

African University Teachers and Political Change

Nzongola — Ntalaja*

Introduction¹

African university teachers today, are culturally as well as sociologically a product of the Western intellectual tradition. This is a tradition in which philosophers from the time of Socrates to the present have emphasized the social responsibility of intellectuals. Intellectuals are to be philosophers and, as such, they must become critics of the *status quo*. For to philosophize, as Merleau-Ponty maintains in his famous lecture in praise of philosophy,² implies that there are things to see and say. And what the philosopher sees and says may not agree with the conventional wisdom and the dominant interests in the society.

Why, it may be asked at the outset, is such a role essential in any society? Why, in other words, are intellectuals to be singled out for such a responsibility in their societies? There are as many answers to this question as there are conceptions of the nature and function of intellectuals. But whatever the differences, ranging as they do from the Platonic ideal of philosopher-kings to the Gramscian concept of "organic" intellectuals,³ there exists a broad agreement with the Socratic view of philosophical practice as an uncompromising quest for the truth. A quest, it must be added, that involves a critical evaluation of all received ideas, values, and conventions. The philosopher, according to this view, is one who investigates, and announces the results of their investigation regardless of the price they as an individual might have to pay for their commitment to the truth, the ultimate price being, as in the case of Socrates himself, giving up one's life. Intellectual practice, moreover, implies an active involvement in the affairs of one's society. This is a point that Plato underlines in his autobiography in the *Seventh Letter* where he states with reference to the unfavourable political climate at Athens that he feared to see himself "at last altogether nothing but words, so to speak — a man who would never willingly lay hands to any concrete task."⁴

Given his characteristic formalism and idealism, Plato is unwittingly raising a point that has become a cornerstone of materialist epistemology. This is the view that to be able to capture reality and to know it fully, one must at the very least interact with it and at best attempt to transform it. It is a view that rejects the empiricity position, which consists in taking the immediate appearance for the whole truth, while neglecting the underlying factors and processes determining it. Truths are neither a historical nor "given" in nature. Knowledge of the real world is obtained not through sense experience but through intellectual activity, the process of knowledge itself being intimately associated with the material and historical conditions of its production. It is a process that is closely linked with politics.⁵

Laying intellectual hands to concrete social tasks, then, means to concretize the dialectical unity of theory and practice not only in the production of scientific knowledge, but also in the practical involvement of intellectuals in society, an involvement without which scientific knowledge is impossible. Given the intermediate place intellectuals occupy in modern society between the dominant and dominated classes,⁶ their scientific practice cannot be neutral. It is generally supportive of some particular groups or values within the intellectuals' immediate or wider environment.⁷

* Associate Professor, African Studies and Research Programme, Howard University.

The value-free science once cherished within the Anglo-American liberal tradition has been shown to be a total mystification of the reality by scholars who wittingly or not invoked neutrality to cover up their ideological role as defenders of the established order.⁸ This is not to say, however, that such intellectuals cannot be critical of the *status quo*. For they often are, in so far as they are not apologists for the established order, do in fact see room for improvement, and do not defend the immediate interests of the dominant classes. But their critique is deficient from the standpoint of mass interests so long as it is made from within the framework of the dominant ideology, merely scratches the surface of the problem with which it is concerned, and fails, accordingly, to deal with its deeper roots.⁹

This essay attempts to show that African university teachers, in their great majority, are supportive of the new social order being established in post-colonial Africa to serve the interests of international capitalism. By virtue of their place in the institutional structure of the post-colonial state, their elitism and their preoccupation with their own material-well-being, they cannot be expected to involve themselves in serious social criticism and in revolutionary politics.

AFRICAN UNIVERSITIES AND UNIVERSITY TEACHERS

A major determinant of the basically conservative or *status quo* orientation of African university teachers is the very place they occupy in the institutional structure of the *post-colonial* state. Universities, like all other ideological apparatuses of the state, play the role of elaborating and transmitting the dominant ideology, the ideology of the dominant classes.¹⁰ Given their specific role as centers of critical thinking and fundamental research, universities may also generate within them a serious challenge to the dominant ideology and the class interests it represents. Such a challenge is yet to materialize unequivocally in African universities, and this is unlikely to happen so long as these universities continue to reflect, in their functioning, all the characteristics of the postcolonial state.

The State in post-colonial Africa is a capitalist state, albeit a dependent one, its dependent character being a function of the continuation of imperialist domination and a weak economic base. Generally neo-colonialist, it has the double task of preserving the country's dependent place in the international division of labor and of suppressing revolutionary ideas and movements.¹¹ Unable to satisfy the basic necessities of the population, it must resort to arbitrary rule and violence in order to maintain law and order and the stability needed for the execution of its economic functions. A crisis state is different from the normal liberal democracy by its concentration of authority, the exercise of power in the hands of a strong-willed individual and by a more open and brutal repression of opposition groups. Its ruling class is made up of the former petty-bourgeois leaders of the anti-colonial struggle who, together with new recruits among university graduates, strive to constitute for themselves a solid economic base through state participation in the economy, without at the same time breaking away from their dependence vis-a-vis the international bourgeoisie. To legitimize itself in the people's eyes, the ruling class uses a populist ideology, under the slogans of "African Socialism," "Authenticity," "mixed economy," and their variants, while some leaders have taken the unprecedented step of proclaiming the establishment, by decree, of a "socialist state" guided by Marxism-

Leninism, in the absence of a real party organization. Whatever the particular merits of some of these slogans might be, they serve for the most part to mask the class contradictions of post-colonial Africa in the interest of the ruling class and its allies: the international bourgeoisie and the highest petty-bourgeois stratum of high-level civil servants, university teachers and other members of the liberal professions. The neo-colonial state serves principally the interests of these three groups, interests which are on the whole incompatible with those of the underprivileged petty-bourgeois strata (e.g. clerks, nurses, primary school teachers) and those of the popular classes of workers, peasants, and the lumpenproletariat.

Likewise, the African universities serve primarily the career interests of university administrators, teachers and students. They are run in a mostly authoritarian fashion, and they exhibit little or no imaginative initiative in elaborating programmes that would contribute to the amelioration of the living conditions of ordinary men and women. This is so, in spite of the fact that the universities do require a massive commitment of public funds for their maintenance. The high cost of higher education diminishes the resources any country may use for other vital needs such as agriculture, health, and social welfare. University administrators and teachers usually justify the high cost of higher education by pointing to the presumed gains to society in terms of manpower training and "development."¹² Since it is a well-known fact that African university graduates are seldom useful for development purposes, the development rationale serves in this context as a means of masking class contradictions and as a cover for the career interests of university teachers and administrators. Like their counterparts in the civil service and the parastatals, they always claim to be working for development, even when their concrete actions frustrate the development process.¹³ They certainly will meet any proposal for a radical reappraisal of national priorities and revenue allocation that would threaten the continued existence of universities as they are constituted today with the strongest resistance. As bureaucratic organizations, the universities must surely place a high value on their own self-preservation.

Universities today are complex organizations in which the academic profession is less a style of life than a career;¹⁴ organizations where the pursuit of individual goals takes precedence over everything else. In Africa, the careerism of university teachers is most evident in their quest for prestigious administrative posts, quick promotions to higher ranks, and financial parity with the senior staff in the parastatals. In the universities, as in the other branches of the state system, the need for Africanizing the staff has resulted in easy appointments and fast promotions of many individuals, some have less than adequate qualifications for the jobs they hold. The fact that the faculty deans and department heads are relatively young, might explain the constant fight for these posts as well as the demand for creating more departments. Just as in the case of ethnic politics, in which entrepreneurial individuals would summon up obscure identities in their quest for political or administrative posts, the ambitious African academic enjoys being hired by a university in which their field of specialization is still being taught alongside a number of related disciplines so they can work for the establishment of a department of their own. In those countries where ethnic or regional "balance" is an important political issue (e.g. Nigeria, Zaire, Kenya), the competition for these basically academic posts can be politicized along ethno-regional lines.

The problem of promotions is similar to that of appointment to administrative posts, but since promotions are generally a necessary condition for the latter, concern for them appears to be obsessive. While there are individuals who really deserve their promotions, many of those who speak loudly about it have little to offer in their defence, except perhaps a faithful repetition of the same lecture notes year after year. One of the most disconcerting facts about African university life today, is the large number of academicians who do little or no research and who spend very little time on scholarly pursuits. This is a situation that stands in great contrast to the distinguished scholarly contribution by a smaller number of African intellectuals in the 1950's and the early 1960's¹⁵ Some have blamed this situation on an alleged excessive teaching load, with at least 75 percent of a teacher's time said to be spent on the preparation and delivery of lectures.¹⁶ My own experience shows that this is not the case.¹⁷ If there are scholars who cannot do research for lack of financial or other resources, there are academicians who behave like their counterparts in the civil service and the parastatals as though their intellectual pursuits were practically over the day they obtained their highest degree. Outside classroom and office hours, such academicians look after their other interests, which in some cases include a second job or a personal business.¹⁸ The late afternoons and evenings are generally reserved for recreation and or drinking—a schedule that leaves little room for serious intellectual reflection. Universities in English-speaking countries have retained the British tradition of senior staff clubs, where it is surer to find some members of staff than in their offices or places of research. Those, of course, are the club regulars—a distinct minority, surely, but one perfectly well-adjusted to the dominant life-style of the neo-colonialist ruling class. Those individuals who are seriously committed to working hard, may find themselves misguided idealism or excessive ambition.

In spite of their relatively privileged position in the political economy of post-colonial Africa, university teachers are not satisfied with their remuneration.²⁰ Unable to think of the great gap separating them from the clerks, messengers and cleaners with whom they work at the university, they see above all the smaller differences between their salaries and those of top civil servants and the managerial staff in state and private enterprises, most of whom are not as highly educated as the teachers are. At the university itself, nationals are justifiably displeased with the higher earnings of the expatriate staff. Granting the fact that an adequate remuneration is essential to good job performance, it remains true, however, that an excessive concern with financial rewards can become detrimental to serious academic pursuits and, consequently, to the social responsibility of intellectuals.

AFRICAN UNIVERSITY TEACHERS AND THEIR SOCIETIES

Preoccupied with their own career and material interests, African university teachers have been unable to make a positive contribution to social and political change in their societies. They have even failed to provide a model of political and intellectual maturity in the conduct of their own affairs. This has disappointed those who had expected that because of their high concentration of intellectual skills and capable people, African universities would set an excellent example in administrative organization and performance for the society as a whole. This has not happened because the universities are not, nor can they be, little islands of propriety in a sea of impropriety. To expect this is to assume, in the first place, the existence of university

teachers and administrators, either entirely different from those described above or on the whole unaffected by the social dynamics of their larger environment. As an institution, the university reflects the characteristics and contradictions of the society around it. In post-colonial Africa, it is afflicted by all the ills to be found within the state system, which include normlessness, nepotism, and authoritarianism.

The Professional ethic seems to be relatively weak among African university teachers today. Courtesy to one's colleagues, confidentiality and personal integrity are generally recognized as being important, but the frequency with which they are violated raises doubts concerning the extent to which they are regarded as values essential to the academic profession. Some of the teachers who entertain close relationships with students because they either are ethnically related to the latter or have sex with them are known for doing all they can to help their relatives and friends earn their degrees. The result of such behaviour by a minority of the teaching body is the erosion of respect for all teachers on the part of the students and the larger community. Some students come to think that at the university, as in the larger society, anything can be bought with money or with other favours.

The role that ethnicity plays in the competition for administrative posts has already been mentioned. Petty-bourgeois opportunism, one of the main causes of ethnic conflicts in national politics, is a major part of the problem. In a society where kinship ties and the principle of reciprocity are strong, nepotism and other types of favouritism are to be expected. Whatever their real incidence in African university life might be, such practices are a recurrent theme of conversations in some university circles. The general preoccupation of African governments with ethnic or regional "balance" is said to affect university appointments and promotions in a number of countries, resulting in the ascription to the ethnic factor of a major role in university life in these countries.²¹

Top university administrators behave as though they own the universities. In spite of the existence of councilar organs like the academic senate, the university is run on authoritarian lines like a bureaucratic institution. There is a tendency toward extreme centralization of authority and decision-making. In some universities, this results in the practice of bringing even questions of a routine nature to the attention of the chief executive officer—Rector, Vice—Rector, Vice—Chancellor, or Principle.²² Like other administrative and economic agencies of the state, the universities are not devoid of corruption, mismanagement, and administrative incompetence.

In addition to being primarily bureaucratic organizations serving the career interests of teachers, students, and administrators, African universities have proved incapable of initiating development projects that would help improve the living conditions of ordinary men and women. Only the teaching hospitals of the various medical schools and some of the extension programmes of agricultural faculties can be said to be serving the needs of ordinary people. It is also in these two fields as well as in pharmacy that some efforts is being made to learn from the people's largely untapped but rich reservoir of knowledge and new ideas, methods and products to be used for purposes of improving their health and well-being. These positive developments may fail to achieve the desired effect due to the pronounced mercenary spirit of the doctors and other medical practitioners on the one hand, and to the inability of the agricultural scientists to speak the people's language, i.e., to communicate with them without condescension, on the other. Whether or not peasants may benefit from the results of

agricultural research will also depend on the government's land and agricultural policies, and these have to do with the class contradictions governing the relations between the ruling class, the petty bourgeoisie, and ordinary people. As for most other university disciplines their practitioners have done little in the way of exploring the environment for local teaching materials, and are therefore much further away than the medical and agricultural scientists from being useful to the people and their needs. The important achievements in the cultural and fine arts area of the novel, drama, music and dance have yet to be vulgarized to be of interest to audiences other than foreigners, high school students, and the intelligentsia.

Learning from the people is probably asking too much from individuals whose ideology is basically elitist, and who believe they have all the answers.²³ Many teachers think of themselves in the tradition of medieval scholarship as masters who know it all, and who cannot therefore be challenged by their students. There are encouraged to write down their teachers' carefully dictated lectures word by word and to faithfully reproduce them in their examination papers. In accordance with their elitist claim to enlightened leadership, most university teachers treat their ordinary fellow citizens as an ignorant lot from which little is to be expected. The extent to which social-class differences are significant in the daily lives of African intellectuals can be seen in the master-slave type of relationship they maintain with their domestic servants.²⁴ The latter seem to fare a little better while working for expatriates than for their own nationals. Such intellectuals cannot be expected to fight for fundamental changes in the political economy of their countries on the side of the people.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Rather than serving the needs of the majority population, African universities function primarily in the interest of one of the privileged groups in their societies, the professional intellectuals. Given their high stake in the existing structures of the economy and the state on the one hand and their elitist ideology on the other, these intellectuals cannot be expected to support a radical or fundamental political change in their societies. They may be critical of the government and its policies, but they generally blame the sad state of affairs in most African countries today on personalities. It is this lack of a radical critical perspective on the political economy of post-colonial Africa and the failure of universities to distinguish themselves from other state institutions in the conduct of their own affairs that leave no doubt as to inability of the majority of African university teachers to defend and promote the interests of ordinary people. In its present form and content, the African university mirrors almost perfectly the state system of which it is a part. It is totally incapable of changing it.

To be able to help the struggle for political change in Africa, the university must work with those social forces opposed to the neo-colonial state. But this is impossible in the present context, inasmuch as the state keeps the university under the control of individuals with a vested interest in the *status quo*. Thus, the struggle to transform the university from its present character as merely a diploma factory, producing technocrats for the civil service, the parastatals and private enterprises, presupposes

the struggle to transform the state system of which it is a part. African universities have, within teaching bodies, individuals who do not care whether or not distinguished British dons spend entire evenings in their staff clubs, and who do not dream of catching up with those enterprunial American professors hopping from plane to plane and collecting money for advising corporations and governments on how to run their affairs. This essay is a plea to these potentially revolutionary intellectuals to work with those students deeply concerned with the needs of their people and to accept the challenge posed to all of us by Amilcar Cabral to become revolutionary workers.²⁵

NOTES

- 1 This essay is based on my four years of university teaching experience in Africa, three in Zaire and one in Nigeria. The ideas and opinions expressed here stem largely from my own observations and those of some of my former colleagues at Kisangani, Lubumbashi, and Maiduguri. In order to test some of those observations, I designed a questionnaire on the academic and extramural activities of African university teachers and on their views concerning university and political life in Africa for a pilot study involving teachers at three universities in Northern Nigeria: Ahmadu Bello University (ABU) at Zaria, Bayero University, Kano, and the University of Maiduguri. The survey was conducted between the 17th and 31st of July, 1978. Approximately 93 questionnaires were distributed: 36 at Maiduguri, 12 at Bayero, and 45 at ABU. Given the time constraints, none of the questionnaires left at Bayero on the 28th of July to be collected on the 31st were returned. Here, as at ABU - where the administration of the questionnaire benefited somewhat from a three-day stay in Zaria - most of the teachers had already gone on vacation. At least two of the Zaria respondents were scholars from Makerere University and the National University of Cameroun (Yaounde'), respectively, attending an international geographical meeting at ABU. Only 43 questionnaires were returned, 21 from Maiduguri and 22 from Zaria. Two of the latter were dropped because the respondents were not university teachers. They were laboratory technicians. The summary results of the questionnaire will be found in some of the footnotes below, where they are used for illustrative purposes only.
- 2 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Eloge de la philosophie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1953).
- 3 According to Gramsci, "Organic" intellectuals are distinguished from the "traditional" or professional intellectuals in that belonging to any job category, they are intellectuals by virtue of their function of directing and organizing the ideas and aspirations of the fundamental social classes to which they belong either objectively or by choice. See his essay "The Intellectuals," in Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, edited and translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), pp.3-23.
- 4 Plato, *Seventh Letter*, quoted in George H. Sabine and Thomas L. Thorson, *A History of Political Theory*, Fourth Edition (Hinsdale: Dryden Press, 1973) p.51.
- 5 The position outlined here is developed in some detail in Nzongola-Ntalaja, "Marxism and Epistemology," *Theory and Practice (Ibadan)*, forthcoming.
- 6 On the social position of intellectuals in modern society, see Nicos Poulantzas, "On Social Classes," *New Left Review* (London), 78 (March-April 1973), 27-54.
- 7 Maurice Duverger, *Sociologie politique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1968), pp. 11-12.
- 8 See Manuel Castells, "Urban Sociology and Urban Politics: From a Critique to New Trends of Research," ch.13 in John Walton and Louis H. Masotti (eds.) *The City in Comparative Perspective* (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1976), pp. 291-300; Manuel Castells and Emilio de Ipola, "Epistemological Practice and the Social Sciences," *Economy and Society*, 5:2 (May 1976), 111-144; Donal B. Cruise O'Brien, "Modernisation, Order, and the Erosion of a Democratic Ideal: American Political Science, 1960-70," *Journal of Development Studies*, 8:4 (1972), 351-378; Andre Gunder Frank, "Sociology of Development and the

- Underdevelopment of Sociology," ch.12 in James D. Cockcroft, Andre' Gunder Frank and Dale L. Johnson, *Dependence and Underdevelopment: Latin America's Political Economy* (Garden City; Anchor Books, 1972), pp.321-397; Richard L. Sklar, "Political Science and National Integration - A Radical Approach," *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 5:1 (March 1967), 1-11.
- 9 For a similar argument, see Martin Shaw, "The Coming Crisis of Radical Sociology," in Robin Blackburn (ed.) *Ideology in Social Science: Readings in Critical Social Theory* (Glasgow: Fontana/Collins, 1972), pp.32-44.
 - 10 See Poulantzas (note 6 above) and especially Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (London: New Left Books, 1971), pp. 121-173, for the conception of the ideological apparatuses of the state used here.
 - 11 An exception to this typical form of dependent capitalist state in Africa today is the progressive people's state engaged in the struggle for total national liberation and for socialism in Angola, Mozambique and Guinea-Bissau.
 - 12 Most of the 80 percent of the respondents to my questionnaire (see note 1) who agreed that African universities are worthy of the massive commitment of public funds required for their maintenance cited "development" as the reason for such expenditure. Among the 20 percent who disagreed, some mentioned the tremendous wastage of funds in African universities and other felt that these universities were not working in the interest of the African people.
 - 13 Development is often confused with economic growth, which refers primarily to the increase in the per capita output of goods and services in a nation's economy. The idea of development goes beyond this basically quantitative phenomenon to look at how this output is actually distributed among the country's population. It implies a definite improvement in the standard of living of the population as a whole, collectively as well as individually. As such, economic development involves a qualitative measure, and cannot therefore be rendered an exclusive domain for statisticians. Given its normative connotations, the realization of economic development is intimately tied up with politics.
 - 14 L.C. Sykes "The New Academics," in David Martin (ed.) *Anarchy and Culture: The problem of the Contemporary University* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969), pp. 200-205.
 - 15 I thank Dr. Alex Kwapong for this pertinent remark.
 - 16 See T.M. Yesufu (ed.) *Creating the African University: Emerging Issues of the 1970's* (Ibadan: Oxford University Press for the Association of African Universities, 1973), p.69.
 - 17 85 per cent of respondents to my questionnaire gave 50 or less as the percentage of their working time spent in preparing and delivering lectures. Only 15 percent estimated theirs to be 60 or more.
 - 18 Given a catastrophic economic situation in countries like Zaire, some universities teachers must engage in trade in order to live, i.e., to be able to meet their social obligations and to maintain the high standard of living to which they have become accustomed.
 - 19 Few of the African academicians are women.
 - 20 Nearly 50 percent of the respondents to my questionnaire thought of their salaries as being fair, while 25 percent said they were poor. Only 5 percent thought of them as excellent, and nearly 20 percent maintained they were good.
 - 21 In my Nigerian study, 78 percent of the respondents agreed that the quest for "ethnic balance" does affect university appointments and promotions, while 65 percent were of the opinion that the ethnic factor plays a major role in African university life. Although this may be true for few other countries like Zaire and Kenya, it is not the case for Africa as a whole. Professor M.L. Sedat Jobe of the University of Dakar informs me that in the former French colonies, university promotions are still controlled by a board set up in Paris by the French Ministry of Education.
 - 22 During my stay at the University of Maiduguri in 1977-78, the Vice-Chancellor used to spend his time approving expenditure for very minor things and, once a check was prepared by the Bursar's office for the approved amount, it had to go back to the Vice-Chancellor for his signature. He signed a lot of checks each day.
 - 23 Most of the 67.5 percent of the respondents to my questionnaire who thought that university teachers should be entitled to a special position in terms of determining public policy in Africa today gave as a reason the claim that these people are better informed or have greater knowledge of the issues than the rest of the population. 32.5 percent were against such a special position, mostly on democratic grounds.
 - 24 For people who have learned to condemn the master-servant relationship as one of the most humiliating aspect of race relations in Southern Africa, it is most shocking to hear domestic servants in independent black Africa address their black employers as "master."
 - 25 Amílcar Cabral, *Revolution in Guinea* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972).