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TOWARDS MODERNIZING AFRICAN EDUCATION

by
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Mr. CHAIRMAN
Your Excellencies
Distinguished Celebrities
Distinguished Educators
Ladies and Gentlemen

I am truly flattered to lend my name to such a prize, and to have been chosen for one of the Awards being presented today.

For an educator and researcher like myself this young prize is on its way towards becoming the Nobel Prize for those engaged in research in African universities, research networks and institutes.

This period is regarded as the first half-century of Africa's postcolonial era. Some of us have been engaged in those fifty years on issues of development and of the Africanization of modernity.

In Japan after the Meiji Restoration in the nineteenth century the Japanese asked themselves "Can we nationally modernize without culturally westernizing?"

The Japanese at that time decided that they could not nationally modernize without culturally westernizing. They wanted to safeguard their authenticity.

Between the two world wars the Turks under Mustapha Kemal Ataturk asked themselves the same question: "Can we nationally modernize without culturally westernizing?" The Turks had a different answer. Ataturk's felt they could not nationally modernize without culturally westernizing. Ataturk claimed to be European. Turkey westernized dress, the alphabet and much of the official identity.

In the first half century of post coloniality many Africans posed themselves the same question "Can we nationally modernize without culturally westernizing?" Many African countries culturally westernized without nationally modernizing. Anglophone

Africans speak much better English than do South Koreans, but South Koreans have a more advanced and modernized nation than do Anglophone Africans.

In this second half century of postcoloniality Africa is trying to modernize on top of the earlier cultural westernization. Southern Africa especially has combined modern infrastructure with considerable cultural westernization.

North Africa's "Arab Spring" is wondering whether democratization is possible without substantial westernization. The Arab democratic experiment hangs in the balance.

These major systemic changes in South Africa and Arab Africa may need an educational revolution in schools before political reformation can be stabilized.

In Nigeria the democratic experiment is working adequately in those parts of the country which are not subjected to the violence perpetrated by the sectarianism of "Boko Haram" – an anti-western Islamic militant movement.

Some universities are undergoing reduced westernization. This is tried out in some of the Arab universities. Some use Arabic as a medium of instruction. The Arabization of university education is up and down in Sudan. The English language was stronger in the University of Khartoum fifty years ago than it is today.

On the other hand some universities in sub-Saharan Africa are considering teaching Chinese courses within a decade or two. There are also classes in the Hindi language at the University of Nairobi, Kenya.

Japan has encouraged the teaching of technology in Africa. Japan invested in the early phases of the Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology, Nairobi. I personally served for a while as Chancellor of this university in Kenya.

In 2008 I was received by the Prime Minister of India at his home in New Delhi. Dr. Manmohan Singh was very interested in helping African universities strengthen their courses in management and engineering.

Primary and secondary schools in Northern Nigeria may be strong in Islamic studies but less strong in secular studies. This has carried consequences of reduced Northern Nigerian participation among the elites of the country. Relatively speaking, there are fewer Northern Muslim Nigerians among the country's intelligentsia.

There are also fewer Northern Nigerian Muslim women who have graduated from universities. This marginalization of Muslim women is not as bad in Africa as it used to be. In some universities outside Africa there are more women students than men graduating. This is true of some universities in Iran.

There are denominational universities in Africa. These include Roman Catholic institutions in several African countries. There are also some Islamic universities not only in Arab Africa but also in sub-Saharan countries.

The University of Cape Town is widely regarded as the most distinguished western-style university in Africa. On the other hand, Al-Azhar University in Cairo is the best known Islamic University and is more than a thousand years old. A university in Fez, Morocco is even a little older in age than Al-Azhar.

The best endowed library is the new Library of Alexandria, currently directed by Dr. Ismael Serageldin. It is independent of any university but is widely used by researchers from all over North Africa and the rest of the Arab World.

Elsewhere in Africa the best libraries are usually affiliated with universities. Unfortunately, they are not well protected at the moment.

In the first half-century of post colonial independence Africa has suffered severely from the brain drain. Some of the most distinguished researchers of post-colonial Africa are now based in institutions in North America and Western Europe. Such scholars have access to such special libraries as the Library of Congress, the Library of London, the resources of Paris and UNESCO as well as well-endowed university libraries scattered in the western world.

CONCLUSION

As for Chinese studies, interest in Mao Tse-tung and beyond is evident in some political science departments these days, but Confucius is still ignored. Contemporary China is becoming a major factor in world affairs. We definitely need to learn about American historical traditions, as well as European. A conscious effort to learn more about what is done in India, and to understand its relevance to African and Muslim needs could contribute important practical knowledge. Both India and China have much to teach Africa about intermediate technology, intermediate medicine and new methods of agriculture, as well as about ideology and economic organization.

In the 20th century European imperial powers experimented with branches of their universities located in their colonies. These Euro-colonial educational branches included Gordon Memorial College in Sudan, the University of Hong Kong established by Lord Lugard, and the sub-Saharan academic jewels at Ibadan, Legon in Ghana, Makerere in Uganda, and the University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur.

In the postcolonial era it is American universities which have taken the lead in establishing branches in the Global South. But the American University in Beirut, and the American universities in Cairo and Nairobi are not branches of metropolitan institutions

but have been autonomous cultural influences. Such impact has helped in creating an Americanized elite in their respective countries in Africa and/or the Muslim world.

Somewhere between the ancient approximations of international centers of learning like Timbuktu and the more recent trends towards a global university, there lies the stage of universities as cultural multinational corporations. We have examined the ramifications, and the effort to decolonize modernity. Africa and the Muslim world have needed to distinguish between Westernization and modernization.

But at least as fundamental is the issue of how much Western science owes to other civilizations. From the Indus Valley to ancient Egypt, from imperial China to medieval Islam, the West has found intellectual and scientific benefactors. Very little of this history is communicated to young children in African schools. Their sense of awe about the West becomes a foundation for subsequent intellectual dependency. African secondary school curricula should contain a compulsory paper which places science in its proper historical context, reveals the diversity of the human heritage and breaks the dangerous myth of a Western scientific monopoly.

Another change which should be introduced into primary and secondary schools would require each African child to learn a minimum of three languages — one European, one Asian, and one African. The era of learning multiple European languages, some ancient and some modern, while other linguistic heritages are ignored, should come rapidly to an end.

At the university level a course on “Great Systems of Thought,” with examples drawn from the range of human cultures, should be required of all undergraduates in the humanities and social sciences. All undergraduates, regardless of field, should take either

an African or an Asian language at an advanced level. In addition, they should take a course on a Third World civilization, preferably but not necessarily linked to the language of their choice.

University reforms will require a fundamental change in attitude for all departments of African and Muslim universities — away from excessive Eurocentrism and toward both increased localization and increased internationalization. This broader focus could change the African university into a truly multicultural corporation.

The Strategy of Counter-Penetration

Africanization of modernity and diversification of Africa's cultural content will not be fully achieved until Islam can once again influence Western civilization. There are reformers in Africa and the Muslim world who urge only localization, some of them to the extent of espousing cultural autarky. But withdrawal from world culture would result in the continuing marginality of Africa and the Ummah in global affairs in a world which has shrunk to the point where many decisions can affect the entire human race. It would be futile for Muslims to attempt a strategy of withdrawal or total disengagement. Modernity is here to stay; the task is to decolonize it. A world culture is evolving fast; the task is to save it from excessive Eurocentrism.¹⁴

*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 time abides a changing time.*

NOTES

1. "U.S. Universities Overseas Abroad: Failure is a Reality," *Huffington Post*, <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/10/20/US-universities-overseas>.
2. Quoted from *The Observer* (London). See back cover of Ibn Khaldun *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, translated from the Arabic by Franz Rosenthal (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989 reprint).
3. Ibn Battuta, (1304 to 1369) born in Tangier, Morocco; Islamic scholar; considered one of the greatest travelers of all time. He journeyed more than 75,000 miles (121,000 km).
4. See Garland Hampton Cannon and Alan S. Kaye, *The Arabic Contributions to the English Language; An Historical Dictionary*, (Weisbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1994).
5. For a general discussion of imperialism, see George H. Nadel, (ed.), *Imperialism and Colonialism* (London: Macmillan, 1964); Harrison M. Wright, (ed.), *The New Imperialism* (Boston: D. C. Heath, 1961); Carlton J. H. Hayes, *A Generation of Materialism, 1871–1900* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1941), p. 218–22; Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Imperialism and Social Classes*, Heinz Norden, (trans.) and Paul Sweezy (ed.) (New York: A. M. Kelley, 1961).
6. Eric Ashby, *African Universities and Western Tradition* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964), p. 3.
7. Ashby, p. 38.
8. Judith Lynn Hanna, "African Dance: The Continuity of Change," *Yearbook of the International Folk Music Council*, 5 (1974). I am grateful to Dr. Hanna for allowing me to read her article in typescript.

9. The first non-European instructor who was hired by MIOME was an Ismaili Indian, Badruddin Pirmohamad. Although he was the first instructor of Muslim faith, his field was electrical engineering.
10. Graham M. Bull, "Impressions of a Medical Tour of the Eastern and Western Regions of Nigeria," *West African Medical Journal*, NS IX (1960), pp. 139–144.
11. For examples of works which have creatively used Marxist categories, see Samir Amin, "Capitalism and Development in the Ivory Coast," in *African Politics and Society*, Irving Leonard (ed.) (New York: Free Press, 1970), pp. 277–288; and Giovanni Arrighi and John S. Saul, *Essays on the Political Economy of Africa* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1973); E. A. Brett, *Colonialism and Underdevelopment in East Africa* (London: Heinemann, 1972); and Colin Leys, *Underdevelopment in Kenya: The Political Economy of Neo-Colonialism* (London: Heinemann, 1975).
12. Okot p'Bitek, "Indigenous Ills," *Transition* 7, No. 32 (1967), p. 47.
13. p'Bitek, p. 47.
14. The Eurocentrism of world culture is discussed with passion and insight by Chinweizu, *The West and the Rest of Us: White Predators, Black Slavers and the African Elite* (New York: Random House, 1975); chapters 14–16 are particularly relevant to this article. See also Ali A. Mazrui, *World Culture and the Black Experience* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1974).