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Citadels of Crisis: The Predicament of Nigerian Universities

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Back in the 1960s and 1970s, Nigeria boasted a small number of public universities that held their own among the world's best and produced scholars who rose to global acclaim in their respective fields. Today, notwithstanding the remarkable explosion in the number of Nigerian universities and the fact that a handful of these institutions intermittently appear in the lower rungs of global university rankings, no one disputes that higher education in Nigeria has fallen on hard times. If there is any controversy at all, it typically centers on the triggering factors and strategies of remediation.

On one level, the diagnosis is straightforward enough: the crisis of tertiary education in Nigeria is, without any doubt, a reflection of the crisis of the Nigerian state. Indeed, the woes of the universities seem poignantly illustrative of this multifaceted crisis of governance, which includes the mutual alienation of state and society, the failure to deliver economic prosperity, and, subsequently, the continued inability of the state to make itself legitimate. Insofar as the first generation of Nigerian universities were products of a certain kind of state formation and rationality, it was only to be expected that the crisis of the state would deflect their identity, character, and operations.

At the same time, efforts by academics to engage with the state and correct its perceived malformations and excesses have invariably left an imprint on the university system. Such interventions required that faculty time and resources be

dissipated on matters with, at most, a tangential relationship to scholarship. If, in hindsight, it appears that the era of military rule coincided with the nadir of the Nigerian academy, that was because it was a time of acute social distress, when university professors devoted considerable energy to thwarting the perceived designs of the military on the intelligentsia in particular, and civil society more broadly. The generals sought to bring them to heel through subordination, co-optation, or sometimes outright elimination.

In its own way, the Academic Staff Union of Nigerian Universities (ASUU), the umbrella association of faculty members, continues to show the wear and tear of this encounter. It still pays the price for overexposure in the political arena, even as it struggles to maintain its identity and integrity as a body of university professors with a social mandate to cogitate, research, and write.

Yet one can admit the above and still accept that the crisis is also internal (to the university system, that is) in nature. Indeed, a lingering criticism of ASUU is that its rightful focus on external threats to the system has made it lose sight of this equally important internal dimension. In any event, once it is understood that the academy everywhere is situated within and feeds off of the logics of a particular social milieu, including the prevailing economic ideology and social mores, it should come as no surprise that Nigerian universities have taken on and continue to exhibit some of the worst characteristics of contemporary Nigerian society.

On the campuses, these manifestations include the collapse of academic standards, rampant corruption, alleged sexual exploitation of students by university staff, inadequate funding, and recurrent

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strike action by academic and nonacademic staff. Worst of all, there is a definite sense that Nigerian higher education as a whole has become marginal to the global system of knowledge production. All of this has combined to produce arguably the largest emigration of faculty and students since the heyday of the universities in the late 1970s.

A FRAGILE ENTENTE

Considering the overall high standing of Nigerian universities and the commensurate status of academics just a few decades ago, an observer at that time would have been hard pressed to imagine their physical decrepitude and the professoriate's attendant loss of prestige by the end of the twentieth century, a decline that has continued well into the current century. According to historian Jacob Ade Ajayi, what was generally true of African universities in that post-independence era was especially true of Nigerian universities: "Most African universities in the 1960s were treated with great respect. The governments were, on the whole, generous to the universities financially, and were generally unwilling to disturb their autonomy."

From the governments' perspective, undergirding this concession of autonomy was the understanding (whether or not the academics themselves were on the same page)

that university professors would stay in their lane and not dabble in "such issues as the expansion of primary and secondary education," let alone matters of partisan politics. In a nutshell, governments would keep their side of the bargain by not tampering with university autonomy as long as professors kept theirs and desisted from political interference. Rather than functioning as intellectual powerhouses likely to cause trouble by producing transgressive ideas, universities would stick to their technical mandate. In the words of Nigerian economist and academic administrator T. M. Yesufu, that mandate was to "train and develop the skills and high-level manpower to replace the erstwhile official as well as to staff the new and expanded political, administrative, social, and economic institutions."

This entente did not last. In retrospect, it is surprising that it held for as long as it did. Considering the first-generation university academics' understanding of their role as defenders of the public good, broadly conceived, it was

only a matter of time before any perceived attack by government on the same would instigate them to renounce their oath of political noninterference.

Furthermore, even when academics were not engaged in direct confrontation with the state, the nascent professoriate, given its particular intellectual provenance, was always liable to imagine itself as the vanguard in defense of what it saw as the "people's institution." Being a university academic at one point in Nigeria implied that one was either a card-carrying Marxist or at least generally sympathetic to the left's doctrinal assertions. Many operating under that logic saw the state as an adversary to be challenged and outfoxed, or, in the worst-case scenario, grudgingly accommodated, rather than an institution with which to engage or collaborate. Their relations with the state would deteriorate rapidly from the moment the military, no more inclined to leftism than the government it had ousted, pushed aside the civilian politicians and installed itself in power.

BRAINS VERSUS BRAWN

For a Nigerian professoriate that saw itself as being locked in an irreparably adversarial relationship with the state, the takeover of the state by the military could only worsen this dynamic.

Aside from their sharply contrasting temperaments (one side inclined to domination, the other to deliberation), the military had a clear corporate objective of pacifying agents and forces within civil society as a way of establishing total control. The academy may not even have been a direct target; there is some evidence that among the military leadership, right up until the late 1970s and early 1980s, there was residual respect for the universities, stemming from the conviction that they had a role to play in "national development." In hindsight, though, the showdown between the two was just a matter of time, foretold by the differences in their dispositions and social outlooks.

As the military quickly realized, going after the academy was the social equivalent of killing two birds with one stone. It sent a message to the rest of civil society that no one would be spared the rod of discipline, not even "eggheads" who still enjoyed a modicum of social respectability, and so led to social demoralization. When Yakubu Gowon's military regime (1966–75) sought to

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push academics under the aegis of what was then the Association of University Teachers (the forerunner of the ASUU), pressuring them to call off their strike action by forcibly removing them from their official campus quarters, it signaled that they had lost the last vestiges of their special status. A new era in the military's relationship with the academy had begun.

To be sure, that relationship was not defined exclusively by coercion. The military's methods evolved as it solidified its hold on Nigerian society. For instance, the Ibrahim Babangida regime, in power from 1985 to 1993, perfected a strategy of pacification through incorporation. This involved sowing division among academics by offering plum government positions to leading social scientists. So many well-known scholars worked for the Babangida administration that political scientist Jibrin Ibrahim could cheekily allude to a "Faculty of Social Sciences, Aso Rock." (Aso Rock is the seat of federal power in Abuja.) Babangida also created a Centre for Democratic Studies, directed by political science professor Omo Omoruyi, and donated generously toward the establishment of the Centre for Advanced Social Science under the leadership of Claude Ake, the leading African political scientist at the time.

Together with appointments of leading social scientists to choice posts, these institutional initiatives and related acts of calculated generosity undermined the social standing of the academics as reliable allies in the struggle against military rule, while solidifying Babangida's grasp on political power. Academics found it difficult to present a united front. In a majority of cases, their antagonists were now former colleagues who until recently had been on their side at the barricades.

The university teachers and the intelligentsia more broadly were by no means passive in the face of the military's onslaught; they adopted creative methods of resistance from the global playbook of political dissent and forged alliances with student organizations, trade unions, and cognate social movements. Yet this came at a cost. The professoriate's clever messaging—"My take-home pay cannot take me home"; "My boss is a comedian, the wages he pays are a joke"—may have garnered sympathy for its plight from parents and a cross-section of the Nigerian public, but it also lifted the veil of a profession that many had once regarded with utter adoration. The academics may not have intended to undermine their public image when

they exposed the derelict conditions across the campuses, but that was precisely the effect.

Similarly, expressions of ideological solidarity between the ASUU and nonacademic civic groups, while dictated by the exigencies of social mobilization, had the dubious effect of making the professoriate appear less intellectual and certainly more political. Pulled into the vortex of activism, the academy gradually surrendered its vaunted social prestige.

The impact of these trends has been nothing short of momentous. With the professoriate delegitimized and the system in the throes of an existential crisis—of which the reckless proliferation of universities is an added proof—Nigerian academics have been leaving the country in droves. Currently, they comprise a significant percentage of the estimated 23,000 academics who emigrate from Africa annually in search of greener pastures—predominantly, though not exclusively, in Europe and North America.

The subsequent loss of faith in Nigerian higher education is itself of a piece with the broader erosion of confidence in the quality of public education. This constitutes the immediate backdrop to the explosion in the number of private universities—many of indifferent quality—and the seemingly unstoppable flight of Nigerian students to universities in various parts of the world. According to the Central Bank of Nigeria, Nigerian parents, rightly dubious about the quality of pedagogy on offer domestically, spent more than \$28 billion on foreign education in the decade between 2010 and 2020. That this bodes ill for the country's economic growth and the vitality of civil society cannot be overstated. The consequent drain of human capital, at a time when it is badly needed, means that Nigeria will be unable to reach its full developmental potential.

FROM 'MAN OF LETTERS' TO 'MAN OF GOD'

Given that the university in Nigeria occupied a central place in the social hierarchy, laden with real as well as symbolic prestige, the military's attack on it—carried out in conjunction with ancillary centers of critical deliberation, it is worth remembering—was bound to leave a mark. Combined with a prolonged economic crisis, this loss of status has devitalized tertiary education, scattering at least three successive generations of academics and intellectuals to the four winds.

Two other factors have aggravated the professoriate's loss of social standing. One is the global

collapse of socialism, which, among other things, robbed the intelligentsia of its organic identity. Just as in the rest of the postcolonial African academy, Marxism (for reasons outside the purview of this essay) ruled the ideological roost in post-independence Nigerian universities. To be a university teacher in Nigeria was to be a Marxist more or less. This is not to say that every academic was an adherent of this ideology; the point is rather that such was the influence of Marxism that it was the unquestioned lens through which university teachers *as an entity* saw and related to the world. Not only was it the ideological chassis for ASUU's pedagogy, but Marxism also organized and galvanized the union's social mission, as well as its often contentious relationship with the state.

For this reason, the fall of socialist regimes and the ensuing intellectual crisis of the Marxist worldview had a severe impact on the Nigerian intelligentsia. Suddenly denied its accustomed pieties, academia plunged into a crisis of identity from which it has yet to fully recover.

If the global collapse of socialism sealed the fate of the Nigerian professoriate as a coherent intellectual class, the rise of Pentecostalism, by most accounts the defining Christian movement of the past quarter-century, appears to have driven the final nail into its coffin. Pentecostalism's global ascendance no doubt stems from a variety of factors. In the African regional context, the movement found a positive reception and fertile soil for propagation across communities where the well-documented failures of postcolonial states and chronic sociopolitical dysfunction had left people largely bereft of hope and scrambling for meaning. Its message of eventual divine salvation (to be preceded, under the right conditions, by instant prosperity) was music to the ears of people fatigued by unredeemed promises of state-backed development.

As Pentecostal Christianity stepped into the vacuum bequeathed by the retreat of the academy from public life, so, too, did the Pentecostal pastor (the "Man of God") replace the university professor (the "Man of Letters") as the epitome of social

influence and cultural power. The transfer of the baton from one to the other, a profound transition in the basis of authority, has important ramifications for knowledge production, political rule, state legitimacy, and civil society not only in Nigeria, but also across other African countries experiencing a similar shift in authority. Universities established and owned by Pentecostal churches are an important part of this dynamic. In theory they are challenging the norms of secular education, but in reality they are all too susceptible to the same ethical and normative deformities for which secular (educational) institutions have become notorious.

CLASS DISMISSED

Since the country's return to civilian rule in 1999, Nigerian academics have gone on strike on 16 different occasions for a combined total of 1,594 days. In the past seven years alone, they have been on the picket lines for 567 days, suggesting that, the situation is not getting any better. The latest strike was finally called off in October 2022, after eight months. It is likely that we have not seen the last of these strike actions by the university teachers. Although the toll of such frequent disruptions on the quality of pedagogy and intellectual life is perennially lamented, there seems to be general agreement that nothing is wrong with the system that "adequate funding" cannot solve.

The emphasis on funding is not wrong, but if the foregoing account demonstrates anything, it is that funding might be the least of the Nigerian academy's problems. These woes have just as much to do with the delegitimizing of universities as centers of knowledge production and the erosion of the social standing of university professors as an authoritative class set apart from the rest of society. Any restorative strategies must take into account the fact that this erosion has taken place over a long period and has been precipitated by a complex combination of national, regional, and global forces. Nigeria badly needs its universities restored to their glory days. The survival of its young democracy may well depend on it. ■