Realities of African Governance and the Relevance of Higher Education; Problems and Prospects

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Introduction
The issue of good governance in post-colonial Africa has been for decades now one of the most vexatious and hotly debated problems in African countries. This is so because of the almost continuous maladministration and misrule which we have seen in many parts of Africa since the beginning of the independence period. Of course the colonial period was undemocratic; Africans were imposed upon frequently in brutal and inhuman ways. But independence and the prospect of self-rule had been hoped to be a different world. For most Africans this has been the case.

In order to address this problem a host of solutions have in the past been offered. However, none of these solutions has attempted to approach the problem the way this meeting intends to do; Integrating the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) into University Education, and to inject governance education into the educational systems of Africa at the tertiary level is a consideration which is fairly unique.

It raises in its wake other issues including its feasibility, particularly in practical terms and the appropriateness of the target group to which such education can be directed. Some may ask if this target group, that is people at tertiary levels of education, represent the social group or groups which need targeting. Is it not more needful for us to target grassroots society? I think we can say that both grassroots society and the upper levels of society need to be educated on issues of governance, but we must remember that such education alone, in itself, may not necessarily turn the problem of poor governance round.

Education and Society
The idea of education is generally understood in two broad senses. In social science usage, it is generally understood to be coterminous with our understanding of the socialization process. In this sense it refers to all that is learnt in the course of our lives, which at each
stage adapts us to the present and prepares us for the future. In this process, the individual is not only shaped to function in a social context, but more specifically, he or she is molded to operate as a rewardable social unit, rewarded materially and non-materially, according to the premium society places on the sort of contribution the person makes in the social system. Socialization implies therefore both formal and informal social formation and adaptation of the individual.

But, more popularly, in colloquial usage and also as used by educationists, it is understood in a narrower sense, confined to largely formal education recognized by the state; sponsored by the state either directly by intervention, or indirectly by sanction and blessing. Education in this sense involves schooling at various levels in the formative stages of the life of an individual. It is a well organized, fairly standardized menu endorsed by the authorities in every society as these see fit.

In either senses, it refers to learning which enables humans to make the best of their lives at both the individual and collective levels of social life. Those that are able to go through the educational system successfully come out at the end of the day with qualifications which open doors to statuses and occupational roles in society on the basis of the qualifications and achieved credentials they have acquired. But if what we learn provides us with skills with which to cope with social expectations and perform requisite functions defined by the terms of our professions or occupations, arguably education at best must also provide the means for the fruitful exploitation of our creativity.

What this means is that ultimately, what we learn should provide us the tools to create and deal with issues which are fresh and which challenge our ingenuity as tutored minds. Facile regurgitation of all we have been taught undersells the object of education. What we have learnt should be adaptable to new and changing circumstances. It should provide us with the capacity to innovate and make novel contributions to the fund of human knowledge and culture. I would define higher education, in consonance with the above, as education at the cutting-edge or close to the cutting-edge of knowledge.

No educational system is conceived or operates in a sociological or cultural vacuum. Another way of making this point is that no educational system can constitute a ready-made framework for all, societies. All educational systems represent formulae which bear directly on specific societies and which relate to the social requirements of the society in question, by those who control decision-making. What this implies is that when we inherit an educational system, the new society needs to ask itself whether what has been inherited is capable of serving its needs. The new society needs to define for itself its priorities, its short and long term goals, and recreate or adapt the heritage with the requisite skill to the new society and its priorities. Even where a new society in ethos and organization does not represent a serious departure from the old order, each new generation needs to treat the educational system not as a formula cast in stone. Change and re-visitation of ruling canons is essential for meeting the challenges of changing circumstances.

The educational system and its curriculum reflect the identity of the society in as far as it addresses concrete and perceived social and historical needs. In all countries where scientific
and technological progress is being registered, universities and other tertiary institutions as the senior institutions of learning and principal sources for innovation play important roles. In the developed parts of the world this role is closely linked with scientific production in industry, both public and private. The linkages tend to be integrated and relatively well-blended. It is not unusual to find industry working hand-in-glove with scientific innovators in universities. The arrangements and contractual obligations vary considerably in form and substance.

In the poorer countries of the world, like African countries, the prime structures and institutions for innovation remain the universities and other tertiary institutions. It is here that the most scientifically accountable ideas are fashioned both theoretically and practically. The problem we have is that very often our scientific endeavours in tertiary academic institutions are not brought into synergy with industrial production. African universities remain, too much ivory towers largely divorced from the technological preoccupations and activities of our local industries. This disconnection needs to be seriously addressed.

**Educating Governance**

The abiding concerns referred to here are essentially twofold. Firstly, one plus one, if we collectively share an understanding of what one is, will be two, an aggregation of two ones. This is true whether you are in New York or Lagos. There is nothing like African mathematics, as a different “species” of mathematics different from Chinese mathematics or Indian mathematics. Secondly, the circumstances and conditions of freedom and resource support which enables the academic enterprise to flourish are largely shared by all societies. This analogy applies equally well to issues of governance. Good governance has recognizable features wherever, and in whatever society, it is located. The same principles universally apply.

There are however differences in traditions of scholarship; differences in the histories of the construction of knowledge and scholarship, from one society to the next. Where such knowledge represents true cognitive gold, its validity is universal and transcends the boundaries of its source. Thus whether like Newton, the principle of gravity is ascertained by the experience of a falling apple, or a falling mango in a village in Benin or South Africa the natural laws governing the physics of falling objects transcend geographical and societal limits.

Where the state intervenes, transgressing the tenets of academic freedom, to impose its own official truth, however salacious the ideological rationale may be, this should send alarm bells ringing. In Africa, political leadership which is sometimes semi-illiterate or has barely had exposure to tertiary education of any kind is quick on the draw, to pontificate and prescribe conditions for academic and scholastic work. Such leadership range from leaders like Amin, Bongo, Eyadema, Moi, Rawlings and many others.

But we need to be reminded that, education must have social relevance if it is to serve the needs of society. Social life for Africans in Africa involves the African physical and social environment and the realities of this environment its legacies, history and cultures. In the existential realities of Africa, possibly no issue has commanded our attention by sheer force
of relevance than the problem of African development. How do we get African society to equip itself with the ingredients of modernity in both physical and non-physical senses of the notion? How do we effectively introduce and develop scientific and technological approaches to Africa without attempting to make the African a westerner? Is it desirable to make the African a European? Can the African educationally and developmentally advance without becoming a European? Or more pointedly, can the African advance without doing this on the basis of his/her own culture? I say that, indeed, it is impossible for the African to advance through the agency of education, unless this is constructed firmly on the foundations of indigenous culture, particularly African languages. For example, no society on earth advances educationally and developmentally on the basis of foreign languages. Governance education is not an exception to this rule. Governance has in the first instance to be societally relevant and sufficiently specific. No one-size fits all approach is beneficial; no grossly imported precepts can be simply grafted on to African realities and get them seamlessly to work.

Broadly, in as far as education in Africa is concerned, some progress has been achieved since the commencement of the post-colonial era, but this is relatively insignificant when compared to the dimensions of the needs of the present, and with the backdrop of the enormous social and economic problems of the present. Education has expanded and reached groups who in the past had been excluded or relatively deprived. Educational facilities have expanded throughout Africa, although falling standards across the board, and increasingly the quality of our educational product leaves much to be desired. Educational infrastructural development has grown considerably in some countries. In all this expansion that has taken place and the various subjects and themes that our institutions have taken on board, as teaching fare, I have hardly heard of attempts to include questions of governance into our teaching programmes. So, your efforts here win full marks for innovativeness and the attempt to break new ground. How governance as a subject is placed in the curriculum will however be a big challenge. Do we want to teach it as a single subject or break it up and distribute it into already existing cognate subjects? In which faculties do we locate such concerns? Can it ever have credibility as an entire subject or discipline? These are questions you must answer before you can rationally locate the whole issue of governance into the curriculum.

The Curriculum
Curriculum lies at the core of all educational systems. It is through the curriculum that the larger social objects of the social order are implemented and achieved. Arguably, each system of curriculum, historically reflects the order of power and priorities in any state, and implies expected outcomes geared towards the realization of the aims and interests of the existing order. Where techniques and skills are valued above academic performance or vice versa, social and economic rewards will underpin the ethos. All societies reward and variously value educational qualifications according to the status of the particular skill defined by the qualification. For centuries, the pre-revolutionary Chinese state through a life-long educational system rewarded literary and clerical skills which served to buttress imperial rule. The sort of principles of governance that were taught in this system were patrimonial and gerontocratic. They glorified filial piety and the institutions of feudalism. Long before the protestant reformation in Europe the Catholic church maintained a monopoly of knowledge and the basis of its reproduction and underwrote the legitimacy of statelets and principalities of contemporary Europe. Augustinian precepts from the City of God were of more use to
governance than early principles of natural justice. The two above examples refer to totally
different societies and histories. In similar fashion African societies, histories and cultures
differ from the above two, and if and when we teach governance we cannot copy or duplicate
their assumptions or solutions.

The Vagaries of African Governance
We are about 50 years into independence and colonial freedom. But, on the whole these have
been 50 years of uncertainty, relative lack of direction, an inability to chart a confident way
forward, in other words we are as they say “lost in the woods.” The fifty odd states, which
have come into independence since the late 1950s have all started off with great expectations,
and in all instances within a decade or a little more, the signs of developmental disorientation
have crept in and slowly but steadily replaced hope with despondency. In each case, for some
odd reason, we have believed that our specific country case is unique, and therefore will succeed
where all others have failed.

The questions that come immediately to mind are that, why are Africans so hopelessly
floundering in the efforts to developmentally make headway in a stable and self-sustaining
fashion? Why are African governments so prone to instability? Can our governments learn from
their own mistakes and the lessons of others? Why is social and political degeneration so
ubiquitous in Africa? Why are practices of graft, rampant pilferage and the unbridled looting of
the public exchequer so prevalent in African countries? Are our aspirant so-called “nations” in
the long run viable?

My view is that, if after a half-century of independence, the fifty-odd African countries cannot
find their balance and move forward with confidence, then there are fundamental structural
deficiencies and discrepancies that need adjustment, reform, reconstitution or overhaul. We
need indeed to go back to the drawing-board. We need to do this with no holds barred. And
that must start with an admission that, as a line in the Shakespearean play Hamlet runs;
“Something is rotten in the state of Denmark.” The stench is reaching high heaven and
pungently infiltrating our nostrils. But, we continue to lie to ourselves that with minor repair
work and a bit of tinkering here and there, things will be turned round. A principal source for
our prolonged agony is that our so-called nations are in fact developmental freaks; indeed,
developmental mules, they are neither horse nor donkey. What are these socio-structural mules?

The decade of African independence (1960 – 1970) saw suddenly the appearance on the world
scene, of a raft of new states aspiring to be nations. They were all in sequence roundly
congratulated by the human community with hopes of great things and great promise. It is
difficult to believe that those who created these states seriously believed that they were putting
in place structures with long term viability.

Charles De Gaulle and many like him never believed that the African was capable of charting
his/her own way forward. Being one of the principal architects of African independence;
indeed, the main architect and midwife for the conception of francophone Africa his views in
this respect are most interesting. Sulzberger observes from records of interviews he did with the
General on the eve of the independence of francophone Africa that; “On May 31, 1956, I asked
him how he foresaw the future of French Equatorial Africa. He didn’t seem to understand the
question very well, but I didn’t get a chance to elucidate. He launched off again, talking about Arabs and Negroes together and explaining in a rather arrogant, kindergarten way that there really was a difference. Those are Blacks, not Arabs. They are black. Before the whites came they were savages. I don’t think the Black Continent can civilize itself all alone.”  

This view was shared by many Western colonial types. Cecil Alport, one-time professor of clinical medicine, University of Cairo expressed himself as follows: “The African, on the other hand, is a barbarian, with no history, or culture, except the most primitive, to fall back on. It will take three or four centuries to civilize him …” If De Gaulle, under whose leadership the whole post-colonial map of French colonial Africa was designed, is of this view, it is difficult to believe that he could have handed over states ruled by Africans with any chance of autonomous success at development because he says clearly that he did not think that Africans by themselves had the ghost of a chance of moving forward. In other words, the states that were created under his French supervision were not intended to move forward by themselves. They were neo-colonial from conception. What is even more pertinent is that these states were given nomenclature and labeling which were misleading, false and represented a confidence-trick on the African inheritors of the colonial patrimony. Thus, independent Africa, in fact, was made up of post-colonial states, which right from the point of conception were fashioned to be neo-colonial entities.

The borders of these states were designed and sanctioned by the colonial powers. The original designs emerged out of the scramble for Africa at the end of the 19th century. After the first global inter-imperialist war (the First World War) revisions and adjustments were globally made to the general outlay of colonial territories. The principal factor was that Germany, which had lost the war, was obliged to cede her colonial territories to the victors. Britain and France were the main beneficiaries to this dispensation. In Africa, Britain gained Tanganyika, half of Togoland; Belgium gained Ruanda and Burundi; France got a slice of the Cameroon and the other half of Togoland, and South Africa was beneficiary of South-West Africa.

The inheritors of these neo-colonial states were the African elites, formed and groomed under colonialism. As creatures of the colonial project they had one leg in their own societies and the other leg in the cultures, languages and economic interests tied to the metropolitan powers. It is these elites and generational reproductions of themselves which over the decades since the end of the colonial period have controlled and dominated mass societies in Africa. Invariably, their rule was initially ushered in through elections which often have been the only completely free and fair elections these countries have ever seen. The rule of these elites has been characterized by cavalier politics, tin-pot dictatorships, political intolerance and arbitrary rule, bribery in low and high places, and pilferage of state coffers. It is not unusual to find heads of state who are also the richest or one of the richest in the land. Sometimes their wives are near rivals in avariciousness. Many of these ruling groups have been desperate to get rich overnight and have stopped at nothing to ensure that this happens.

The post-colonial era has gone through three phases. The first phase was the period when the initial political groups which gained independence were in the saddle. The second phase was a period characterized by rampant coups and the establishment of military-bureaucratic regimes. The third phase has been characterized by attempts by civil society to hold-back and arrest the erosion of civil and political rights that had been denuded by the politicians, military and the bureaucratic elites which have in different coalitions dominated the African states since independence.

The post-colonial states were baptized at independence as nations; nations in the making, nations to be, or nation-states, borrowing the nomenclature of the European nation state, which emerged after the Peace of Westphalia (1648) and brought to maturity in the 19th century. The labeling is wrong; the historical conditions of the European states differ substantially from the African states going under the same nomenclature of nation. These artificially carved out entities have no continuity with the historical, political, ethno-linguistic and cultural realities of Africa before the colonial encounter, initiated in the period of the scramble for Africa. In all cases, on the continent, the borders cut through historical formations and truncated territories and people with age-long histories. This arbitrary and opportunistic agglomeration of different ethno-linguistic and cultural groups has been the structural bane of Africa. The African elites have been forced into a situation of controlling groups arbitrarily united under flag and anthem. Loyalities and identities which are frequently divergent have been put into make-believe conditions of unity. To complicate matters the post-colonial rulers have not been able to make the relevant socio-political adjustments which would allow the co-existence and sharing of common interests in a viable, credible and efficient way. They have been too happy to be satraps of the political hand-me-downs of the departing colonial masters.

The elites have treated any expression of dissent as inimical to the unitarian interests of the state. Any expression of cultural differentiation is treated as “tribalism” which must be stamped under foot. Instead of celebrating difference and tolerating expression of cultural and linguistic variety as an enriching feature of the society and citizenry, such differences have been dismissed as expressions of a primitive heritage. The attitudes of the colonialists to African culture and the African patrimony have been faithfully copied by the inheritor elites. I agree with Kempton Makamure’s contention that; “Consistently and daily, we observe that the African leaders and their political systems do not respect the following: (1) the right to life for Africans; (2) the dignity of the African; (3) the liberty of Africans; (4) the pursuit of happiness by Africans; (5) the right of Africans to the enjoyment of democratic freedom. In other words, Africans and among them the most highly educated products of western educational institutions, think and act about Africans in exactly the same manner as our former European colonizers did. It is ironic, but nonetheless true.”

Guidelines for Good Governance

In terms of the principles of good governance, I would like to remind our meeting of a few salient features. The way forward in the governance and ordering of these states would have

been better furthered if these ruling groups would allow greater devolution of power to the grassroots of society; if people and groups would be accorded emphatically greater decentralization of power and decision-making on all matters affecting the lives of the people. Decentralization can be understood as the devolution by central government of specific and categorized functions, with all of the administrative, political and economic attributes that these connote, to local governments and elected authorities which are independent of the centre and sovereign within a legally defined territorial and/or functional sphere. Where there is exceptional cultural diversity and pronounced social differentiation the framework for governance should permit the expression of difference and localize the institutions of governance and power, so that people feel and in reality control in as much as possible the circumstances affecting their lives on a daily basis.

Decentralization is doubtlessly one of the peremptory solutions to the political, social and governance problems we face on the African continent. People should be allowed to control their own lives and circumstances in their own localities and within their own groups. The benefits of decentralization include the facts that; decisions are made by those who have the most concrete knowledge about local circumstances and conditions; greater local capacities for relevant political inputs in decision-making have a positive and encouraging effect; and thirdly, locally elected representatives are likely to have more insight and control over work and local government performance.

The devolution of substantive power to localities also enhances political participation amongst the people, because of the increased levels of interest and involvement in local government which it brings about. This process enables the installation of democratic values and promotes political stability. Similarly, decentralization provides the opportunity for citizens to debate and decide upon those local issues which matter most to them, thus upgrading political education. Lastly, local politics provide fertile training-grounds for local leaders, who can then grow and progress to become larger leadership figures.

Tolerance of difference is vital in a world where proximity and closeness of people characterizes increasingly the lives of us all. So also, secularism in our times is vital to the survival of a free society and free citizens. The need to remove religion from political practice and the arena of political contestation is contemporarily understood by all who aspire for freedom and democracy. If religion is allowed to intrude into politics, however benignly, it is bound in the long run to undermine rational and tolerant approaches to governance. I subscribe to the school of thought which argues that religion is a private affair. Adherence or non-adherence should be volitional. But, we all must have the right to believe and exercise this right without encroaching on the attitudes and sentiments of others. We must create and institutionalize the sort of cultural space and tolerance which make such coexistence realizable.

Democracy in our times is the unchallenged formula for sound and fair rule. But democracy must not be understood in a mechanistic or narrow sense in which only the routine exercise of the ballot is seen as, more or less, the total expression of democracy. Democracy is to a large extent culturally specific and must be integrated into the cultural usages of people so that people can feel ownership to its institutions and recognize it for the virtues it offers. It is
impossible to impose French-style, British-style, American-style or whichever-style democracy on an African society, but the fundamental principles of democracies are universal and we recognize them for what they are. Its cultural specificity is matched by its historical contextuality. We also need to be reminded that, what is democratic today may be tomorrow inadequate.

In an earlier paper, I had argued that; “If democracy is understood as a historical process, an institutionalized approach to decision-making in groups, directed towards the provision of choices for the constituent elements of a group in matters affecting their interests, and providing scope for the prevalence of consensual, collective or majoritarian opinion, its meaning leaves the narrow and limited arena of popular contemporary formulations closely tied to types of ‘Western liberal democracy’, the most advanced and preferred form of government in contemporary capitalist society. This latter narrow usage pertains to democratic practice principally in the selection of ruling party and government or sub-units of the latter in the state. The extent to which the democratic ethos and social practice permeate social interaction and all types of decision-making is a measure of “democratization” in society. But what is perhaps crucial is the social unit in which the democratic right is ultimately vested, and its comparative significance in relation to other clearly institutionalized interest articulating groups and structures in the society.”

The culture of democracy and its development is a process. The institutionalization of democracy takes time and grows with time and practice. As earlier said, it cannot be borrowed from elsewhere and imposed wholesale on another society. Neither can it be properly and safely introduced from “the wings of a B-52 bomber” (Hosni Mubarak) as President Bush tried to do in Iraq.

Democracy requires the existence of a free press able to express itself on all matters affecting the lives of people. A free press including, newspapers, magazines, radio, TV, blogs, is the bedrock of any bona fide democracy in our times.

A democratic society in the 21st century must acknowledge and uphold universally understood and agreed human rights. Human rights are not only a common inheritance of universal values that transcend cultures and traditions, but are quintessentially local values and nationally-owned commitments grounded in international treaties and national constitutions and laws. Indeed; The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is the foundation of international human rights law, the first universal statement on the basic principles of inalienable human rights, and a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations.

The idea which one sometimes comes across that human rights as acknowledged by the human community today is in some respects inappropriate for Africans, is without any doubt, totally false. The idea that we must accept atavistic practices in the name of tradition or dictatorial impositions in the name of culture is without doubt sophistic. In the contemporary

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world every individual must have exactly the same rights. He or she should be allowed under all circumstances to exercise these rights in freedom and equality.

The rule of law calls for maintenance and respect if all citizens are to feel free in the state. All should be treated equally under the law and all citizens should have the same rights. As earlier said, another important element for democratic governance is the maintenance and cultivation of the ideal of tolerance, this cannot be overemphasized; tolerance of difference in religious confession, tolerance of difference in ethnicity, culture and language, tolerance of difference in opinion, tolerance of the institutions of free association and the freedom to own legitimately acquired property. If we want to collectively survive, we must by all means tolerate difference and each other.

It is important also to establish institutional framework for the imposition of rules, guidelines and sanctions for upholding transparency and accountability in public practice. People who hold public office should understand, and be made to understand, that they are directly and indirectly accountable to the citizenry. Malpractices must not be allowed to go unpunished and no-one, of high or low status, should be able to get away with malpractices of any kind. Nobody should be excused. Nobody should be privileged to be above the law.

An Africa-centered approach requires that wherever possible, subject-matter and examples used in teaching should be drawn from the student’s environment; that, without distorting facts or manufacturing them, they are assembled in such a way that the African student views the world from the African experience. Knowledge production should relate to the world we live in, the world we know, the world in which we eke out a living. References which pitch the minds of the students outside, which reinforce a syndrome of cultural inadequacies in students, and which glorify continuously non-African realities succeed only in alienating the students from their historical and cultural moorings.

The key to any successful development of relevance and societal engagement in education in Africa, from primary level to tertiary level will require the development of materials and teaching in African languages, the same way local languages are used in Denmark, Germany, England, Italy, Korea, Vietnam, Indonesia, Thailand, Japan, China, Portugal, Finland etc.

**Closing Remarks**

My closing summation is that; in much the same way that, it would be absurd to suggest an Afrocentric approaches to Chinese students in China; it would be thoroughly inappropriate to suggest Arabism as a central value in education in Western society, or Arabism to Africans. Westerners study first and foremost western society, and western ideals, in similar fashion Africans should be taught in the first instance African realities and issues, presented to them in their primary languages, African languages. Democracy and its principles need to be adapted to African cultural and historical realities. In other words, Afrocentricism has relevance to African conditions. It cannot be transposed or imposed on realities other than African ones.

Given Africa’s rich cultural variegation and diversity, tolerance, cultural space, a pluralistic celebration of what society in its entirety offers is the way forward. But, at the same time,
minority elite cultures and languages of privilege cannot and must not hold sway. That would amount to an anti-democratic condition, which can never bring out the full potential of our societies, both at the individual and collective levels of social organization. The dominance of minority euro-centric elite cultures will be a perpetual constraining feature on social development and may further stimulate rivalries, antagonisms and possibly conflict on this continent. African students must know the world through African eyes and experience. In both teaching and research this needs to be encouraged and rewarded. This approach is not suggested for sentimental or idiosyncratic reasons. It is suggested because it is the only way to develop a higher educational system relevant to African conditions in general and mass democratic society in particular.