THE IDEA OF THE UNIVERSITY--ITS ROLE IN THE PRESENT WORLD CRISIS WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

The role of the university in our time is discussed with special reference to Africa. In a first paragraph, the idea of the university is reviewed in its historical development as the highest institution of research and scientific education implying a close relationship between teachers and students. In a second paragraph the present world crisis is briefly analyzed as it affects the very identity of many ethnic groups and nations. People are feeling the present transition claiming, on one side, a stronger international unity among all the nations of the world and, on the other side, asserting local interests leading to ethnic fragmentation and even violent divisions. This is also reflected in the demand for local tiny institutions of higher education with the evident consequence of academic isolation and lowering standards of efficiency. On this background, the situation of the African Universities is finally indicated as one where the dangers of isolation are made quite evident. Unity of intents and especially the need of exchange of scholars and students are therefore envisaged as the only way to overcome the serious damages that would primarily be suffered by African Universities, but would finally be felt by the entire body of the scientific world.

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TO AFRICA

The idea of the University implies an extraordinary opening of mind for the achievement of knowledge, its acquisition through research and its spreading through teaching and communication. Such a lofty ideal has never been easy to implement. Its implied universality has been contrasted either by the abuse of those very sponsors by whose authority the University was entitled to perform its activity as an institution, or by want of efficiency. Indeed, through history both teachers and students have had to stand firm, sometimes by joining forces sometimes by opposed contrasting strifes, in order to claim their rights to teach and to be tought and also in order to defend the autonomy of their academic institutions. Of course, as a living institution the University is part and parcel of a social reality. Its role in terms of standards is somehow determined by its social context. Social crisis are reflected on the life of the University showing how this is socially sensitive. Therefore on discussing the role of the University in our time, we have to refer to the crisis that is now confronting the world. This is even more true with regard to the Third World, and especially Africa, where the strggle for new ethnic identities is facing a very difficult time.

I will divide my paper into three paragraphs, as follows: 1. The historical development of the University as the highest

institution for research and scientific education; 2. Modern University and the current crisis; 3. The present role of the Uiversity in Africa.

1. The idea of the University.

As a starting point I take for granted the following working definition of the university: *an institution of high education whose essential elements are teachers and students as distinct subjects effectively united by the common scope of knowledge achieved by research and learning.*

I think that some useful suggestions may be derived from the multi-centennial life of the university. As known, some well organised systems of high education date back to the early times of Greece and Rome, consistently adapting to a changing process of world perception and social structure.

High education in those ancient times was entirely based on an active relationship between teachers and students. The teaching method of Platonic Academy, for example, the oustanding centre of philosophical research and teaching, was based on a debating system engaging scholars of renown as teachers and younger trainees as students; the Academy was a private concern and no degrees, as such, were conferred. Equally no degrees were accorded by the *Atheneum* in Rome, founded by the emperor Hadrian in the second century, as a public institution for teaching philosophy, rethoric, grammar and jurisprudence implying an exclusive relationship between teachers and students.

The big change occurred in medieval times, though the two major schools of medicine, Salerno in Southern Italy, and Montpellier in Southern France, the forerunners of the University

as an established institution, were still of a private character and did not grant any degree.

The juridical status of the University as an institution of public interest directly endowed by the state or approved by the state is normally emphasized as its constituent element. Conferring a degree at the completion of an established course of studies is thus described as the most distinguishing tract of the University. By this perspective we miss the true human constituents of the University, namely teachers and students: it is their relationship that should rather be emphasized as complementary and vital. Both, in fact, in different ways have consistently contributed to the historical development of the University, to its successes and to its failures.

Medieval University that stands at the origin of the present system was due, as known, to teachers and students. It was their corporations that were at first identified by the term *university*, a word that was to carry a very different conceptualization as is now connected with the idea of the University.

In medieval time students gathered from all parts of Europe to listen to lecturers of fame. Bologna was one of the centres made famous by great masters of law, but it was through the gathering of students that its University was named: *the University of students – Universitas scholarium*. Students were joined by the need to protect themselves from the greed of hostel-keepers, and also by the claim to uphold their paid right to be regularly tought by their teachers. They joined according to their common regional origin. There has been a time when in Bologna there were two student Universities: a cisalpine

University and ultralpine University.

In 1989, the University of Bologna did hold the 9th centennial anniversary of its foundation. It is a paradox of history that after nine hundred years, the problems facing students in Bologna and in other universities of Italy are still of the same order, the right to residence and to be properly lectured.

Differently than Bologna, Paris began as a *universitas magistrorum* - a corporation of teachers. Oxford and Cambridge provided an efficient solution to problems typical of the continent: Colleges as residential hostels for students were instituted as a way to solve their endemic worries. Only in a second time residential Colleges provided also teaching facilities.

The idea of *University* changed, then, from implying the corporate interests of teachers and students onto pursuing a lofty universality of knowledge. It was a long process which may be considered completed at the end of the eighteenth century with "*le Siècle des lumières*" and "*l'Encyclopédie*": in Greek, *egkuklios paideuma*, literally *full-cercle education*, implying an *all-embracing* idea of knowledge.

The right to confer degrees came as a sign of public or state ratification of a higher education completed under a renowned teacher. This was the lasting innovation introduced by the institutionalisation of the Universities in medieval times. The change affected the early centres of learning where some teacher of fame, a *magister*: lector, (lectures were normally a commentary of written texts and codes of law), attracted students from different regions. The subject matter was normally law and

theology. Students: *tirones* - after a full course of studies: *tirocinium* - were finally granted the faculty to teach in any place: *facultas ubique docendi*. By such a faculty a scholar was proclaimed a *doctor*: teacher, a qualification that was soon assumed as a title of distinction, almost a privilege, besides its actual enabling to act in court or to teach theology.

However, it is the extension of the faculty that needs to be stressed. Acting *ubique:* anywhere, as a doctor underlined the *universal* character of his qualification and hence the idea of the *University* as the right place for acquiring the basic intellectual formation for that qualification. The faculty to act in court could not but involve the interest and concern of public authority. It was thus that the early centres of high teaching were formally recognized by the Church or by the State as legal institutions duly authorized to teach and confer public degrees.

2. Modern University and the current crisis

All these basic connotations may still be recognized in modern universities. The ubiquitous faculty to teach has been somehow lost. Universities have taken more and more a nationalist character and limitation. A point, I think, that deserves meditation. The modern world has now been turned into a world village: perhaps, to reclaim that early extension of teaching faculty it would help to turn the world-village into a peaceful place.

(Parenthetically, the original meaning of the term *faculty* as "the right to teach" has now been changed to mean "the body of teachers", those who originally testified to the achieved status of *doctor*.)

A much stronger institutionalisation marked the development of the universities in modern times. Their juridical autonomy and personality were formally recognized by papal or royal authority, though the Church and State did in fact exercise an effective control especially on teachers who had to fight for keeping their statutory authonomy. However, material facilities and endowments did much gain from the papal and monarchical protection.

Research was, thus, greatly encouraged and whether priority should be given to its development rather than to teaching has remained a matter of constant dispute. The contending matter lies more on emphasys than on substance as there is no disputing on the intimate connection between research and teaching, both being considered as essential to the progress of knowledge and education. Both, therefore, research and teaching, are essential to the idea of University and such, indeed, is the charge that modern society entrust to its role and functioning.

The following points may be taken as typical of today's world crisis.

At first I will stress the malaise derived from the widespread uncertainty concerning the *ethnic and cultural identity* of peoples and individuals. This is due, to the deep changes that have altered old social structures as well as the economy of the world. A dramatic confrontation has matched different ethnic groups, each other opposed as the poor ever poorer against the rich ever richer. While political blocks have ceased to exist in dual opposition, the rich and the poor afford a division that is constantly increasing and bitterly felt.

The process may be traced back since the fall of colonial empires. Independence did not bring happiness. The new countries

have been faced by tremendous problems. Having inherited their status from previous colonial entities - empires, colonies, protectorates, etc. - whose ideologies they claimed to repudiate, they had to invent a new cultural unity by welding together their ethnic groups who, without their knowledge or consultation, had found themselves included into unknown political formations. It was no easy task to ask people to think and act in terms of a new national entity instead of looking only to their local interests. "Tribalism" became a catch word to condemn every reactionary act and mind-attitude as against the efforts towards building new ethnic and cultural identity. The change of mentality and the fight against local interests were the cause of simmering conflicts occasionally exploding into violent confrontations. Civil wars have ravaged bitterly during the last decades and are still in course, as in Somalia and Liberia just to mention a few African cases. In spite of all appearances, however, some positive results are beginning to emerge, namely a conscience of national identity as a gain over the limitations of localism. (KITUYI, M. 1989. *Becoming Kenyans: History and Adaptation in the Trasformation of the Pastoral Masai*, Bergen University. - Kituyi is himself a Masai).

A similar process of disintegration as well as the emergence of new independent states have been set in motion by the fall of the Soviet Union. Jugoslavia has followed its own way losing an artificial unity by a cruel civil war. Even the old nations of the Old World seem to be affectd by a new wave of local ethnicism implying the demand and the assertion of new identities. Ethnic identity is indeed a natural right, though its practical implications are full ofhistorical ambiguities and local

interests. As a consequence it has turned into a deep social and political malaise, leading to political instability and fragmentation, a form of local pathology.

World economics accounts as another decisive factor. The situation, in this perspective, exhibits many different facets. A most shocking one is connected with the appalling poverty inherited from the fall of the Soviet Union. Its peoples have been brought to the ridge of starvation. Such a dramatic outcome has also affected most of its former sattelites. An impulse to *migration* outside their native country in order to escape the spectre of famine has taken a dramatic trend.

East Germans, after the fall of Berlin wall and the reconquest of democratic freedom, were soon attracted by the affluence of Western Germans but the first excitment was soon supersided by the difficulties of the economic and social adjustment which gave way to disillusionment and bitterness. Italy had to face the sudden invasion of Albanians flying away from the economic void produced by the most conservative and severe of all communist regimes.

Many an economist do foresee an even larger wave of *immigration* from the poor countries towards the industrialized countries and their paradise of richness and pleasure. As an anthropologist I see this forecast as a positive phenomenon which should not blind us from seeing the real problems that in its first pahse it will cause.

One of the most serious consequences are the ambiguous and contradictory reactions to the exodus by the receiving countries. On one side newcomers have been accepted and welcomed as partners. Their presence has also been considered an asset for

the development of the host country. On the other side, newcomers have been met by strong and emotional opposition. They have been seen as substracting opportunities and work from the local peoples. Indeed, surprisingly though not entirely unexpectedly at least by attentive observers, a resurgence of *racism and pathological ethnocentrism* has shaken such countries as Italy and even France causing serious alarm. The ensuing malaise has been stirred by political movements for political interests. If seen in this perspective the future is bleak. Irrationality and emotions are a real hindrance and if not properly clarified and checked their implications may lead to disaster. All this demands thinking.

3. *The present role of the University in Africa*

In the current malaise an evident resposibility falls on those interested in the re-evaluation of higher education. We should try to envisage the role that the University should play in meeting the needs of the next decades. A new millenium is shortly beginning, one should avoid to give way to phantastic millenarist planning, rather we should keep our purposes directly involved in planning for the next years, possibly to sow the seed for future strengthenening of the idea of the University in order to uphold its function in solving the present crisis.

To avoid generalities, I propose to refer specifically to the situation of African Universities, because, in the opinion of all Africanists, they are the institutions which are going to suffer most from the present critical difficulties. May I say at once that it would be an illusion to think of Africa and African Universities as a problem detached from the difficulties faced by

other continents. As I will stress ahead, we may no longer stand aloof if we want to avoid discovering that at the end we all shall be the losers.

Before I proceed, it is, perhaps, correct that I should introduce myself not simply as an Africanist anthropologist, but as one interested in the fate and development of African Universities. In so doing some of the problems of African Universities will be made evident.

My first involvement with the University life in Africa dates back to February 1948, when as a young post-graduate student from the University of Rome I registered at the Department of Afican Studies, University of Cape Town, in South Africa, where in 1950 I was awarded the degree of *"Ph.D. in African Studies"*. Cape Town University was yet a liberal University, trying to contrast the old *colour-bar* and at the same time to resist the incoming *aparheid*. In March of that year, a fateful political election took place when Jan Smut was defeated by the Nationalist Party under the leadership of Daniel Malan. Apartheid, which during the election sounded as a rather confused program, was to be so rudely implemented, as we all know, that it became a police regime that was to last more than forty years up to our own days. Blocked by the apartheid policy, South African Universities were practically hindered from taking any part in the development of higher education that after independence was being realized throughout Africa.

In 1952 I was seconded to Kenya and charged with the direction of a new secondary school among the Meru of Mount Kenya in the Central Province. It was the time when the school system in Kenya was widely expanding pressed by a popular demand for

more school opportunities. Indeed, the pressure for higher education was even more felt as it became part of the simmering social discomfort that was to explode in the Mau Mau rebellion repressed by the state of emergency in 1953. Up to then, East Africa formed a sort of *ante litteram* common market, comprising Kenya, Uganda and Tanganyika, within which the University of Makerere, Kampala, an affiliation of the University of London, met the demand of higher education from the three countries. Many an African leader of the following years were old students of Makerere. The foundation of the Royal Technical College in Nairobi set the premises for the establishment of the University of Nairobi, the first of the four institutions that today constitute the University system of Kenya.

In 1963 I visited Ibadan University in Nigeria and Legon University in Ghana in order to get acquainted with their structure and programs. Their facilities, especially their libraries, and the high standards that they had set to themselves left me with a very high impression. When in 1975 and in 1984 I returned to Ibadan as a guest, my experience was somehow disappointed: some of the facilities needed repair, libraries lagged behind in their acquisitions, though the faculties were admirable in their struggle to keep up the established standards. Ife, on the contrary, was, so to speak, in its prime, flourishing as the earlier Ibadan. On the whole the situation was not yet decadent, but there were serious signs that the crisis was beginning to badly affect the entire institution. Isolation from, and by the academic world outside Nigeria, was the subject of the main complaint. The Ibadan situation, I was told, could be taken as a sign of a general crisis of the University in Nigeria.

In 1976 I took part in a seminar on *The Professionalization of African Medicine*, as the guest of the University of Gaborone, in Botswana. During the session we were given the possibility to form a personal knowledge of this new African University. Indeed, the efforts to set up a modern University in this arid land were a major realization. As known, the University of Botswana is one of the three Universities that branched off from the early interstate University which had served the three independent countries of Botswana, Lesotho, and Swaziland. The prestige of independence apparently claimed the institution of local and separate national Universities, however small. There is hope that the end of apartheid in South Africa will possibly open up new channels of cooperation with the entire set of Southern African Universities.

Lately, at the University of Addis Ababa, in Ethiopia, I went through a new experience of mutual cooperation with my Ethiopian colleagues. I had been asked to assist in setting up a Master degree program, eventually leading to a PH.D. degree in Social Anthropology, within the Institute of Social Studies. Such a program was conceived as a contribution of the University to a renovation of the Ethiopian administration. As known, Ethiopia includes a large number of ethnic minorities that have been practically ignored by the old administration. It was felt that a knowledge of their traditional culture and social organisation was the first step to involve them into a direct interest in their own development and in the development of Ethiopia as a multiethnic nation: in this perspective training young anthropologists both as field researchers to gather information on every ethnic group, and as civil servants properly informed on

local cultures, was the kind of contribution that the University should provide.

The Ethiopian case may be taken as an index of a general situation. At the end of this century the world has passed through a deep revolution with the dramatic events connected with the fall of the Soviet Union and the failure of Marxist ideology. Old and new countries, in Africa and around the world, are endeavouring to reshape their own identity. This is, in synthesis, the essence of the present world crisis, and this is the terrain where the University, as an institution of learning and high education, must play a full role.

Since 1968, the fateful year, even the oldest universities were forced to devise a new structural model. They were formerly institutions for the élite, they have now changed into institutions for the masses. However, the change has not been an easy solution. It has raised a series of problems. Indeed, the debatable question "*is quality compatible with mass*?" is repeatedly posed as the demand for local minor Universities is steadily increasing. There is no doubt that the mass expansion has sometimes been paid, though not necessarily, by a lack of efficiency, isolation and lack of resources.

As regards African Universities, isolation and lack of resources are the most disturbing prospects, a threat to their very existence. We as scholars must be concerned. On the 19th July 1986, for the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the International African Institute, at Bayreuth, the late Michael Crowder, a distinguished Africanist historian, delivered a prophetic lecture warning against the consequences of isolation which, in the end, will be felt both by African and non-African

scholars and students (Michael CROWDER. 1987. *"Us and Them": the International African Institute and the current crisis of identity in African Studies, Africa* 57, 1: 109-122)

May I quote: *"Put bluntly, this crisis is one in which our community [of Africanists] has once more been divided into two, with 'us', the comparatively well-off non-Africans, increasingly dominating the field, and 'them', the African scholars, feeling that they have less and less control over the means of production in African Studies"* (Crowder 1987: 111).

In his analysis, Michael Crowder indicated five choices as possible means to face the crisis: 1. *exchange of information*; 2. *exchange of scholars*; 3. *planning research with African partners*; 4. *African priorities*; 5. *assuaging book-famine of African Universities*. Each of these points is an invitation to factual action leading to an exchange of personnel and resource.

However, when we move on from the ideal to the practical approach, it is not easy, if at all possible, to indicate the actual steps to take. One has to face reality and consider case by case. The autonomy of the universities is at stake at both ends of the exchange. In the same perspective the specific Faculties, and scholars as individuals, must be taken into consideration. In academic exchange, as well as in any other kind of exchange, one has to proceed by steps. The first phase must be dedicated to information and consultation when it may be convenient, if not necessary, to involve the largest possible number of persons. A second phase or the later phases will have to involve only a few persons, if not a single rsponsible authority, in order to reach the final phase of decision and action. Perhaps, all this may sound trite and banal: it is not,

especially if one is aware of the correct measure and method that the academic exchange requires affecting, as it does, the personal dignity of each scholar and the authonomy of their institutions.

At this point, with special regard to the situation of the Universities in Africa, I think that a different approach is required if the faculties involved are of scientific or humanistic nature. I do no mean to drag us into the recurrent discussion between art and science. This should not concern us in the present context. The difference between the two kind of faculties I wish to underline regards laboratories. The equipment of scientific laboratories is very expensive and must be properly mantained as they are an essential endowment for teaching and training. Rarely the Universities in Africa are in a position to possess modern equipment and when they do, they find it hard to maintain it up-to-date. This is the case where the exchange between Universities and scientific faculties may be foreseen as an exchange allowing scholars and students from African Universities to avail themselves of the program offered by better endowed Universities abroad. Scholars might be invited to be partners in planning and carrying on research; students might be given the opportunity to attend courses and laboratories and thus obtain the advantages of a fully competent training. One could imagine a network or a relais of scientific Faculties of various Universities in all the continents, Africa, Asia, Europe, America, for the promotion of scientific education. Scholars and students from the poorer countries would share the opportunities with their colleagues. A cooperation of this kind could really serve for strengthening local minor universities.

As regards humanistic faculties African priorities should be encouraged. Africa, all over, is an extraordinary rich field of research in humanities: archaeology, history, literature, art, museums, are each an area where much has been already achieved and much more can be done. When Michael Crowder stressed his points 3 - *planning research with African partners*, and 4 - *African priorities* - he spoke by personal experience. As an historian of West Africa his cooperation with Jacob F.Ade Ajay, a professor at Ibadan University and himself a distinguished historian of West Africa, was well known and afforded an exemplary model: a model that many others should follow.

Indeed, one could prospect a World University, a place of comparative learning, with teachers and students from all over the world where they would have the opportunity to meet and cooperate together in research and discussion. A dream, perhaps, but if materialized, it would help to implement in modern terms the primeval idea of the University as a centre of learning and training, where students will be entrusted, as "doctors", with a "*facultas ubique docendi*". The mere possibility of sharing a common education would be a forceful means for spreading a better understanding of the peoples around the world and thus work for a future of mutual understanding and peace.

The ERASMUS plan as carried out within the European Community could be taken as an apt model. A similar program extended to the African Universities, would greatly limit, if not annul, the evil of isolation letting African students share in the resources of historically established and richer institutions.