable solution is to fill the empty professorial chairs with expatriates and hope that, in time, posts could be filled by nationals.

One advantage of having expatriate professors is, by itself, very unconvincing, that of broadening the intellectual scope of the university to prevent it from being a provincial, in-grown diploma-

giver rather than a responsible institution of higher learning. But, as previously discussed, if almost all of the teachers are foreigners, the indigenous culture is not given sufficient airing.

Undoubtedly, the most compelling reason to accept the idea of expatriate university professors and administrators is the fact that there is virtually no other choice. A growing country does not expect to have its first choice satisfied in all circumstances during the first years of independence. In this instance, temporarily filling academic posts with non-nationals is considered far preferable than leaving those posts unfilled. Reluctantly, then, African universities have had to settle on this alternative if they are anxious to promote the viability of their universities.

Criteria for Selection of Professors

There is apparently a very informal desirability hierarchy of expatriate professors according first, to their educational background and second, to their nationality. From available evidence it appears that the first criterion is by far the most important. Most to be preferred, after other Africans from nations other than the one in which the university is located, are professors from «The Third World,» from other neutral or developing nations such as India or Brazil. After these, professors from developed but not highly politically associated countries such as Israel, Norway, or Japan are desired. Finally, teachers from the bipolarized or «imperialist» world are appreciated, such as those coming from France, Belgium, England, the U.S.A., the Soviet Union, or China.

Unfortunately, however, this order-of-preference list can seldom be consulted because of the hard realities of the choice of candidates available. The countries most ably prepared to render assistance are the very ones which, for reasons cited above, are the least theoretically desirable at the present juncture. These are the countries with the most extensive foreign aid programmes, the countries with the historic ties and recognition of Africa's existence, the ones apparently the most interested—for national reasons—in the affairs of Africa. And, not surprisingly, these are the countries from which the vast majority of the expatriate professors come. There are in some places surprising numbers of Indians and Dutch, and certain countries have also managed to recruit a number of Canadians or Americans.

Conclusions

The question of staffing the African universities, then, can be reduced to whether the university would be willing to reduce its quality in order to provide positions for its own nationals, or whether it would be willing to wait until its nationals were better qualified to teach before replacing the expatriates with nationals. The governments of Africa are faced with this same question in every aspect of professional life: Africanization vs. quality in bureaucracies, industries, businesses, courts, for example; its occurrence in the field of higher education is not at all surprising. Assuredly, given time and careful planning, the situation will be vastly improved, but time is a difficult friend to have when one is impatient for the arrival of the future.

One compromise solution is to have a number of national part-time instructors. This permits the nation to make double use of one man's training—during the day, a lawyer, one evening a week, a law professor; a day-time public servant, an occasional lecturer in public administration. There are certain disadvantages to this system, such as lack of community among the professors and their relative unavailability to the students seeking outside-class assistance, but they appear relatively mild in comparison to the advantages derived. The drawbacks seem particularly slight when one considers the probable lack of community among a heavily-expatriate professorial staff anyway, and there also exists the fact that many universities do not make provision for easy access of the professors in any case. There is the distinct advantage of providing a greater degree of Africanization of the teaching staff without material diminution of the quality of the academic programme. The major problem in instituting a part-time instruction staff, in my opinion, would be sheer institutional inertia—the fact that in many locales this would require a novel approach to otherwise rather routine administrative decisions as the concept of the part-time professor is not always present. But in nations with administrative machinery mature enough to make provision for new ideas (i.e., not precisely inherited from the colonialists) it could provide a measure of solution to a real problem. But such a compromise, delightful as it may be, does not solve nearly all the staffing problems of a growing university, and the institution is compelled to look elsewhere for instructors.

ATTRACTING STAFF

Trying to locate professors to teach in foreign posts as remote as what Africa sounds to most ears is not an easy task, and there are an amazing number of factors which are involved in the choice of a single acceptable university instructor. He must first be willing to move himself and his family for an agreed number of years to a very foreign place, and there are of course only a limited number of such professors; he must be of high academic quality in order to make the African university's recruitment expenses worthwhile, and the list becomes narrower; he must not be leaving his home surroundings for unhealthy reasons such as to join a less competitive academic community, for that would leave African universities with only second-class teachers, and the list becomes narrower; he must be willing to separate himself from his professional colleagues at home for a period of time; he must either make arrangements with his home university for reinstatement after that time lapse or risk loss of his precious tenure; he ought to have a sense of dedication regarding the work he would undertake without being paternalistic; and preferably, he would know more than an ordinary amount about Africa and African life. By the time the list of possible recruits has passed through this system of sieves of first, these absolutely essential and second, highly desirable qualifications, it has dwindled measurably.

In order to make some of the essential qualifications a fraction less difficult to fulfill, the African universities have found it advisable to institute a system of enticements. These include very attractive salaries, guaranteed tenure for a specific period, various allowances (family, travel, standard-of-living differentiation, etc.), comfortable housing furnished by the government, and/or car privileges. All or most of these combined make leaving home psychologically and physically less painful and the list becomes somewhat healthier looking again. But there would still remain professors who would be unwilling to leave their home posts because of political reasons—fear of being massacred in the next race riot or being expelled for vocalizing inappropriate political opinions. There can of course be no absolute guarantee for the professors' personal safety, just as their own governments do not make such provision, but they are ordinarily granted academic freedom of a high order to attract the finest possible quality university teachers.

All these lures, necessary as they may be, carry with them certain disadvantages; the most important is that the national and the expatriate professors as a consequence are paid different salaries and have different privileges, to the disservice of the nationals. There naturally is some resentment on the part of the national professors who find it ironical that it is now their own government that is treating them as second-class citizens and treating the foreigners as a privileged group, just like colonial days. But, being professors themselves, they are usually in a position to realize, no matter what their personal feelings on the issue may be, that for the time being it is a necessary evil, and complaint has been surprisingly low-keyed.

An interesting special arrangement known as « circulation » has been established by certain English universities. This now-institutionalized experiment began when the need for English speaking professors in ex-British areas was recognised as well as the attendant recruiting difficulties the African universities were encountering. The system involves the secondment of interested professors to selected universities in primarily Commonwealth areas for a specified period of time, usually five years, with full privileges and tenure still intact when the professor's term of secondment is finished. This prevents the instructor from feeling as if he would lock himself away from British academic community, lose knowledge of current developments in his field, and give him full confidence of a position when his session in Africa is completed. From the African's viewpoint, the system is salutary because recruitment is materially simplified, contractual demands are more predictable, and the reliability of the individual professor is more certain than under haphazard recruitment methods. Also, five years is a long enough time for the professor involved to become used to his surroundings, to gain an appreciable understanding of the society in which he works, and to make significant contributions to the university of which he is a part. By mutual consent, after spending a short time back in Britain (customarily two years), the contract would be renewable.

There are also various provisions for university staff in foreign assistance arrangements which has the advantage of saving the African government involved the expense of looking for likely professors. Often, too, the foreign government will provide a salary or benefits to its nationals teaching at the university. However, it is obvious that professors supplied by a foreign government may be (and often are) used as political wedges to the disadvantage of the

national being «assisted» by such a «gesture of cooperation.» But therein lies one of the knottiest problems of being underdeveloped, and nobody is going to solve it overnight.

PROSPECTUS

—It is difficult to predict how long the present dilemmas will have to be faced, but it is probably not too far wrong to say that the difficulties will persist for at least another generation in most African countries. Until the sub-university education systems of a nation are soundly based with nationalistic programmes and well attended, the numerical possibilities of training enough qualified and—just as importantly, interested—young men and women to filter into the university teaching positions are stringently limited. The situations, too, vary dramatically from country to country. Countries with a relatively solid primary and secondary education footing will probably have fewer recruitment difficulties than some countries with a much lower percentage of literacy and children in school.

Educational development is of course inseparable from overall economic and political development, each interacting with the others in mutually beneficial or detrimental ways. As African nations mature and prosper economically and politically, their educational difficulties will be ameliorated; as education can contribute its power to the overall vitality and stability of a nation its political and economic predicaments will become less acute. If properly conceived and carried out, education and particularly university education can make a tangible difference to the development of a nation. It is therefore important that we take care, and endeavour to select professors who not only have the necessary academic qualifications, but also a sensitivity to our urgent needs, and one eye fixed on the future.

This article is Copyright and Distributed under the following license



**Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike
CC BY-NC-SA**

This license lets others remix, tweak, and build upon your work non-commercially, as long as they credit you and license their new creations under the identical terms.

[View License Deed](#) | [View Legal Code](#)

**Cet article est protégé par le droit
d'auteur et distribué sous la licence
suivante**



**Attribution - Pas d'Utilisation
Commerciale - Partage dans les Mêmes
Conditions CC BY-NC-SA**

Cette licence permet aux autres de remixier, arranger, et adapter votre œuvre à des fins non commerciales tant qu'on vous crédite en citant votre nom et que les nouvelles œuvres sont diffusées selon les mêmes conditions.

[Voir le Résumé Explicatif](#) | [Voir le Code Juridique](#)

Copyright and Take Down notice

The digitized version of Abbia seeks to honour the original intentions of the paper publication. We continue to publish under the patronage of the Ministry of Arts and Culture: permission for this was given by the minister of Arts and Culture on 9 August 2019 Ref 1752/L/MINAC/SG/DLL/.. It has not proved possible to track down the surviving authors so we are making the material available under a more restrictive noncommercial CC license. We have setup a takedown policy to accommodate this. More details are available from [here](#).

La version numérisée d'Abbia vise à honorer les intentions originales de la publication sur papier. Nous continuons à publier sous le patronage du Ministère des Arts et de la Culture: permission a été donné par le ministre le 9 August 2019 Ref 1752/L/MINAC/SG/DLL/. Il n'a pas été possible de retrouver les auteurs survivants, c'est pourquoi nous rendons le matériel disponible sous une licence CC non commerciale plus restrictive. Nous avons mis en place une politique de démantèlement pour y faire face. Plus de détails sont disponibles [ici](#).