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CRISIS IN AFRICAN UNIVERSITY EDUCATION

a Synopsis of a Lecture

by Dr. Cheikh Tidiane Sy

former Acting Secretary-General of

The African University Commission

(Ed. Note: *On February 24, 1972, Dr. Cheikh Tidiane Sy gave a public lecture at UCLA's African Studies Center on "The Crisis in the African University." As can be seen from the following account of that lecture, the issues raised are of fundamental significance and, coming from such quarters, are bound to influence the course of higher educational planning in Africa.*)

The basic problem in African university education, according to Dr. Sy, lies in the need for establishing an educational system which can play an effective role in the development of African societies. There is a clear need in Africa today for a new social order and for a system of education which prepares one to induce and to absorb the inevitable process of change. Unfortunately, African universities, suffering as they do from a certain degree of sclerosis, have proved incapable of performing this creative function in their societies. In a way, their problem is a crisis of identity. They are universities in Africa but not of Africa, always aspiring ill-advisedly to approximate British and French models. As a result, these universities exist outside the mainstream of the cultural and socio-economic history of their societies by whose grace, incidentally, they exist.

According to Dr. Sy, no serious and conscious efforts are being made to bridge the gap with past African philosophies of education, to forge a continuing tradition of African education, and to play a dynamic role in the evolution of the society. In the past, people were trained to serve the society and to perform their assigned or acquired roles after the due process of initiation. The people thus initiated and trained became also the innovators in the society. Thus, the society had an in-built mechanism for generating and absorbing the normal process of change.

The present situation, Dr. Sy points out, is that most African universities literally live on hill-tops and in ivory towers from where they look down benignly on the

vulgar masses. Courses are vigorously taught on Roman Law and Latin as part of the attempt to maintain "international standards." People are trained merely to perform the uncommitted functions of the former colonial administrators, keep their elitist attitudes and live in their style. Worse still, no research projects that could be relevant to the needs of the society are conducted. The only type of research that maintains a steady stream of adherents is the dry academic type by which a man grabs a quick Ph.D., with all its "privileges and immunities," and joins the exclusive ranks of the elites.

Dr. Sy thinks that perhaps the universities recognize demands which the society makes on them and which have to be met, but because they exist in a society that is itself crisis-torn, they tend to be paralyzed into inaction and drift. But he thinks that the answer is not to seek an escape from the problem. Education, after all, should prepare one to give creative leadership particularly in a situation of crisis.

Moreover, the former Acting Secretary-General believes that African universities should be multi-purpose. They should pay more attention to the training of middle-level manpower, that cadre of functionaries who are better oriented toward relevant service to the community. The truth about economic development in Africa is that it does not necessarily demand a tremendous number of university graduates. It is within the middle-level cadre that one finds the true ingredients of the economic development process. The time has come, therefore, for African universities to end their snobbish attitude toward that level of training.

One other reason which makes it necessary that attention should be paid to the training and utilization of a middle-level manpower cadre is the high cost of university education. It is a piece of unkind irony that the ultimate carrier of this burden of high cost is the poor peasant who does not derive the benefits of his sacrifice. In addition to staggering overhead cost per student many of the universities have to pump a sizeable amount of their annual budget into the maintenance of roads, medical and water supplies. Moreover, about 80% of the staff strength is expatriate, a situation which merely helps to increase the costs. It is not surprising that it is in such institutions that about 60-70% of the budget goes to staff expenses. The former Acting Secretary-General suggests that a new approach has to be adopted towards the question of recruitment of

qualified lecturers and professors not only as a means of reducing costs, but as a way of increasing intro-continental cooperation. He cites the case of Ghana where, in the absence of a qualified Ghanaian candidate, the International Universities Commission is approached for the recruitment of a British lecturer while no attempt is made to recruit a qualified candidate from another African country.

The former Acting Secretary-General pointed out the need for greater cooperation and exchange among African universities not only in the realm of ideas, but also in terms of exchange of professors. There is very little circulation of information, and as a result, many universities know very little about one another. There have been cases when two researchers in Ethiopia and Nigeria were plodding away on an identical topic, completely unaware of the fact until some enterprising person in London informs them. There is also the need for student-exchange programs to enable students from other countries to study in one country where facilities are better developed.

In conclusion, Dr. Sy concedes that part of the problem is political in nature. There is, on the policy-making level, the tendency to subject universities to the sometimes whimsical demands of political expediency and the ability of the institutions to innovate is stifled in the process. He cites the case of Abidjan University in the Ivory Coast which was set up for the countries of the *Conseil d'Entente* and was, until recently, making fine progress toward building a continental African student population. The university has now been confiscated by the Ivory Coast Government which recently expelled most of the "foreign students" i.e., non-Ivorian African students on a charge of political subversion.

While a measure of political control may be necessary, Dr. Sy says, it is important that the universities should be free to maximize their usefulness to their societies without fear of political interference.

THE EDITORS

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*The Thief and the Chair*  
(illustration for Ethiopian folk-tale)

