

UNIVERSITY AND STATE IN AFRICA 1960-1995: Why so much disruption in African Universities?

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My research has been concerned with the development of African universities (south of the Sahara and north of the Republic of South Africa) after independence from colonial rule, particularly attempting to understand why so much unrest and disruptions of learning processes have occurred.¹ The development of my knowledge on the subject started when I did research for my doctorate at the Haile Selassie I University of Addis Ababa from 1970-1973, focussing on the social and political consciousness in the Ethiopian student body. The choice of topic stemmed from my years of teaching in an Ethiopian provincial state secondary school in the mid-1960s, during which time I often observed surprising indifference on the part of people in high places, with or without modern education, to the plight of the masses of poor people. Whether the new university might contribute to a greater capacity for empathy with others, I felt to be a vital research question. My 1970-thinking phrased the problem in the following way: "By social consciousness is meant the ability to perceive poverty and injustice in one's environment. It implies, in the Ethiopian context, rejection of the fatalistic attitude that men's living conditions are determined by powers beyond human control...Political consciousness includes the knowledge of how people are governed in a given polity...and of the source of legitimacy of power. It necessitates a perception that pressure can be put on a government from below to institute desired change. In the Ethiopian context it implies a rejection of the monarch's divine right to rule" (Balsvik, 1985: xiv). My work on the Ethiopian students was published in 1985 with the title: **Haile Sellassie's Students. Intellectual and Social Background to Revolution**, which documents the link between the students, the fall of Emperor Haile Selassie and the revolutionary character of the military dictatorship (Balsvik 1994). After almost twenty years of other engagements I returned to the African university scene, to find out to what extent the experiences at the university in Addis Ababa with student protests and severe disruptions of teaching and learning, were unique or to what extent they corresponded to developments in other countries in Africa. I had already been at the universities of Nairobi and Dar es Salaam in 1972 in order to get an impression of how they compared with that of Addis Ababa. In the early

¹The material of this article is planned to be expanded into a book.

1990s I did research at the University of Yaounde, Cameroon, the universities of Dar es Salaam and Lusaka and went back to Cameroon, visiting the three universities of Yaounde, Buea and Ngoundere in 1995. I have read relevant material in the local university libraries as well as talked informally with staff and students. These notes and fieldwork diaries are my principal sources, but I have also read extensively on African universities in the libraries of UNESCO in Paris and the School of Oriental and African Studies in London. Concerning the role of students, the state of affairs within the universities, and the relationship between the university community and the government, my sources give an astonishing impression of similar trends in African countries even if each country has had its own unique development of events.

In spite of the visible role students have played in revolutionary movements in a large number of countries throughout the world, there has been little research on students. However, in the late 1960s and early 1970s a lot of attention was given to the political activities of university students in Western countries. As far as the research touched on the developing countries, it was related to the role of students as emerging elites.² In the last edition of "studies and documents" connected to the *UNESCO General History of Africa* it is stated that the students' "undeniably important struggle for the liberation of Africa has been overlooked." (Boahen, 1994 Preface) My interpretation of African history during the recent decades after independence is that students have been a major driving force in the second liberation of the continent, that of democratisation.

In the scholarly writings there is often discernable, either a sympathy or dislike for student activism.³ This tendency is especially marked in the many investigative reports on the universities in Africa, where some see student unrest as a noble force for development while others characterise it as indiscipline and indeed "incessant hooliganism" (Omari and Mihyo, 1991:4). However, one general conclusion seems to emerge, namely that students who regard their intellectual and material lives as manageable and meaningful are less prone to support actions instigated by the active few directed against their university or government. My research supports this theory.

²Lipset, S.M. (ed) 1967, *Student Politics*, New York and London. The *Annals* of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, May 1971: Student Protest. Altbach, P.G.(ed), 1981, *Student Politics. Perspectives for the Eighties*. London.

³ Feuer, L., 1969, *The Conflict of Generations*, is an example of an analysis from a critical perspective.

Colonial rule in Africa established before World War II only a handful of educational institutions of higher learning. However, just before but mostly soon after decolonisation, universities were established in the new states. The models of the institutions were drawn from Europe, British models in former British territories, French and Belgian models in their former territories (Ashby, 1966, Hargreaves, 1985, Goldthorpe, 1965, Davidson, 1963). The model in independent Ethiopia was mostly North American.

The leaders of Africa's freedom struggle had received formal Western education. African states have since independence declared education to be the key that unlocks the door to modernisation. Integration of the numerous ethnic groups and nation building were perceived to be intimately linked to the expansion of higher education, science and technology. The large number of beautiful and prestigious-looking university campuses are testimonies to the willingness, at the outset, to give these institutions the highest priority. The close alliance between university and state was underlined by the fact that the heads of state were also very often the chancellors of the universities and that ministers of the government were members of the governing boards.⁴

Yet, in spite of the spectacular rise in enrolment that has taken place since independence, the African continent has the smallest number of formally educated people and the smallest number of students in higher education in relation to population. Considering the prestige and importance ascribed to institutions of higher learning and the very few who get an opportunity to study, *the amount of disruptions and closures that have taken place in African universities is indeed puzzling.*

Contrary to experiences in the West, regular teaching and studies were often, more or less dramatically, disrupted and universities were from time to time closed for weeks, months and even years. Student unrest has been endemic. In a report by a team that had visited universities in Kenya, Tanzania, Zimbabwe, Ghana and Nigeria towards the end of the 1980s, it was stated that during the time of study for the report all these universities were either closed or had recently been closed due to student unrest (Coombe, 1991:24). Relatively speaking, the

⁴President D.A. Moi of Kenya is the chancellor of each of the five public universities in the country. See article by Tunbridge, "Rule of Fear in Universities Forces Kenya's Academics out", in *Finance* (Nairobi)2/1996. Other articles in the same magazine, "Education on Crossroads", "Criminalization of Social Sciences" and "An Open Letter to President Nelson Mandela on the Constitutional Freedom of Associations: the Case of Universities" from the Academic Staff Union of Kenyan Universities. This edition of *Finance* supports the general picture I have tried to draw in this article.

universities of Lusaka and Dar es Salaam have been calm, yet the latter was closed a number of times and during the academic year 1990/91 students were kept out for eight months. The University of Zambia was closed for shorter or longer periods in 1971, 1976, 1982, 1984, 1986, 1989 and 1990. The closures from 1976 to 1986 deprived the students of 400 days of learning (Mangani, 1991). The University of Nairobi probably had the highest incident of crises, about 25 by 1990 (Omari and Mihyo, 1992). A search through the news magazine *West Africa* from the end of the 1960s to 1990 reveals some 500 notices and articles dealing with riots and closure of universities in Sierra Leone, Senegal, the Ivory Coast, Liberia and Mali, but mostly in Ghana and Nigeria, the latter country having the greatest number of closures.

Ethiopia was one of the first countries in Africa to experience this phenomenon. Every year during the last decade before Haile Selassie's regime was overthrown in 1974, the university experienced long periods of crisis. No country in Africa had a stronger student movement around 1970 (Rønning Balsvik, 1985). However, the phenomenon of university crisis has increasingly become a general feature of the African university scene after independence, with a visible start in the early 1970s.⁵

Conditions and issues have differed from country to country and from time to time - as has the quality of relationship between university and state. Yet, the patterns and ingredients of events were often strikingly similar whether they occurred in Ethiopia, Madagascar, Nigeria,

⁵Hanna, W.J.: *University Students and African Politics*, Holmes and Meier Publishers, London and New York, 1975.

Legum, C. (ed.): *Africa Contemporary Record - Annual Survey and Documents*, Volumes I-XX, 1968/69-1987/88, London 1969 -1988. These volumes has registered much on disruptions within African universities: Colin Legum: "The Year of the Students-A Survey of the African University Scene" in *ACR 1971/72* covers about 20 universities, and then: *ACR 1968/69*: 579 and 529, *ACR 1972/73*: xv, B 171, *ACR 1974/75*: B 205, B 644-45, *ACR 1976/77*: B 205, B 384-85, B 582, *ACR 1977/78*: B 646, C 127/28, *ACR 1978/79*: B 240, B 726-728, B 908, *ACR 1979/80*: B 237, B 453, *ACR 1981/82*: B 385, *ACR 1981/82*: b 385, *ACR 1982/83*: B 181, B 454, *ACR 1983/84*: B 172-173.

West Africa Jan. 23 1884: "Stevens vs. students", *West Africa* Jan. 16-22 1989: "The agitated student front", *West Africa* 24-30 April 1989: Ghana - "Conflict on campus", *West Africa* 5-11 June 1989: Nigeria-"Student riots against SAP", *West Africa* 11-17 September 1989: Senegal "A rocky road", *West Africa* 12-18 June 1989: Nigeria "Clampdown on riots", *West Africa* 20-26 November 1989: Nigeria "Universities in despair", *West Africa* 18-24 December 1989 Sierra Leone "Colleges closed again", *West Africa* 5-11 March 1990: Cote D'Ivoire "Students on the march", *West Africa* 11-17 June 1990: Zaire "Lubumbashi verdicts", "EC demands action", *West Africa* 10-16 June 1991: Nigeria "Student Unrest".

Ngobesing Suh R.: "The Yaounde University: Students' Social and Academic Problems," Thesis, International School of Journalism, University of Yaounde, Nov. 1981: 2 and 68. Rønning Balsvik, 1985

Nkinyangi, J.A.: "African Education in the Age of Student Revolt", *Higher Education Policy* vol.4, no.2, 1991.

Coombe 1991 op.cit. This report is based on investigations in eight countries in former British colonial territories in East- and West Africa.

Omari and Mihyo, 1992.

Cameroon, Kenya, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Tanzania, Zaire or Zambia. They were characterised by a chain of events consisting of student challenges and university/government responses that combine to make a general formula. The first step is an announcement of a student view/demand unpalatable to the political elite, expressed in a student paper or in the form of a demonstration. Dramatic confrontations follow between students and armed security forces. Student leaders are expelled from the university, often arrested and their union and paper banned. Students then strike in solidarity to reinstate arrested or expelled student activists.

A period of tension and uncertainty follows in which the student body becomes divided between those who want to continue the boycott and those who want to resume classes. The administration starts an unsuccessful reregistration of students. The authorities announce that the institution is closed. Over the years this decision has been reached with increasing speed. Then armed forces invade the campus to drive out students from their canteens and lodging. The confrontations between students and police/ military forces caused great damage of property to a large number of universities and an unknown number of wounded, raped and dead. This has happened in Ethiopia, Uganda, Nigeria, Zaire and Kenya and many more countries.⁶ There is however little to suggest that there were connections between disturbances across state borders.

There seems to be a marked difference in the security forces' handling of university crises in the various countries. In Ethiopia in the 1960s a lot of destruction of property took place and the soldiers also pillaged the student quarters. In 1969 they shot into a gathering of several thousand students from the university and secondary schools. In Tanzania, and to a lesser degree in Zambia, the presence of soldiers and the expulsion of students at gunpoint have taken place in relatively controlled forms and with minimal damage to property. Not so in Nigerian universities, where teargas, shots, heavy weapons were used within the buildings. Rapes are also reported to have taken place. An unknown number of students have lost their lives in confrontation with armed police or soldiers. In Ethiopia, after the president of the student union was shot and killed in 1969, five university students and an unknown number from the

⁶ Ethiopia: Balsvik 1985: 268-271 ,Nigeria: *The Killings at A.B.U.* Published by The Academic Staff Union of Universities of Nigeria, Ahmadu Bello University Branch .Printed in Zaria 1986: 51 98-99. Deaths: Ethiopia: Balsvik 1985, Zaire:Legum op.cit .ACR 1971/72: A 10, Africa Watch: *African Universities: Case Studies of Abuses of Academic Freedom*, Symposium on Academic Freedom Research and the Social Responsibility of the Intellectual in Africa, Kampala, Uganda, November 1990: 47-49, Nigeria: ACR 1978/79, *The Killings...*1986, op.cit. and 23, ACR 1976/77:"The Chronicle of Makerere`s Martyrdom": B 384, Kenya: "More Kenyan students die", *The Independent*, 19.12.1996 and *Aftenposten* 25.2.1997.

secondary schools were killed in a student gathering on the largest campus in Addis Ababa. The same year a large number of students were killed in Zaire. The worst massacre of students in Zaire happened during the night between the 11th and 12th of May 1990, in which at least 12, possibly more than a hundred, students were killed on the university campus of Lubumbashi. In Nigeria one student was killed in 1971 and eight in 1979. In 1986, the result of armed intervention in the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, was the loss of 15 student lives; the revolt then spread to the other 19 universities in Nigeria. Demonstrations at universities in Nigeria in May/June 1989 cost 22 student lives according to official estimates, while unofficial sources estimate the number of deaths to be nearly one hundred. The number of students killed, tortured and raped at the university of Makerere during the time of Idi Amin in the 1970s is unknown. Conditions in the University of Liberia were reminiscent of that in Uganda when troops stormed the campus to quell a demonstration and killed a large number of students in August 1984. (*West Africa*, 17 Sept. and 26 Nov., 1984)

Student unrest started later in the newly independent countries of Africa and its consequences for their political development were on the whole less than in Ethiopia. Here the students obtained a more crucial position because of the higher rate of illiteracy in their country and because strong organisations and an indigenous class of traders and entrepreneurs were lacking. The students thus constituted a disproportionately large section of what may be called the carriers of public opinion. Yet, compared to the Western world, civil society in Africa is weak and the influence of students' organisations in the public sphere proportionately much larger.

The main actors on the university stage were the students, mostly the male students. The academic staff was a lesser force due to their small numbers and insecure positions. They were often accused by state authorities of instigating student actions, and indeed it is true to say that students and academic staff were of one mind on most issues, even if the staff did not join in student methods of action. It is also self-evident that the content of teaching influenced student thinking and legitimized student challenges.

The propensity to rebel was influenced by many types of frustrations and undercurrents of unease. The least visible was related to (1) the perception of relevance of university studies in the African context, the most visible to (2) the dramatically declining economic conditions which strongly affected student lives and studies. The main causes, however, (3) were connected to the quality of interaction between state and university in which the latter demanded

the right to free expression which the former would not or was extremely reluctant to allow. Political protest accounted for the majority of incidences and student boycott of classes.

1. A perception of universities as centres of the spread of Western material and cultural values may have been a hindrance to the internalisation of knowledge (Lewinger, 1984). The fact that knowledge was communicated in the languages of the former colonial masters represented serious frictions as the mastery of these languages declined with decreasing facilities and numbers of qualified teachers in secondary schools. Textbooks from relevant African perspectives have been a rare commodity. (Ojo, 1995).⁷

We have stated that universities in Africa were built on Western models. It was the knowledge developed over centuries and defined as "universal" that became the basis and content of teaching in post-independence Africa, even though such knowledge was more suited to the highly industrialised Western countries. Both African and European education builders tended to think that equality in educational content was necessary in order to obtain the massive transfer of Western knowledge that was believed to be a prerequisite for a development "take off".

Increasingly, however, the universities were called upon, by their own academicians, to see the necessity of understanding Africa and of striking roots firmly in the African soil (Legum 1970/71:C 196-97). Questions were raised to what extent the university had been able to forge an African identity, seen as a prerequisite to development. To what extent had Africans been so blinded by white supremacy that they had been unable to see any value in their own cultures. They needed to be liberated from mental colonisation and from an "imperialistic" dominance in knowledge. The challenge facing the intellectual was to identify and construct the local identity and give society an image of itself (Kashoki and Tembo, 1979, Wamba-dia-Wamba, 1983 and 1991). This kind of thinking/ discourse illustrates how uncomfortably African universities were situated between the rich Western world and the materially poor African conditions.

2. The material conditions of universities deteriorated conspicuously. Declining resources meant that the state's role as the good provider came to an end, a fact which in itself produced

⁷ *Union des étudiants de Dakar*, 54 pages, Dakar 1968. Centre d'Etudes Africaines, Paris. *ACR* op.cit.,1971/72:xvi, *ACR*,1972/73: B 677,B 168-176.

ACR, op.cit.,1972/73:B 170/171 After the fall of President Tsiranana Malagassy became the language of instruction. It proved to be a painful experiment because of the lack of resources. By the middle of the 1980s French had been reinstated as the language of instruction except during the first years of primary school. The demand for africanization within the universities have not led to the dismissal of French and English as languages of higher instruction except in the University of Khartoum.

disaffection towards state authorities. Inadequate funding to meet the physical needs of the students, poor food and overcrowded living quarters increasingly, particularly during the 1980s, played a significant part in the instigation of the chain of events that led to closures.⁸ Dramatic decline in material conditions of students often initiated material demands which later on were extended to affairs of national politics. The evidence of this is overwhelming in reports of enquiry and the reporting of the media. The expectations of students (and staff) were conditioned by the recent past: Most universities had enjoyed an initial Garden-of-Eden stage with ample resources providing a high standard of living for both staff and students. Living together and interacting on the university campus were considered an important part of the learning process. *This arrangement unintentionally also furthered the rise of political organisation of expression* and the development of student solidarity. The state provided also for lodging, feeding and allowances for pocketmoney, books and travels of students. This was considered necessary because an overwhelming number of the students could not be supported by their families. Recruitment to the universities came from a broader section of the population in Africa than at any time in Europe. Sons and daughters of the few rich were mostly educated in Western universities (Maliyamkono, 1988 and 1987, **West Africa** 26 Nov.1984: 2383)). About 90 percent of students in East Africa come from a peasant background. (Omari and Mihyo, 1991:10)

The numbers of students rose enormously during the 1980s and onwards and a large number of universities were on the brink of collapse, especially in the Francophone countries, where a pass in the "Baccalaureat" usually gave a right to university admission (Ajayi, Goma and Johnson, 1996). More decent standards were kept in many of the Anglophone universities, as in Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe, where numbers were kept down by highly competitive entrance requirements. The national budgets could in any case not keep up with increasing numbers.⁹

The lack of books, journals and laboratory equipment became chronic. Teachers' salaries decreased through inflation to such an extent that those who could, fled the universities.

⁸Omari, J.M. and Mihyo, P.B.:The Roots of Student Unrest in African Universities. April 1991:18/19. This substantial report draws its evidence from Kenya, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe, presented at a conference at the University of Nairobi in January 1992.

⁹The physical conditions of Zairian universities have been characterized as "abysmal", resembling "disaster areas" or "war zones" (*Academic Freedom and Human Rights Abuses in Africa*, An Africa Watch Report, London April 1991.

Teachers who struggled on had to neglect their teaching and research to earn extra money. Increasingly, the strikes of teachers also led to disruptions and closures, as in Zambia, Kenya and Ghana in the early 1990s.

The debt crisis and the structural adjustment programmes (SAP) of the World Bank presented as "conditionalities" to African states in the latter half of the 1980s, contributed to further deterioration in the functioning of the universities. In Nigeria many universities were closed for five months after demonstrations against SAP. (*West Africa*, 20-26 Nov. 1989, "Universities in Despair") Clearly, a large number of African students were on starvation diets as allowances in the mid- 1980s could not pay for more than one meal per day (Coombe, 1991, *West Africa April 25, 1988*).

In the eyes of the local university community the government was too ready to follow the prescriptions of outsiders. The governments on their part, fed up with the disruptions of teaching and expositions of government shortcomings, were receptive to the World Bank's emphasis on the need for African states to spend more of their resources on education in the primary rather than the higher education sector. These developments combined to undermine not only the economy, but the morale, the dignity and the sense of mission within the universities.

The World Bank's demand for "cost-sharing" within the educational sector from the mid-1980s meant that ordinary families had to pay a share of the expenditures of education in general and university education in particular. Nigerian universities exploded in student riots during 1989 after the effects of SAP had been experienced in the society at large for three years (*West Africa*, 5-11 June, 12-18, 1989). In Zambia students protested that the IMF, in student publications labelled the "International Misery Fund" or "Imperialist Monetary Fund" (*Dialectic*, Dec. 1985), had taken over the running of the government. Students appealed to the government also to save the poor peasants and workers from the tough IMF conditions (*Times of Zambia*, Dec. 3, 1985, Tordoff, 1984: 291).

At a meeting of the International Association of Universities in Harare in 1987, reportedly the "general view" was that if accepted " the World Bank's proposal to concentrate educational resources on those levels considered most "socially productive" i.e. on primary education, had the potential to kill higher education in Africa." ¹⁰

¹⁰Regional Symposium on Higher Education in Africa, Dakar, 4-8 May, 1987. (UNESCO Library, Paris.)

A cause consistently on the student agenda all over the continent was education as a human right and the call for expansion on all levels of the educational system, in spite of the fact that the existing expansion was the root of their own material sufferings. Their view that the lack of resources for education was connected to mismanagement, misallocations and lack of zeal on the part of the governments to stand up against the dictates of Western capitalism gave strength to their oppositional attitudes.

3. Most conflicts between university and state had to do with challenges from the university community as to who were entitled to forward opinions and criticism of the political affairs of the country at large. Students' demands to be participants in a public political process were definitely not welcomed. Here we can see parallels to the part played by industrial workers in the European political processes of the 19th- and early 20th century. This role was left to the university students in African countries, where labour organisations were much weaker due to the underdeveloped stage of production.

In the 1970s and 1980s four-fifths of the African states had a one man-, a one party- or a military government. The academic autonomy which was such an important part of the imported university model was exceedingly vulnerable. The questioning, critical faculties which were encouraged by university education seemed a threat to governments which could hardly accept a loyal opposition of any kind. The arm of the government was present in ways which was detrimental to the functioning of the university. Ultimate leadership lay in the office of the head of state. The distribution of positions and privilege within the university and after graduation was often not according to intellectual merit. Usually, but not always, both the administration and academic leadership of universities were appointed by the government and imposed on the university community (Ajayi, Goma and Johnson, 1996, Cheater, 1991). The lack of elected academic leadership was a source of tension (Ojo, 1995).

The ideology of student activists sometimes had the character of religious belief, which strengthened the oppositional spirit. The ideology was anti-imperialistic and distrustful of Western policies in South Africa and Rhodesia. The Rhodesian unilateral declaration of independence in 1965 spurred students all over the continent into actions in which they accused

New Policy Measures for the Financing of Higher Education. Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Technology. Republic of Zambia, April 1989.

Times of Zambia, April 5, 8 and 11, 1989.

University of Zambia Annual Reports 1987-91:6

their own governments of not doing enough to prevent Ian Smith from forming his government. At the end of the 1960s student ideology became increasingly inspired by Marxism-Leninism and Maoism as well as the leftist wave which swept through Western universities as a protest against the Cold War and the US' war in Vietnam. African students in Western universities as well as Western academics in African universities were transmitters of leftist ideology. But anti-imperialism and anti-capitalism were also rooted in the African independence struggle.

The vocal few in many African countries turned their backs on the African past, believing that Marxism-Leninism, "scientific socialism", had all the answers for a development strategy and wanted to see a more vigorous nationalisation programme of banks, mines and Western companies. Even if many students regarded socialism with distrust, their contempt of and disappointment with the ruling elite was so great that they did not object to the use of socialistic theory as a tool for showering abuse on the ideology of for ex. African humanism of President Kaunda of Zambia and the ruling party, whose members, according to the students, in no way practised what they preached. On the contrary, "the Mercedes Benz clan" was said to be "obsessed with the tragically mistaken view that it shall continue with its grab and take until doomsday...All this sickness is hidden behind Dr. Kaunda's good name... How long can Dr. Kaunda continue to wash away the sins of UNIP?"¹¹

In Ethiopia in the 1960s, demands for participation and debates which sought pragmatic reform of the existing order were repressed. Only ardent believers in revolution could endure the harsh consequences triggered off by their political engagement. The students were for ten years the only group that articulated opposition to Haile Selassie's regime and were active in bringing it down during the "creeping coup" in 1974. Their political message was a radical redistribution of land in Ethiopia. The military rulers adopted "scientific socialism" as guidelines for revolutionary intervention, seeking advice and legitimacy from civilians who had their roots in the student movement. But most of those who belonged to this political culture soon turned into a disloyal opposition also of the military rulers - and paid a dreadful price in the purges and terror of 1977/78. Students almost consistently fought against military dictatorship, not only in Ethiopia, but more so in West Africa where the phenomenon was much more prevalent than in East Africa.

¹¹From: UNZASU Executive To: UNZA Community, Feb.23, 1982. *Dialectic* July 1980:"A portrait of UNIP."

The consequence of the students' belief in socialism as the only "correct" way was a departure from the elitist student position of the first years after independence, to a phase where mass poverty was seen as the result of the shortcomings of global and local structures and the abuse of power by ruling elites. The students took upon themselves to be the conscience of the nation and the spokesmen of the downtrodden. In their self-image they were more responsible for the future development of their countries than other groups. Indeed, university students had, especially in the 1960s, but also later, been told that they were the future leaders of their countries. In their union building this was an important premise. The union was often called the "student government" led by a president with his "ministers". Students in many countries expected their union and leaders to play a role on the national political stage, which they did although in varying degrees. Where the student union was weak, as in Tanzania, Zambia and Cameroon, protests were naturally less prevalent than in Nigeria, where the national student union managed to unite and direct all the individual university unions. This happened in spite of the fact that the national student union was banned during most of the 1980s. Nigeria's many universities also meant that the causes and incidents that could be used for mobilisation were many. Solidarity was a virtue and a weapon ardently built up among students all over the continent. In Nigeria protests and repercussions in one university tended to spread like wildfire to others (Ahmed, 1991, Attahiru, 1994, Evensmo, 1986).

A prominent aspect of student protests was the frequent and violent verbal attacks on African governments for their corruption and abuse of power to enrich themselves and their families to the detriment of the country at large. Students' interpretations of reality were shaped by the heritage of anti-imperialism and in the late 1960s and 1970s influenced first by the writings of Frantz Fanon's **The Wretched of the Earth** (Published in French 1961, in English 1965) and then by Walther Rodney's **How Europe Underdeveloped Africa**,(1972). African leaders were seen as tools of neo-colonialism, and imperialist exploitation was the root of poor economic development. Multinational corporations and the dictates of the World Bank were believed to undermine both economy and political independence.¹² Student attitudes to state authorities were deeply distrustful, often hostile and cynical. The fact that state leaders had been leaders in

¹²*University Platform* (University of Nairobi) from Nov. 1965-July 1972, Randi Rønning Balsvik: "Universitet i Øst-Afrika", *Samtiden*, 2/1973, Kängero, M.: *The University and the State*, MA dissertation, University of Dar es Salaam, 1984, *The Student* (publication), Nov. 5 and Nov. 26, 1971, from: UNZASU Executive To: UNZA Community, 23rd February 1982, From: The Silent Majority To: The Student Body, 9th April 1982. All four sources are in The Special Collections of the University Library, University of Zambia. Cheater 1991, op.cit..

the independence struggle did not justify looting and the stifling of people's democratic rights. Students had no intentions of letting the political elite eat public money in peace.

The strong winds of change in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union around 1990 intensified the African university demands from staff and students for academic freedom, government "accountability" and democratic changes.¹³ In Ethiopia university students came out in the streets in March 1990 after more than a decade of enforced silence to demonstrate their strong support for the government's declared intentions to relax the state's dominance in the economic sector. In Sierra Leone students intensified their call for an end to the one-party constitution and in Zambia students who had come out to demonstrate their abhorrence to the armed intervention and killings in the university of Lubumbashi in May 1990, shifted their aim to express their support for the movement for multi-partyism in the ongoing power struggle with President Kaunda and UNIP. There were clear links between the initial and the second stage of the demonstration. President Mobutu's treatment of the institutions of higher education in Zaire was seen as a reflection of the one-party states' lack of oppositional forces which could legitimately check the government in power (*West Africa* 1-7 April, 1991, *Zambia Daily Mail* May 22, 1990). The sequence of events instigated by student actions contributed significantly to the breakthrough for the multi-party system in Zambia.

The most important factor in prolonging the university crises was the brutal intervention of armed government forces and the arrests or expulsion of leaders. Antagonism between students and police seemed to be endemic, rooted on the part of the police in envy of the pampered and privileged students. These ill feelings continued long after the situation which caused them had come to an end. The brutalities meted out to students rarely obtained any press coverage (*West Africa*, 15 June, 1987). In the few cases where governments showed patience and reluctance to set armed police and soldiers on the students, as was the case with Rawlings before the elections in Ghana in 1983, popular support increased and crisis was prevented (*West Africa*, 6 June 1983: "Roots of Student Protest").

The severe government responses strengthened student unity, as long as it did not become so harsh as to silence the university community completely, as happened in Ethiopia under the Mengistu regime. Student unionism was strongest in Nigeria where a relatively independent

¹³UDASA Newsletter/Forum no.13, July 1991, see above Legum (ed) *Africa Contemporary Record*, Doris Lessing: *African Laughter Four Visits to Zimbabwe*, London 1993:153.

civil society had developed during the colonial period. The union leaders everywhere tended to use commemorations of those who had died in confrontations with armed security forces to consolidate unity and solidarity (*West Africa*, 8 June 1987, Balsvik 1985).

Governments invariably saw agitation and the creation of movements as destabilising and contagious, and above all they abhorred demonstrations. Democratization in general was said to be unaffordable due to the need for unity in the process of economic development. Multi-partyism would degenerate into ethnic strife. Authorities all over the continent repeatedly emphasised that students should stick to their books and leave politics to the politicians. Universities were feared as a state within the state, and students regarded as a group which wanted to compete with the politicians and destabilise the fragile new polities. In their view the expression of demands and criticism weakened the governments in the eyes of the people.

Hierarchical structures are strong in African societies. Wisdom, power and prestige increased with age and experience in traditional Africa, a fact which is still very prominent in the minds of common people. Young people should not criticise their elders. When state leaders rejected student criticism, they appealed for support in their people's image of the cosmological order in which reverence for elders is vital. The organised body of self-assertive students with modern education represented a clash with this culture. The opposition within the universities was perceived to be unbearably and disgustingly arrogant and indisciplined, it was said to be a foreign "disease" inherited from the colonialists and inspired from outside (*Times of Zambia*, 12 Dec., 1977, Omari and Mihyo, 1991). The students were drunk on foreign ideologies and tools of foreign powers. Media pictured students as ungrateful and impolite - who bit the hands that fed them. When students were driven out of the University of Dar es Salaam in May 1990, they were expelled for eight months, during which time nobody was allowed to employ them. The government whipped up a media war against the students in which they were presented as enemies of the people (Shivji, 1991). All this was meant to "discipline" the university community, to prevent it from criticising the political realm in public.

There were poor channels of communication both within the universities and between the state and the universities. The possibilities of misunderstanding were great. The art of negotiation was often poorly explored. The learning processes connected with the habits of democracy were prevented by the presence within the universities of secret government informers and the proximity of security forces. This contributed not only to the stifling of free expression but also to violence between groups of students. (SYNES, 1992) On the campus of

Lubumbashi University in Zaire in May 1990, student attacks on persons found to hold arms and believed to be government agents, started the dreadful intervention and killings by soldiers (Africa Watch, 1991, CODESRIA, 1991).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Student unrest in African universities from the mid-1960s till the mid-1990s was rooted in and characterised by the students and the governments distrust and disappointment of each other. Students' opposition was conditioned by unfulfilled expectations of the state as the provider of decent conditions for living, studying and after- graduation employment. They also expected decent and uncorrupted leadership of the state as well as economic development. The state was unable to fulfil any of these expectations. In the unions and in student solidarity the means were built to fight for causes and to challenge governments. Governments wanted to get rid of the notion that university students were entitled to voice their opinions and stage demonstrations. Their expectations as to the positive role universities would play in the promotion of economic development seemed unrealistic, especially in the face of the large- scale disruptions in the university institutions. Their response was to frustrate student aspirations. Armed intervention further promoted student unity and hatred of the political system.

The modern university was suited to the development of Western societies. In Africa it was a transplant into an alien soil, dependent for its activities on the values of a society in which critical thinking and institutional autonomy was essential. It was also designed for societies that had quite a different economic resource base than that of the African states. The dramatic deterioration of the African economies in the 1970s undermined the universities to the extent that even the nutritional standards of large sections of the student population were at stake. This undermined the development of human resources and antagonised the university community.¹⁴

In the prevailing climate of opinion after independence the burden of development was placed on the shoulders of the educated few. Students had inevitably developed an image of themselves as important agents of change. Yet, African governments failed to harness the formidable strength and reckless courage of the students into the task of building civil society and the state. Severe repression hindered the building of professional competence, responsible

¹⁴The incorporation of higher educational institutions into the Western system of knowledge which took place in India during British colonial rule also caused tension, unrest and "indiscipline" among students. Lipset 1967 op.cit. and Ashby 1966 op.cit..

political leadership and a loyal opposition. Student demonstrations developed into prolonged crises mostly because of arrest of student leaders. Solidarity with student leaders was a prerequisite for any kind of sustained union activity. All over Africa boycott of classes was the weapon used by students and closure of universities was the response of governments, which meant that students sacrificed their studies- studies which anyway were seriously undermined due to underfunding and the lack of employment prospects for large sections of graduates. It may be said that the disruption of the learning processes within universities in Africa, although it has thwarted the development of professional competence, has also represented political learning and promoted the process of democratisation. The universities, particularly its students, took upon themselves to perform roles that other groups were as yet unprepared for.

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