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A Fragment

**AFRICA BETWEEN THE BAOBAB TREE AND THE
OWL OF MINERVA:
A POST-COLONIAL EDUCATIONAL NARRATIVE**

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PROLOGUE

Minerva is, of course, the Roman Goddess of Wisdom, Science, Poetry and War. In Africa the Baobab tree has often been the nearest equivalent seat of wisdom.

The Owl of Minerva is the owl that accompanies the Roman Goddess, Minerva.

Hegel, the 19th century philosopher, used the term “Owl of Minerva” to mean a philosopher.

In Africa the Baobab tree comes close to being regarded as sacred – or as the shelter under which the elders talk and consult until they reach consensus.

Senegal has often raised the status of the Baobab tree to a national symbol.

Minerva’s Narrative

In the first 50 years of independence there have been some development in African higher education which had positive trends but were interrupted by political impediments.

One interrupted symphony in Eastern Africa was institutionalized Pan Africanism in higher education. In the early 1960s there developed the University of East Africa – a federation of Makerere

University College in Uganda, the University College in Dar es Salaam and the University College of Nairobi. Such an African University with campuses in three different countries was a major experiment.

All young East Africans wanting to study medicine or agriculture came to Makerere in Uganda; all those wanting to study law went to the University of Dar es Salaam; and all those fascinated by engineering went to Nairobi.

The President of Tanzania, Mwalimu Julius K. Nyerere became the first Chancellor of the University of East Africa.

It was a major breakthrough – perhaps even more ambitious than the University of the West Indies, with a campus in Jamaica, a campus in Trinidad and a campus in Barbados.

Unfortunately this East African federation in higher education broke up – as Uganda, Tanzania and Kenya became nationalistic towards higher education, and created separate national universities.

The question has arisen whether Eastern Africa should once again experiment with a federation of universities, without necessarily preventing national and state universities in each East African country.

There have also developed in eastern Africa religiously-based (faith based) institutions of higher education. The Baobab tree has provided shelter to a new Talmudic tradition.

We do not yet have in Africa a world class Jewish university like Brandeis in the United States, but East Africa is experimenting with a Roman Catholic University similar to the University of Notre Dame in the United States. We also have in Uganda an Islamic University – a humbler approximation of Al-Azhar University in Cairo, Egypt.

Religiously-based universities can help to promote ecumenicalism rather than sectarianism – the way Brandeis and Notre Dame have enhanced inter-faith dialogue. The Owl of Minerva may preside over these trends.

We need to compensate at college level for religious radicalization at Madrasa levels of education prior to university entry.

There was a time when we regarded the politicization of undergraduates as a potentially healthy development of youthful independence. In the 1960s North America and Western Europe witnessed spectacular politicization of the youth – giving rise to the students' campus movement, the anti-war movement against the conflict in Vietnam, the Civil Rights movement against institutionalized racism, and the early stages of the Women's movement.

Between the Baobab and the Baracks

In Africa there were also spectacular students' demonstrations against Emperor Haile Selassie in Ethiopia; there were ujamaa

Socialist marches in Nyerere's Tanzania, and repeated closures of Nigeria's universities as students rebelled against the corruption of politicians.

As the 20th century was coming to an end young Africans went beyond getting politicized. They even traversed beyond mere ideological radicalization. Lo and behold, they started getting militarized.

The phenomenon of child soldiers emerged even in the earlier years of Museveni's struggle against the post-colonial tyrants of Uganda. This was the recruitment of young people into the armed forces voluntarily.

But the Lords' Resistance Army in Northern Uganda went further with outrageous conscription of children, turning them into killing machines. There were earlier outrages of the militarization of African youth in Liberia and Sierra Leone.

It is imperative that we reverse all trends towards the premature militarization of Africa's youth.

In the Muslim sector of Africa the question has arisen whether the assassination of Usama bin Laden on May Day 2011 in Pakistan will reduce the attraction of Al-Qaeda for young Muslim males in Somalia or Nigeria – or whether the perceived Martyrdom of Usama

bin Laden will instead trigger more anti-American militancy from Mogadishu to Maiduguri.

The Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda saw itself as a latter-day Christian Crusade. Al-Qaeda in the Horn of Africa, on the other hand, has seen itself as a latter-day jihad.

Africa must find creative ways of stemming the militarization of its youth – be the militarization leaning in either the jihadist or the Crusadist direction.

But to stem the jihadization of Muslim youth would require more than just creative educational policies in Africa itself. It would require wider changes in the international arena.

Until Al-Qaeda committed its outrages in the United States and Western Europe, all global North-South battles were fought on global Southern soil. The Mau Mau war in Kenya devastated the country in the 1950s – but all the killings on both sides were perpetrated on Kenyan soil. There were no long-distance attacks by Mau Mau on Manchester or Liverpool.

Algeria was very close to France during the Algerian war of independence from 1954 to 1962. A million Algerian lives were lost. But the Algerian revolutionaries did not cross the Mediterranean to attack French targets in Marseilles.

And now Libya is being bombed by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization – and Gaddafi can only fight NATO on Libyan soil.

The American war in Vietnam cost Vietnam two to three million lives – and cost the Americans nearly 60,000 deaths. But all the killings were in Indo-China. The Vietnamese did not plant bombs in Chicago or Washington, D.C.

The paradigm shift which Usama bin Laden succeeded in creating was in making the global North vulnerable to global Southern attacks perpetrated on Northern soil itself.

Although the United States had waged wars in Korea, Vietnam, Cambodia, multiple Latin American countries, Iraq, Afghanistan, the Caribbean, Sudan, not a single one of those Southern countries had hit back the United States on American soil – until Usama bin Laden changed the paradigm on September 11, 2001. Al-Qaeda created mutual military vulnerability between the global North and South for the first time in American history.

Unfortunately the paradigm-shift has had negative consequences for African Muslim youth in the Horn of Africa, Northern Nigeria and potentially Mali. A young northern Nigerian was caught on Christmas Day with potential bombing material in his underpants. Young Somali males living in the United States have gone home to train for Al-Qaeda

or for Al-Shabab. Other young Somalis are re-enacting ancient skills of piracy on the high seas. The international community has abandoned the Somali people.

Some educational deficiencies in Africa cannot be solved until wider global problems are addressed. But other educational problems can only be examined more fully when more resources are made available for additional teachers, better libraries, better accommodation, and wider motivational patterns to inspire the pursuit of success.

The African Owl of Minerva is seeking a new nest to perch on. Madrasas need not be abolished but they need to be more modernized and rationalized. And if we are going to have religious universities, let us aspire to have African equivalents of Brandeis and African approximations of Notre Dame and McGill University.

We need more effective institutions for inter-faith dialogue and more responsive institutions to linguistic diversity.

We might even explore once again the interrupted symphony of the Federal University of East Africa.

Pan Africanism should inspire not merely organizations like the African Union and ECOWAS. Pan Africanism should also be mobilized

in pursuit of greater intellectual and academic cooperation. The struggle continues.

The Owl of Democracy

Prodemocracy uprisings by intellectual students and professors did not begin in Tunisia in January 2011. The Sudanese have not received enough credit for two popular uprisings decades before the overthrow of Zeinal Abideen Ben Ali in Tunis in 2011.

In 1964 Khartoum exploded in a non-violent pro-democratic uprising against the government of General Ibrahim Aboud. Subsequently the soldiers returned to power in Khartoum. In 1985 the Sudanese rose again – once again led by professors, judges, and students against the government of General Jaafar Nimeiry.

But although Sudan shared borders with nine other countries, its pro-democratic uprisings did not trigger a region-wide contagion or imitation.

But one fascinating factor about the two Sudanese uprisings – in the demonstrations against General Aboud in 1964, the participation of Sudanese women was very limited.

However, in the demonstrations against Jaafar Nimeiry in 1985 female participation more than tripled. One major reason was that

there were many more women students in Sudanese universities in 1985 than there had been in the 1960s.

In addition, there were many Sudanese women who were outraged when the government of Jaafar Nimeiry executed an old scholar for alleged apostasy and heresy. The scholar was Mahmoud Muhammad Taha who had argued to his students – including women students – that the Qur'an had two separate messages. One message was to contemporaries of Muhammad in the 7th century (like Abu Lahab), while the other message was intended for the whole of humanity and for all time.

According to Taha, many of the restrictions of women in Islam were intended for 7th century Arabs who were just emerging from idolatry and from a culture which tolerated female infanticide.

The execution of Mahmoud Mohammad Taha outraged much of the Muslim world, and seemed to vindicate enemies of Islam.

In the Sudan itself those who were outraged included a disproportionate number of women students and many emerging female scholars. The Goddess Minerva, was flying over Khartoum above the human uprising.

Before long much of the Sudan was ready to rise against Jaafar Nimeiry. He was soon overthrown and went to Egypt in exile. Nimeiry needed to reflect upon his fate under a baobab tree.

A quarter of a century later an incident occurred in a small town in Tunisia. A well-educated young Tunisian would not get a job appropriate for the skills he had learnt in college. His name was Mohamed Bouazizi.

He had become a fruit-vendor in the streets. And yet the authorities harassed him even for doing such a modest livelihood. In frustration and desperation the young man got some kerosene and matches, poured the kerosene on his body, and set himself aflame.

Committing suicide by self-immolation is more common among Hindus and Buddhists than among Muslims. But the suicide in Tunisia in January 2011 not only physically killed a young man but politically set the whole Arab world aflame. The suicide of one young Tunisian triggered an Arab awakening.

Conclusion

Behind the individual tragedy was the wider tragedy of frustrated skills acquired in college from which there were no appropriate jobs in the wider society. The Owl of Minerva was flying without a sense of direction, without a sense of purpose.

But today the head of Minerva, the goddess, can be seen as a bust at Columbia University's Law Memorial Library and at the main library of the University of California, Berkeley.

In Africa, Minerva is the name of a female residence hall at the University of Stellenbosch in South Africa. And in Senegal the baobab tree is where wisdom itself resides across the ages.

*The blood of experience meanders on,
In the vast expanse of the valley of time,
The new is come, and the old is gone,
And life abides a changing clime.*