Transforming African Higher Education: Precolonial Foundations, Colonial Legacies, and Postcolonial Innovations

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Introduction

This article has three main objectives. First, it examines the political, economic, and socio-cultural aspects of higher education policies and systems in Africa before European colonialism. Second, it looks at the possible harm that European colonialism did to African higher education policies and systems. Finally, the example of French Equatorial Africa shows how postcolonial African higher education systems still have policies and systems that were made to serve the interests of former European colonial powers.

Analytical Framework and Methodology

The article adopts a historical-analytical and decolonial methodological approach to examine the evolution of African higher education across the precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial periods. Anchored in critical historiography, the analytical framework interrogates colonial epistemologies and foregrounds indigenous African knowledge systems as valid intellectual traditions (Lulat, 2005; Mawere, 2015). The research is structured thematically to explore key dimensions of higher education, including institutional development, language of instruction, policy orientation, curriculum design, and epistemic foundations (Ngange, 2020; Kallaway, 2020). The article relied entirely on secondary sources, selected through purposive and thematic sampling. Primary source categories included historical legal instruments, colonial policy documents, constitutions, educational ordinances, missionary memos, and archival records. Academic literature was gathered from databases such as JSTOR, Springer, ScienceDirect, Web of Science, Scopus, and Cambridge University Press, accessed through institutional libraries at the University of the National Education Commission, Krakow, and the University of Pittsburgh. Search terms such as “indigenous African education,” “colonial higher education policy,” “decolonizing African curricula,” and “language in African education systems” guided the literature selection process.

To enhance reliability and mitigate bias, a triangulation strategy was employed by drawing from multiple categories of sources—historical texts, scholarly interpretations, and institutional records—across different regions and periods. Scholarly writings (Lulat, 2005), historical and archaeological records (Bryan, 1930; eL-Gammal, 1993), and modern institution references (Per Ankh Academy, 2023), for example, all helped to show that the Per Ankh was an important place of higher education in ancient Egypt. This approach ensured that the institution was not examined through a single disciplinary or ideological lens but as a multidimensional entity validated across genres of evidence. Sources were also cross-verified to ensure historical consistency and capture regional diversity. The research looked at colonial education policies in British, French, and Portuguese colonies (Nwauwa, 1993; Cogneau, 2003; Matasci et al., 2019) to find out what strategies were used in all three cases and how they were different. For instance, the analysis of language policies contrasted the British promotion of English through missionary education with the French assimilationist model, which imposed French as the medium of instruction across West and Central Africa (Eizlini, 2013). This comparative approach prevented overgeneralization and

highlighted how different colonial ideologies produced distinct but similarly harmful educational legacies.

Precolonial African Higher Education Systems

The precolonial era in Africa often begins with the vast interval between the first evidence of human existence and the first signs of civilization on the continent (Adenusi, 2014; Arowolo, 2010; Falola & Fleming, 2011). Contrary to these three scholars' claim that precolonial Africa only stretched until the formal establishment of European colonies on the continent, this article is grounded on the basis that precolonial Africa extended until the 16th century, when the outside world first met Africa, namely its former colonial masters, with the introduction of the Trans-Saharan Trade and the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. Regarding higher education in precolonial Africa, Lulat (2005, p. 42), who happens to be one of the most authoritative sources, sets off with the following salient inquiry: "Did higher education exist in precolonial Africa at all?" He goes further to credit Ashby (1965, p. 147) for writing one of the most timely and outstanding works on the history of higher education in Africa, averring that higher education "is not new to the continent of Africa." While higher education may not be new to the African continent, Lulat (2005) insists that it is still necessary to study higher education in precolonial Africa, if for no other reason than to firmly register the point that African history does not begin with the arrival of European colonialists.

On her part, Ashby (1965) suggests that the existence of higher education in precolonial Africa does not significantly influence present-day higher education across the continent, due to the discontinuity between the two periods caused by interventionism in the form of European colonialism. This article contends that while there may be little or no continuity between precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial African higher education systems and policy dimensions, there is the possibility of revitalization, and contemporary African higher education has a great deal to learn from precolonial higher education, particularly aspects that are still relevant to its present-day innovation, originality, and endogeneity. It would be, therefore, a complete waste of time to study it just for the sake of achieving historical accuracy but for maintenance, preservation, and expansion in a globalized context. Therefore, some systems were not only accurate descriptions of higher education systems but also detailed the ways that modern African higher education institutions could use ideas from a time that seemed to have been rejected (Adenusi, 2014).

Before the foray and colonization of Africa by Europeans, the African continent was home to gigantic kingdoms (Falola & Fleming, 2011) that were equipped with wide-ranging educational institutions, including levels ranging from elementary to postsecondary. It is concurrently imperative to note that precolonial African education systems had a significant societal impact although they simultaneously educated religious and secular leaders without distinguishing between the two, one of the system's defining characteristics (Yamada, 2019). The Per Ankh, which was in Egyptian temples and served as a scriptorium, training, and research centre, is an exemplar that is widely referenced and considered in academic literature when discussing higher education in precolonial Africa. It offered higher education to both religious and secular scholars, drawing a large following that included scholars from the Mediterranean and Arabic worlds. This fact has prompted Lulat (2005) and Adenusi (2014) to cast doubt on the Eurocentric perspective, which claims that Europeans brought higher education to Africa. Other educational systems in Africa at the time included those associated with the Ethiopian Orthodox churches, which ranged from basic literacy to

advanced academic thought. Additionally, the Islamic education system grew in tandem with the expansion of the Islamic faith (Woldegiorgis & Doevenspeck, 2013, p. 35).

The Per Ankh education system in Pharaonic Egypt, the Ethiopian Orthodox education system, and the Islamic education system were certainly all essential to the growth of the African continent up until the fall of African kingdoms and the beginning of European colonialism. The only possible explanation is that African higher education systems were built on strong policies, institutions, and principles that promoted science, medicine, and innovation and were easily translated into practice (Adenusi, 2014). This is probably one of the few reasons why these systems were able to last for centuries and continue to exist in some form to this day. Starting with the Per Ankh, the various systems are explored in detail in the proceeding sections, paying close attention to the diagnostic aspects of each one of them.

The Per Ankh. Students of African descent in the United States of America (U.S.) have the opportunity today to improve their educational and cultural experiences about Africa through the Per Ankh Academy, which is hosted on the campus of Contra Costa College (CCC) (Per Ankh Academy, 2023). This Academy carries on the legacy of an ancient Egyptian educational institution. Although many people believe that this is simply an Academy dedicated to actively supporting and nurturing student accomplishment through a curriculum and teaching style that is reminiscent of the history of the African diaspora, the truth is that it brings us back to the very foundations of higher education on the African continent. According to the Per Ankh Academy (2023), the House of Life, for instance, was a momentous institution in ancient Egypt, dating back thousands upon thousands of years. Once more, Lulat's (2005) work, titled "A History of African Higher Education from Antiquity to the Present: A Critical Synthesis", provides a historical backdrop that situates this period, starting sometime around the year 2000 B.C.E. (before the Common Era) and continuing to the present day.

People perceived the *Perimeter of Per Ankh* as an important centre for both the acquisition and storage of knowledge. It had scribes who were not only responsible for producing handwritten copies of documents as part of their profession but were also responsible for modifying the documents by removing the original text and adding new ideas (Erskine, 1995; Per Ankh Academy, 2023). These high-ranking scribes also served as priests and were knowledgeable in areas like medicine, magic, theology, ritual, and dream interpretation (eL-Gammal, 1993). Most graduates of Per Ankh went to careers as public scribes, priests, or administrators. The Per Ankh only allowed a select few to join, and they went on to achieve prestigious positions within the organization. The Per Ankh had a hierarchy of learned officials with titles such as "overseer of writing in the House of Life," "keeper of House of Life secrets," and "Director of the House of Life masters of *heka* (words of power)," but only a few were ever accepted into the organization (Per Ankh Academy, 2023). Indeed, the Per Ankh is among the most important and oldest recognized educational institutions around the world.

Apart from Per Ankh, the ancient Egyptian institution for learning, other names such as the University of Onu, the University of Ptah, the University of Tahuty, and the University of Waset in the cities of Heliopolis, Memphis, Hermopolis, and Thebes, respectively, are often used in literary or imaginative contexts rather than as historical references. Those pursuing a higher education or a professional degree typically attended one of these colleges, universities, or temples. Family relatives, co-workers, and social equals received this

education in a closely guarded, clandestine, and casual manner. Today, higher education systems all over Africa and the African diaspora are incorporating values that date back to the House of Life. This offers credibility to the argument that higher education in Africa is as old as the people who first inhabited the continent and further dismantles the illusion that higher education in Africa is a product of European colonialism. Although it was, to an extent, restricted to those who were recognized as heirs by birth, particularly regarding priesthood and medicine (Sifuna & Otiende, 2006; Wilds & Lottich, 1970), Egyptian education in general, and its higher and professional education in particular, contributed a great deal to human civilization, as detailed in Table 1.

Table 1

Contribution of Egyptian Education to Human Civilisation

Discipline	Contribution
Art	Egyptian art served as a significant inspiration for much of contemporary painting and sculpture.
Architecture	The Egyptians were the first people to effectively employ mass with stone to mimic the immense desert cliffs and mountains to create the pyramids, which are one of the marvels of the world that have stood the test of time.
Literature	Methods that are still widely used in education today, like proverbs, similes, and aphorisms, were used by the Egyptians to instruct students on proper ethical behaviour.
Mathematics	The Egyptian technique of multiplication was, until very recently, employed throughout Eastern Europe and Asia.
Medicine	Egyptians knew physiology, surgery, and blood circulation, and were the originators of the Hippocratic oath.
Writing	Egyptians developed hieroglyphics and invented the earliest known writing material. Paper is an abbreviation of *papyrus*, which was a plant cultivated in Egypt and used for writing.

Source: Wilds and Lottich, 1961; Rinehart and Wiston, 1961; Mayers, 1969; Power, 1970; Sifuna and Otiende,1994

Despite the evidence presented above, there are critics of Egyptian civilization who argue that these accomplishments were not further developed because of the stagnation and degeneration that ensued after the end of the Old Kingdom. That notwithstanding, it is certain that ancient Egyptian civilization played a significant role in the formation of the scientific and technological foundations upon which the present Western world is built. Considering this, it is not a kind of bias to state that, contrary to Meredith (2006), precolonial African cultures were not largely composed of individuals who were illiterate or unable to read or write.

In agreement with Bryan (1930), the educational principles of ancient Egypt were written down on papyrus and were composed in a collection that became known as the Books of Instruction. The Books of Instruction can be thought of as a policy document in the modern sense, because they are a structured collection of educational rules or guidelines that were written down in a way that makes sense. They are like modern policy documents that spell out standard procedures or protocols for different academic fields in Africa and around the world. A similar argument could also be made about the Islamic faith and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church's educational systems, both of which were grounded on policy (Robso, 2021).

Another school of thought, led by scholars such as Bunson and Margaret (2002) and Zinn (2012), asserts that the origins of higher education in Africa can be traced back to one of three distinct institutional traditions: the Alexandria Museum and Library, early Christian monasteries, or Islamic Mosque universities. Both the Museum (also known as the *Mouseion*) and its accompanying Library, the Great Library of Alexandria, are famous for the significant contributions they made to the development of academic knowledge since its founding in Egypt in the third century B.C.E. (Erskine 1995, p. 38). It is estimated that the library has more than 200,000 books and provides services to as many as 5,000 students and scholars (Houghton & Monier, 2020; Nevárez, 2021; Zinn, 2012). According to Erskine (1995, p. 40), the library may have had as many as 500,000 volumes in its collection at one point. It is abundantly clear that this establishment served as a massive research centre, and a significant number of the most eminent Egyptian, African, Greek, Roman, and Jewish intellectuals from the ancient world studied or worked there at some point in their lives.

The establishment of the initial monastic communities in Egypt occurred during the third century A.D., a period when Egypt was already home to some of the earliest Christian groups in existence. There are other examples of churches in Egypt, including The Hanging Church, The Church of Saint George, Abu Serga Church, Abu Mena, The Red Monastery, and the Saint Catherine Monastery (ETP Team, 2020). The desert served as the originating location for Coptic monasticism, which first embodied the austere philosophical and intellectual concept of celibacy and dedication (Romel et al., 2020). The establishment of monastic orders and monasteries provided several Christians with significant prospects for reflection, scholarly pursuits, and intellectual development. The concept of monasteries and their establishment extended throughout Africa and Asia, including Britain, Georgia, Persia, and India, where several institutions eventually emerged. This takes us to Ethiopia, perhaps the only African country that was able to repel European colonization, as well as the issue of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

Education During the Time of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. The second of these traditions originates in Ethiopia, a country that converted to Christianity in the fourth century A.D. and promptly instituted a system of monastic instruction. Higher education was made available to members of the nobility and clergy during the Zagwe dynasty, which ruled in the 12th and 13th centuries. At the very bottom was the *Qine Bet* (School of Hymns), followed by the *Zema Bet* (School of Poetry), and at the very top was the *Metsahift Bet* (School of the Holy Books), which taught a variety of subjects including religious studies, philosophy, history, and the calculation of time and calendars, among other things (Negash, 2006). At various points in time throughout her history, the educational policies of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church had the goals of pursuing the current world order, modernizing Ethiopia, and producing interpreters for international and public relations (Bishaw & Lasser, 2012; Negash, 2006; Robso, 2021). The year 330 A.D. is often regarded as the year when the Ethiopian Orthodox Church was successfully established. The church served as the foundation for the development of early Ethiopian education.

The ancient language of *Geez* formed the basis for a teaching methodology that was developed and promoted by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. The Amharic language then appropriated this methodology (Robso 2021, p. 4144). Many researchers (Bishaw & Lasser, 2012; Larebo, 1987; Robso, 2021) who have studied the origins of education in Ethiopia use the term *traditional* when denoting the educational system that existed before attempts made by Emperor Menelik II (1889-1913) to introduce modern education. This research intentionally avoids using the word *traditional* to describe Ethiopia's educational system

before Emperor Menelik II's modernizing attempts. The reasoning behind this choice is based on the acknowledgement that the term *traditional* sometimes has an unintentional negative meaning, namely suggesting primitiveness or obsolescence, which would mean inadequately acknowledging the historical and cultural importance of Ethiopia's educational tradition. It is essential to recognize that this system, deeply rooted in a long and important past, is not just a basic type of education but an intricate and developed one that has greatly contributed to the intellectual and cultural foundation of the country.

Islamic Education. Islam is responsible for founding some of Africa's earliest and most lasting educational institutions. Africa is the birthplace of some of the world's oldest still-functioning colleges and some of the world's oldest Islamic institutions. These are the 732 Ez-Zitouna madrassas in Tunisia (Zeleza 2006, p. 31), followed by the al-Qarawiyyin mosque university, which was built in Fez in 859 A.D. by Fatima Al-Fihri, a young immigrant princess from Qairawan. Both institutions are in North Africa (Tunisia). The colleges were attractive to intellectuals from West Africa as well as students from Andalusia in Spain (Zeleza, 2021; 2009). In continuation, Zeleza (2006, p. 31) offers this historical evidence:

> […] In 969 A.D. Al-Azhar Mosque University was established in Cairo, the same year that the city was founded by the Fatimid dynasty from the Maghreb. It came to be regarded as the most prestigious centre of Islamic education and scholarship and attracted the greatest intellectuals of the Muslim world, including Ibn Khaldun, the renowned historian who taught there.

During the seventh century, Islamic education was disseminated in Ethiopia and over the entire continent of Africa. It had affiliations with and received sponsorship from numerous Islamic religious organizations around the continent. The institution had a dual function in promoting the learning and practice of the Arabic language, as well as the exploration of Islamic philosophy and law, and naturally, the teachings of the *Qur'an*, the holy scripture of Islam (Hanny & Rizal, 2020; Harad et al., 2022). Another major early Islamic university was Sankore mosque university in Timbuktu, founded in the twelfth century, where a wide range of courses were taught, from theology, logic, astronomy, and astrology to grammar, rhetoric, history, and geography.

The enduring presence of the old Islamic universities in contemporary Africa is marked by their ability to adapt to significant historical changes, such as the incorporation of more secular, technical, and professional disciplines. Generation after generation has carried on this long-standing tradition (Zeleza, 2009; Zeleza, 2006). Furthermore, it serves as evidence of the current trend of privatizing higher education throughout the continent. The European higher education system, which inherited it from Africa during the colonial era, also reflects its significant impact. One could argue that modern African higher education policies and systems share very little with the precolonial higher education systems. Nevertheless, they also have considerable capacity to improve the revitalization of indigenous knowledge, provide direction, develop structure, implement efficiency, and promote innovation in modern African higher education.

Disruption and Transformation During Colonialism

The year 1415 is considered here as the inception of European colonization in Africa, in contrast to the commonly used late eighteenth-century timeframe employed by most authors of African history. 1415 coincided with the Spanish occupation of Ceuta (Newitt, 2010),

followed by Christopher Columbus' arrival in the New World (Feldmann, 2016). Designating the year 1415 as the starting point of European colonization in Africa equally emphasizes the initial Portuguese explorations and settlements on the African continent, which occurred before the intense competition for African territories in the late eighteenth century. This perspective offers a more detailed historical account of the extent and obscurity of European influence on the continent. The colonial domination of Spain over the Americas came to an end in 1833 after successive wars of independence. Nevertheless, the colonial presence over Africa continued for a little while longer, with Equatorial Guinea becoming the last Spanish colony to gain independence in 1968.

The discussion on higher education in Africa saw a profound transformation with the onset of European colonialism. This change brings to mind a story about how pre-colonial African higher education policies and systems were replaced with policies and systems that tried to further the colonial goals of economic, political, sociocultural, and subjugation, as well as the exploitation of the colonies. In his work, Mawere (2015, p. 57) presents a pessimistic portrayal of the events and puts up the following argument:

> In Africa, especially in the sub-Saharan region, while the so-called indigenous communities have always found value in their local forms of knowledge, the colonial administration and its associates viewed indigenous knowledge as unscientific, illogical, anti-development, and/or ungodly.

The history of colonialism in Africa has left substantial scars on many elements of African culture and society, one of which is the continent's higher education system (Ocholla 2020, 289; Ukoh 1985). It is important to look at how colonial higher education changed over time through a collection of decrees, ordinances, texts, laws, constitutions, press releases, official memoranda and communiqués, and decisions made by gfggcolonial administrators in the colonies. These documents set the goals of colonial education in general and colonial higher education in particular (Ngange, 2020), and they provide a better understanding of how European colonialism transformed African higher education systems and policies (Pearcey, 2016; Sattarzadeh, 2015). All these factors had simultaneous repercussions for the different kinds of educational institutions, the medium of instruction, the curriculum design, academic freedom, research and innovation, staffing, funding, quality assurance (accreditation and certification), student mobility, educational infrastructure, the overall size of the system (e.g., student enrollment), access, affordability, regionalization, continentalization, and internationalization.

Colonial Higher Education Objective. The relationship between the dominant and subdominant is usually influenced by the design of institutions and the implementation of policies that prioritize their interests. This serves as a metaphor for how colonial administrators in Africa utilized education to manipulate the population, thereby advancing the political and economic goals of European colonization (Cogneau, 2003). In the case of the British, the resolution to establish university colleges in colonial Africa resulted from the exigencies of World War II and the resultant Colonial Development and Welfare Act of 1940. The act was a gesture of the loyalty displayed by Africans during the interwar years. In addition, the act was influenced by the fact that the United States introduced its own higher education to Africans (Lee & Schultz, 2012; Nwauwa, 1993; Pearce, 2023).

The French exercised mental control through education, operating under what became known as a civilizing mission. The French colonial educational strategy rested on four fundamental tenets: (i) uniformity of language; (ii) free of charge; (iii) secularity; and (iv) the connection

with the demand of staff for colonial administration (Gifford & Weiskel, 1971). According to Mart and Toker (2010), the educational objective of the colonizers was to bring Africans into a new world and school them to the colonizers' ostensibly better culture. Put differently, the colonists wanted Africans to attain a higher degree of civilization. In fact, "Colonial education was a deliberate policy to continue colonial rule" (Mart & Toker 2010, p. 363). Colonial governments in Africa were aware that they could amass power not necessarily through physical control but rather mental control that was attained through the establishment of a central intellectual faculty in the form of the educational system. The basic element of the purpose of this program was to promote the paternalist belief that the "primitive" people who live in the lands that have been conquered should be given an education. It should be said, especially in the case of the British, that the need for skilled African labour at the lower echelons of the colonial administration and the eagerness to spread Christianity through missionary activities were both dependent on the use of education as a tool to achieve social control over African people. However, it is important to note that the use of education as a tool to achieve social control over African people was not always successful (Jeremiah, 2018; Malisa & Missedja, 2019; Mart, 2011). Colonial education policies and systems were based on the premise that only a small number of universities should exist in a small number of colonies, and that most Africans who wished to pursue university studies had to do so in the countries of their colonial masters until the late 1920s, in the case of the British. In addition, "British universities could admit only a handful of Africans depending on the estimated number of vacancies in the colonial service of their territories of origin," further hammering the fact that education was designed to satisfy the needs of the colonial system (Nwauwa, 1993, p. 248).

In 1907, the Germans in the then-German Kamerun organized a meeting that would mark what could be described as the official start of their colonial educational plan. This took place when Theodore Seitz was serving as the country's colonial Governor (Gwanfogbe, 1995, p. 51). This conference led the to 1910 Education Ordinance. The conference's resolutions focused on the structure of curricula, the language of instruction, the harmonization of educational standards across all schools, the working relationship between the government and missions, as well as finances, school age, school attendance, school discipline, and vocational education. Education was restricted to a group of affluent individuals but also confined to primary education, which emphasized the educational goal of the colonial system. When Britain and France took control of Cameroon after World War I, they followed in the footsteps of the Germans, and education was designed to recuperate the exploitation of human and material resources in the colonies for the benefit of cities like London and Paris. This also held throughout the whole of French Equatorial Africa (Gardinier, 1974, 1984), where there was an almost complete lack of access to higher education, confirming the purpose of colonial education: to bolster the authority of colonial rulers.

Another important piece of evidence was the divergent approaches that different colonial governments took toward the provision of education. For example, the British allowed missionaries more latitude and liberty because they saw it as a more cost-effective alternative and not because they wanted more people to have access, whereas the French and the Spanish maintained a tight grip on education even though it was provided by missionaries (Cogneau & Moradi, 2014). Coquery-Vidrovitch (2021, p. 6-7) reveals the extent to which colonial higher education was abysmal, with a lack of skills at almost all levels while visiting French Equatorial Africa in 1965, just five years after independence. The presence of French *coopérants* in every conceivable industry, including education, administration, and research, amply demonstrated this systemic lack of qualified workers. The territory had remained

under French tutelage owing to a shortage of skilled staff; the certificate of elementary studies was the highest certification that most, young Africans received. The situation did not start to improve until the 1990s when a new generation that was already more educated than their parents started their educational careers. To this day, Cameroon, Chad, CAR, Gabon, Equatorial Guinea, and the Republic of the Congo have not completely recovered from the damage that was done and continues to struggle with reforms that limit their educational systems and sectors from fully developing. Even after about two decades of gaining their independence, new policies and reforms—introduced in the form of SAPs (Structural Adjustment Programs) that saw the massive privatization of universities—still profited Africa's former colonial rulers more. Today, a significant portion of the AU budget, which oversees Agenda 2063 and CESA, comes from the European Union (EU). This raises questions about the complete independence of African heads of state in deciding the direction of the higher education policies and reforms of their various countries and in determining what is best for the continent.

Structure of Higher Education Institutions. It is possible to pursue education at the undergraduate, graduate, and postgraduate levels, with credentials such as bachelor's, master's, doctorate, and postdoctoral degrees, as well as various professional qualifications. In contrast to the current situation, Matasci et al. (2019, p. 3) argue as follows:

> Paradigms such as "adapted," "vocational," "mass," or "fundamental" education, elaborated within long-standing and enduring racialised frameworks, had a significant role in how European colonial administrations strove to improve the living standards of local populations, to legitimise imperial rule or even enable some forms of controlled self-government.

Some of the higher education institutions, ranging from universities to vocational and technical schools—that were built in Africa throughout the colonial era and upon independence—are detailed in Table 2 below. They are a symbol of European colonialism that has been shoved into the present without any dramatic reforms, thereby slowing the growth of Africa's higher education sector, with corresponding ramifications for knowledge production, research, innovation, and skill creation. They have been around for a very long time, and they are still in use today.

Table 2

List of Universities in Colonial Africa

No.	Name of University	Country	Year
1	Fourah Bay College – University of Sierra Leone	Sierra Leone	1827
2	Historic College of West Africa	Liberia	1839
4	University of Cape Town	South Africa	1829
5	Stellenbosch University	South Africa	1903
6	Cairo University	Egypt	1908
7	University of Algiers	Algeria	1909
8	University of Fort Hare	South Africa	1916
9	American University in Cairo	Egypt	1919
10	Makerere University	Uganda	1922
13	University of Zimbabwe	Zimbabwe	1952
14	Prince of Wales College at Achimota	Gold Coast	1923
15	Yaba Higher College	Nigeria	1934
16	Federal University of Yaoundé	Cameroon	1962
17	Gordon Memorial College, Khartoum	The Sudan	1899

18	Kitchener School of Medicine	The Sudan	1924
19	University of Chad	Chad	1974
20	University of Bangui	Central African Republic	1969
21	Indigenous Colonial Institute	Equatorial Guinea	1935
22	University of Lubumbashi	Republic of the Congo	1955
23	Omar Bongo University (UOB)	Gabon	1970

Source: (Nwauwa 1993)

For instance, the Commonwealth period saw the founding of the Historic College of West Africa in Liberia in 1839. It was first known as The Liberia Conference Seminary or The Monrovia Seminary, and Mr. Jabez A. Burton served as the head of the institution when it was first established. The College of West Africa (CWA) did not transform into its current form until 1898. The United Methodist Church was established seventeen years after its arrival in the African territory of Liberia. Liberia is still Africa's oldest independent state, a tangible reminder of the most heinous atrocity ever recorded on planet earth (the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade), and the world's second oldest Black independent state after Haiti, which gained independence in 1804. The following statement, which comes from the Office of the Minister of Tourism and Cultural Affairs (2012), provides more evidence of the colonial nature of the College:

> Old Fourah Bay College bears an exceptional testimony to the appearance and spread of Western civilisation in Africa. For a century, Old Fourah Bay College was the laboratory for experimenting with the transfer of Western governance ideas, religion, political organisation, and public service bureaucracy. It produced the earliest set of Christian clergymen who took Christianity to other parts of West Africa […] Fourah Bay College produced the earliest generation of Western-type professionals and public administrators.

Since almost no progress has been made in institutional adjustments, the circumstances surrounding numbers 16, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, and 23 in Table 2 above are even more disturbing. You can find yet another piece of evidence to support the claim that these university colleges were primarily found fulfilling the one goal of the colonial government in their geographical and demographic distribution. When looking at the list of university colleges in Table 2, most of them happened to have been in settler colonies such as South Africa, Algeria, and Zimbabwe. This indicates that these university colleges, in most cases, were not intended for Africans but rather for Europeans who had relocated to Africa because of colonization or for only a select few Africans who were willing to yield to the influence of the colonial masters. It is noteworthy that originally, Africans were only granted access to university colleges, which primarily functioned as recruitment centres for the junior cadres of the colonial service, in contrast to the desires of Africans who sought the establishment of full-fledged universities that could award degrees (Nwauwa, 1993).

Enrolment. One of the leading challenges that African higher education faces today is its continuing expansion in terms of enrolment without a corresponding increase in quality (Gudo et al., 2011; Tamrat, 2018; Varghese, 2013). Unlike today—where education has become a subject of priority as a means of national and global development—throughout the colonial era, learning was not only limited to the absolute minimum (i.e., basic and, at most, secondary schools), but only a few Africans in the colonies had access to higher education (Joel & Liberty, 2019). One of the primary reasons for this was that education in general, and higher education in particular, was later seen as a threat to the colonial system, and the goal

of the colonial system was to provide just enough knowledge to prevent "educated" Africans from considering resisting colonial control (Uetela, 2017; Wilson, 2021). The Table 3 below presents an overview of the aggregate number of students enrolled in higher education institutions throughout Africa during the period of colonial authority.

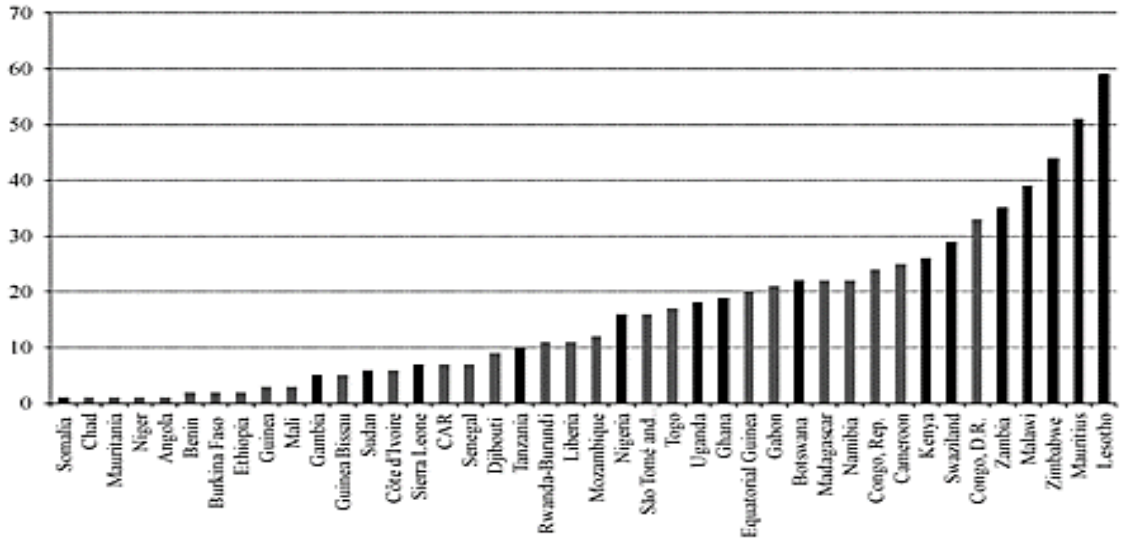
Table 3
Partial Statistics of Higher Education Enrolment in Colonial Africa

Year	Name of college	Region	Number of students
1944	Fourah Bay College	West Africa	16
1943	Prince of Wales College at Achimota	West Africa	98
-	Higher College at Yaba	West Africa	100
1943	Makerere College	East Africa	138
	South African Native College at Fort Hare	Union of South Africa	220

Source: Asquith Commission Report 1945

The above statistics highlight the stringent educational regulations during the colonial period, which were designed to provide just basic education to avoid any potential threat to colonial power. As compared to the total number of students attending elementary and secondary schools, the number of students enrolled in university institutions was a very small percentage (Teixeira & Shin, 2020). Figure 1 below shows the enrolment rates of primary school students in 42 African countries in 1950, separated by the British administration and other countries. The data indicates that the British African colonies had a higher average enrolment rate of 24.2, compared to the averages of the French (9.4) and Portuguese (8.5) (Frankema, 2012, p. 336).

Figure 1
Gross Primary-School Enrolment Rates (Ages 5–14) Subdivided by British (Black) and Non-British (Grey) African Colonies (1950)



Source: Frankema 2012, 337

Although the data suggests that the British performed relatively better in education compared

to other colonial powers like the French, the main point to consider is that all colonial powers aimed to minimize enrollment figures in their education policies. The limited number of students enrolling at the primary level has had a cascading effect on secondary and tertiary education, which still reflects the outdated practices from the colonial era. The standardized structure of colonial administration mostly caused the low enrollment rates; however, other factors, such as financial concerns on the part of Africans, may have also played a role. Hussey, the Nigerian director of education at the time, presented an ultra-conservative strategy for the gradual establishment of universities in Africa, which he thought to be the most appropriate educational method. As per this proposal, African institutions like Yaba, Achimota, Makerere, and Fourah Bay would undergo three stages before achieving the rank of a university college (Nwauwa, 1993, p. 157). This plan was either meant to make it easier for colonial governments to limit the number of college graduates who could hold important jobs in the colonial service or to make the indirect rule system work better, even though it relied on untrained chiefs and was inherently unstable.

Language of Instruction. Many primary and official languages used in schools and everyday administration in Africa today are European. One argument may be that governments in Africa do this to compensate for the 1,200 to 3,000 languages and dialects spoken by different ethnic groups that share comparable diversity throughout the continent. But the truth is that this started during the colonial days when European officials made it a point to ensure that they made use of their military power to wage inland wars and impose their beliefs and values on the people living in the colonies. This occurred following their meeting in Berlin in 1884, where they agreed to divide Africa as easily as possible. One of the most important things that they did to accomplish their goals was to impose linguistic by-laws that encouraged the use of only colonial languages, including English, French, Spanish, and German. Since the use of native languages was either limited to the sphere of elementary education or was outright prohibited, instruction in European languages became one of the most important aspects of education in colonial Africa. In the case of the French, Eizlini (2013) writes:

> Above all else, education proposes to expand the influence of the French language, to establish the [French] nationality or culture in Africa (*Bulletin de l'Enseignement en AOF*, No. 45, 1921); Colonial duty and political necessity impose a double task on our education work: on the one hand it is a matter of training an indigenous staff destined to become our assistants throughout the domains, and to assure the ascension of a carefully chosen elite, and on the other hand it is a matter of educating the masses, to bring them nearer to us and to change their way of life. (*Bulletin de l'Enseignment en AOF***,** No. 74, 1931)

For instance, the purpose of the Brazzaville Conference, which was held in 1944 and was sponsored by France, was to *reconnoitre* the state of colonial education in Africa as it existed at the time. One of the conclusions reached was the necessity of teaching classes in French (White, 1996, p. 12). According to Malisa and Missedja (2019, p. 8), the British also ensured that all subjects, except for African languages, were taught from a colonial point of view; English was the primary language of instruction; and passing or achieving success in the English language was regarded as an essential component of test accomplishment. Table 5 is a snapshot of the profound linguistic influence of colonial powers in Africa. It shows the distribution of German, British, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Belgian, and Italian languages, used as a medium of instruction in different subregions. This reflects the historical impact of colonization on Africa's education and culture. Notably, English and French emerged as dominant languages after World War I, replacing German in several subregions, highlighting

the varying, distinct colonial interests and their enduring impact on the linguistic diversity of the continent.

Table 5
Language Structure and Distribution in Colonial Africa

Colonial Power	Subregions in Africa	Language of Instruction
Germany	Namibia (German South-West Africa), Tanzania (German East Africa), Cameroon, and Togo	German
Britain	East Africa, Southern Africa, West Africa, and former German colonies after WWI	English
France	West Africa, Central Africa, and North Africa, parts of former German colonies after WWI	French
Spain	Equatorial Guinea	Spanish
Portugal	Angola, Mozambique, and Guinea-Bissau	Portuguese
Belgium	Central Africa (Congo)	French, Dutch
Italy	Horn of Africa (Somalia, Eritrea)	Italian

Source: author's contribution

The imposition of colonial languages over Africa has skewed several areas of human development, including education (Duncan, 2022; Kamwangamalu, 2016; Laitin et al., 2019; Meighan, 2023). It is no longer an issue of debate that when people are educated in languages other than their mother tongues, it significantly diminishes their ability to reach their full potential, be it for personal growth or development (Bromham et al., 2021; Schmitz, 2013) or otherwise. Although English has become a global language and is taught to children in most European countries, for instance, this has not resulted in the neglect of their native languages. Their mother tongues remain the sole medium of instruction in schools, which is why their educational systems continue to flourish with unique attributes. Therefore, teaching in native languages in African and CEMAC countries would not only promote a stronger cultural identity and solidarity but would also improve students' cognitive capacities and retention rates. This culturally based approach would enable individuals to make more effective contributions to local economies and government, thereby driving sustainable development from within the community.

Curriculum Design. Another relevant apprehension about colonial higher education policy was the nature of the curriculum offered to African students. To promote Lord Lugard's doctrine of indirect rule, the British, for example, placed a significant focus on "adapted education," and a "progressivist" agenda of rural community education that had previously been trialled in the postbellum South of the United States and was also implemented (Kallaway, 2020, p. 36; Matasci et al., 2019). Even though "educational curricula were to focus on environmental awareness, animals, agriculture, hygiene, nutrition, economic environment – and the role of women and children in society" (Kallaway, 2020, p. 37), vocational and technical study programs, for example, remained very limited and were sometimes circumscribed to White populations, such as in the case of settler colonies (Matasci et al., 2019, p. 9). It reflected contemporaneous political and economic concerns in Britain and Europe in the 1930s for the League of Nations to relate the politics and policy of education to broader problems of welfare and society. Curricula, therefore, had a central role in the formulation of policies within the framework of colonialism (Kallaway, 2020, p. 37).

While adapted education was not entirely abandoned, and the culturalist vision of the German

linguists and anthropologists was not forsaken, formal curriculum models based on international norms for formal mass education retained their popularity with African educators, parents, and students (Kallaway, 2020, p. 47). Colonial governments placed a strong emphasis on vocational education, with agriculture, poultry, vegetables, orchards, cleanliness, first aid, handicrafts, carpentry, home economics, cooking, and dressmaking serving as the primary disciplines in which African pupils were educated (Booth, 2003; Bude, 1983). The intention behind accessing vocational and/or industrial education was not to enable Africans to surpass Whites in talent. Instead, the goal was to help Africans break free from poverty (Maylam, 2001). As a matter of fact, "The underlying premise, as far as academic accomplishment was concerned, was that Blacks could not obtain mastery in 'bookish topics,' and this assumption was based on the belief that Africans could neither read nor write" (Malisa & Missedja, 2019, p. 8). African students did, on occasion, participate in intellectual instruction despite the predominant emphasis placed on vocational education. Several subjects, including English, history, religious knowledge, Latin, arithmetic, geometry, algebra, geography, physics, and chemistry, were included in the curriculum (Omolewa, 2006). The tendency was to portray Africans in a manner that was archaic and backward, to draw attention to the educational systems of Europe and North America, which were seen as being modern and progressive at the time.

Staffing and Funding. The Colonial Development and Welfare Act of 1940 allocated finances for educational institutions and scientific research in African territories under British colonial administration (Nwauwa, 1993). However, in 1938, Great Britain spent £113,205,000 on education from central and local authority funds, while the total net revenues available to the governments of all the colonies and Sudan to cover administrative charges, material development, and the full range of social services was only £79,552,000 (Asquith, 1945, p. 20). Due to inadequate financial backing for colonial education, some existing schools suffered from a shortage of faculty personnel. Although the British government acknowledged the need for personnel for education, the British Treasury did not foresee providing financial assistance for such initiatives. Conversely, the British government advocated for a system that incentivized all colonial governments to achieve financial independence (Nwauwa, 1993). The Asquith Commission Report of 1945 (Asquith, 1945, p. 5ff.) provides data indicating that throughout the 1940s, several educational institutions in Africa received substantial financial assistance mainly from colonial administrations, mostly designated for capital expenditures, including the construction of buildings and the acquisition of equipment, as shown in Table 5.

Table 5

Financial Support for Educational Institutions in Africa (ca. 1940s)

Institution	Location	Financial Support	Year	Source of Funding
Makerere College	Uganda	£105,000	Not Specified	Ugandan Government
Gordon College	Khartoum	£73,896	1943	Sudanese Government
		£2,500	1943	Gordon College Executive Committee
Prince of Wales College	Achimota	£617,000	Not Specified	Gold Coast Government
Fourah Bay College	Sierra Leone	£3,755	1942-1943	Not Specified

Higher College	Yaba, Nigeria	£17,444	1944	Not Specified
Yaba Medical School	Yaba, Nigeria	£12,855	1943-1944	Not Specified

Source: Asquith Commission, 1945

The financial data, however edifying, raises critical questions about the characteristics and consequences of the British colonial administration in Africa. The finances, derived from colonial administrations rather than directly from the British government, exemplify a subtle facet of colonial economic strategies. One could perceive these educational finances as attempts to foster an image of generosity and progress within the framework of colonial governance. Nevertheless, they also emphasize the independence and capacity of these administrations to generate income, potentially obtained using local resources and labour. The difference in the amount of money given to colleges—a large amount going to Prince of Wales College and a small amount to Fourah Bay College—shows that different colonies had different priorities or levels of economic exploitation. This highlights the intricate relationship between education, colonial policy, and economic interests, indicating that educational expenditures were not only substantial but also intertwined with the wider goals of upholding colonial dominance and capitalizing on African resources. It is important to point out that while this was far more noticeable with the British, it was not unique to them. The education of colonial people was an important investment for several other colonial rulers, including France, Belgium, Spain, and Portugal. These countries all had the same ultimate objective in mind. Even though several African countries have gained their independence, virtually nothing has changed.

Discussions on the quality of the education provided during the colonial era, as well as the expenditures made in educational infrastructure, are also important aspects of the debate. Yaba, Achimota, Makerere, and Fourah Bay colleges provided a kind of education that the African intelligentsia considered inferior to the sort that was offered at universities in Europe. Just as the colonial authorities were hostile to genuinely investing in universities in Africa, so too were the African intelligentsia in attending those universities (Nwauwa 1993, 158). Even though there were significant variations in geographic location, the overall enrolment rates in schools were dismally low as a direct result of this. Despite the rhetoric surrounding the *mise en valeur* in French colonies, state investment in education remained largely neglected for both economic and political reasons (Matasci et al., 2019, p. 12).

European and African missionaries who converted to Christianity had a significant impact on the growth of higher education in Africa by introducing Western-style education to the entire continent (Meier zu Selhausen, 2019). Notably, the British concentrated their efforts in South Africa, Sierra Leone, and Liberia (Galli & Rönnbäck, 2020; Hargreaves, 1956). In 1826, Fourah Bay College opened in Sierra Leone and Liberia College followed in 1862 (Paracka, 2003). South Africa's first independent college, later evolving into the University of Cape Town, was established in Cape Town in 1829 (Kitagawa & Kikianty, 2021). Other university colleges in South Africa included Stellenbosch Gymnasium, founded in 1881, later renamed Stellenbosch University in 1918 and the University of the Cape of Good Hope, established in 1873 and later renamed the University of South Africa in 1916 (South African History Online, 2023).

In Algeria, French Algerian immigrants predominantly occupied academic positions. The Algerian Medical School was established in 1857, followed by four specialist schools in

1879, which became part of the faculties of Algiers in 1909 (Obaka, 1983). Madagascar founded the Antananarivo Medical Training Academy in 1896 (Zeleza 2006).
In Liberia, American educational principles led to the founding of Cuttington University College in 1949 and the transformation of Liberia College into the University of Liberia in 1951. Ethiopia's educational system benefited from the Italian occupation (1935–1941), with Trinity College becoming Haile Selassie University in 1949.

In Sudan, Gordon Memorial College, founded in 1902, evolved into Khartoum University by 1956. Cairo University, established in 1908 in Egypt, is one of Africa's largest universities, with over 155,000 undergraduate students. Alexandria University in Egypt began in 1942. The South African Inter-State Native College, now known as the University College of Fort Hare, was established in 1916 and counted Nelson Mandela among its alumni. Colonial authorities restricted access to higher education in Africa until World War II, limiting the aspirations of the educated African elite. Africans often travelled to their colonial rulers' countries for further education.

Post-World War II saw a systematic effort to build higher education institutions in British territories, including Nigeria (Ibadan in 1947), Ghana (Legon in 1948), Sudan (Khartoum in 1949), and Uganda. The Royal Technical College of Nairobi, founded in 1951, evolved into the University College of Nairobi in 1955. Most new or renovated institutions were in rural areas, offering degrees affiliated with the University of London.

The French colonial strategy favoured urban higher education, but missionary education faced constraints, hindering the progress of education at all levels. Before the conflict, institutions like the French Western Africa Medical Training Institution in Dakar and schools in Goree and Bamako provided higher education (Clayton, 1995; Cogneau & Moradi, 2014). Post-war, French institutions expanded in their territories, with the University of Paris establishing Institutes of Higher Studies in Dakar and Antananarivo in 1945. By 1952, only 1,000 Algerians had graduated from Algiers University (Clayton, 1995).

The Official University of Lubumbashi was founded in 1956 to serve not only Congolese students but also those from Burundi and Rwanda. People often discuss the history of this institution in the context of educational developments in the Belgian Congo (Depaepe & Mawanzo, 2022).

Up until the 1960s, Portuguese colonies lacked significant higher education opportunities. Luanda and Huambo established their first universities in 1958, while Angola and Mozambique followed suit in 1962. Langa (2014), Cerdeira et al. (2019), and Havik (2018) review educational policies in Portuguese colonies, highlighting the late development of higher education in these countries.

Apartheid began to segregate higher education in South Africa in 1948, creating distinct universities for different racial groups. By 1994, South Africa had 21 universities and 15 technical schools, primarily catering to White students. Chiramba and Ndofirepi (2023) extensively analyze the evolution of higher education during and after apartheid. Namibia, under South African control, established the Academy for Tertiary Education in 1980, as well as two other institutions in 1985. These developments are discussed in the context of the broader educational policies implemented during South Africa's administration of Namibia (Chiramba & Ndofirepi, 2023).

The establishment of university colleges in Africa during the colonial era, as described by Meier zu Selhausen (2019) and Hargreaves (1956), demonstrates a distinct influence of European colonial aspirations. These institutions functioned as both symbols of Western education and tools of cultural and political dominance, reinforcing colonial ideals and restricting native ambitions. Despite achieving independence, numerous African nations continue to grapple with educational institutions deeply rooted in colonial ideas and practices.

Postcolonial Legacy and Challenges

For most of the colonial era in Africa, Europeans were always afraid of education that would produce a class of disgruntled, unemployed elite who could become a tool for anti-colonial activities. After World War I, France, for example, passed a law that made it illegal to teach in local languages, and by so doing, eliminated the need for missionary schools. In 1929, French Equatorial Africa (FEA) had a total population of 400,000 who were of school age; however, only 4,000 children attended public schools. The only country that fared better was Cameroon, which has had an *École Supérieure* in Yaoundé since 1937, providing scholarships to about 200 students so they could study in France (Bernault 2021, p. 12). After the end of World War II in 1945, the Funds for Investment for Economic and Social Development (FIDES) made it possible for additional investments, which abetted public education by allowing the state to construct technical colleges. Indeed, those who acquired an educational level that allowed them to go to university did so late since there were only a few hundred FEA and FWA students in French institutions in the 1930s—a relative boom that did not occur until after 1945 (Coquery-Vidrovitch 2021, p. 2).

By the middle of the 1950s, the percentage of children attending school had risen to 70% in Gabon and Congo, but it remained relatively low in Ubangi (27%) as well as in Chad (8%). This provision, like all colonial higher education policies introduced by European colonial masters throughout Africa, was part of the German Colonial Educational Act of 1910 (Monteh 2018, p. 222). The linguistic strategy that was supported by the German colonial authority marked the beginning of a problem that is still ongoing to this day regarding the language that was used for teaching in Cameroon's educational institutions (Doh, 2007). It is also important to keep in mind that the educational program of the German colonial government comprised components such as the topics taught, accessibility, cost, and enrollment. According to Unangst & Alemán (2021), the goal of colonial educational policy did not significantly change despite differences in the incentives established by the British and French for missions to provide formal education in Cameroon when they took over from the Germans. There was no postsecondary education in Cameroon when the British and French eventually departed the country in the 1960s since those who wished to continue their education beyond secondary school had to fly to Nigeria, the United Kingdom, or France. Because of this, the Federal Republic of Cameroon did not own any establishments that offered higher education at the time of its independence and reunification. The Federal University of Yaoundé did not open its doors until 1962. Cameroon did not modify its educational system at the university level for another 31 years. This procedure split the University of Yaoundé into two distinct institutions. These new universities are known as the University of Yaoundé I and the University of Yaoundé II.

Post-Independent Africa. To this day, discourses on African higher education have not escaped Afro-pessimism, the belief that Africa is irredeemably condemned to backwardness and pandemonium, even though the continent has made great strides in recent decades (Hyden, 1996; Nothias, 2015). Afro-pessimism is characterized by two distinct tendencies:

the denigration of African experiences and the exaltation of Euro-American engagements with Africa. These tendencies stem from the belief that Africa is incapable of achieving historical progress on its own and that any progress that is visible in Africa is the result of interventions by Euro-Americans (Zeleza, 2006b; Zeleza, 2006a). The discourses on higher education in Africa have not been able to transcend this narrative. One common belief about higher education in Africa is that it was introduced by the Europeans and has declined since independence. On a continent-wide scale, the above claims can easily be dismissed when we think about the fact that more universities were being created on the eve of independence in most African countries, with the following listed as some critical examples in Table 9.

Table 9

List of Selected Universities in Africa on the Eve of Independence

Country	University (s)	year
Mozambique	Eduardo Mondlane University, (as *Estudos Gerais Universitários de Moçambique*)	1962
Nigeria	University of Lagos (UNILAG)	1962
Nigeria	Ahmadu Bello University (ABU)	1962
Angola	Agostinho Neto University (*Estudos Gerais Universitários de Angola*)	1962
Ghana	University of Ghana	1948
Nigeria	University of Ibadan	1948

Source: author's contribution

The process of decolonization was a slow one since African countries won their independence at different times, but the bulk of them did so in the 1950s and 1960s (Motsaathebe, 2019; Young, 2018). As a result of the relatively few institutions that were left behind by colonial masters and the fact that most countries did not even have a single university, one of the most significant challenges that newly independent African countries were confronted with was the establishment or expansion of their higher education systems (Grosz-Ngaté, 2020). It was also necessary to make the few existing institutions more accessible to students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds to make them more relevant to Africa's growth and sociocultural contexts. Sadly, the limited institutions that were already in place were based on European patterns, were somewhat elitist, and were colonialist first and foremost; this colonialism would eventually be maintained in the form of neo-colonialism.

After most of the continent's countries gained independence in the 1950s and 1960s, there was a phenomenal increase in the number of institutions of higher learning throughout Africa (Cloete et al., 2018). Universities were regarded as an imperative need to educate a highly trained labour structure perpetuate a national elite, and promote national prestige within the framework of the aspirational economic goals of the new republic. The designs and models of the brand-new national institutions were highly adaptable and were available in many different configurations. In general, they were much larger than their forebears from the colonial period, had broader goals, and expanded the fields of study and programs they offered beyond the arts and social sciences to include fields such as business, medicine, and engineering, in addition to graduate programs. In other words, they were much more advanced than their predecessors. Yet, growth had very little to do with completely reforming, since the policies that inspired and drove these new higher education institutions were not all that different from the ones that colonial governments had in place for higher education.

There were around 120,000 students enrolled in African colleges in the year 1960 (Westcott, 2021; Fisher & Wilen, 2022). This number reached a high of 782,503 in 1975, and 3,461,949 in 1995, and is most likely getting closer and closer to 5 million currently. In the same fashion, the number of institutions increased from less than three dozen in 1960 to more than 400 in 1995, and because of the rise of private colleges, maybe several hundred more have been formed since then. Today, postsecondary education is available in all African countries; yet, educational systems throughout the continent differ significantly in terms of size, level of development, and quality of education they provide. While postsecondary education is available in all African countries, in 1995, the country with the highest number of students enrolled in higher education institutions was Egypt, with 850,051 students (Altbach, 2007; Teferra & Altbach, 2004). This was followed by South Africa with 617,897 students, Nigeria with 404,969 students, Algeria with 347,410 students, and Morocco with 347,410 students (294,022) (Task Force on Higher Education and Society, 2000). On the other hand, the number of students enrolled in higher education was lower than 10,000 in 23 different countries during the same year (Teixeira & Shin, 2020).

In addition, there were significant disparities between the sexes in terms of the opportunities to pursue higher education (Middleton, 2007). Even though some countries had achieved gender equality in primary and secondary education by the year 2000, this success was still restricted to a tiny number of countries (Uetela, 2017). Botswana, Lesotho, Swaziland, Namibia, and South Africa were the countries that departed significantly from the norm in this regard. Furthermore, Elu (2018) observed that the gender gap was evident in both the study areas and the distribution of faculty members. Women were greatly overrepresented in the subjects of the humanities and social sciences, but women continued to be chronically underrepresented in the fields of the sciences as well as most professional specializations (Bradley, 2000; Teixeira & Shin, 2020). Entrance to higher education in African countries was further varied not only based on ethnicity, colour, and class but also, in some cases, based on religious and cultural ties. These countries were usually stratified civilizations that consisted of people of many racial and ethnic backgrounds. When most African countries gained independence in the 1960s, the middle classes quickly expanded throughout the continent (in many cases as a result of the establishment of new universities or the extension of existing ones) and began to have children (Assié-Lumumba, 2005; Takyi-Amoako & Assié-Lumumba, 2018).

Not only has the meteoric rise of higher education across Africa led to massive increases in the continent's stock of human capital, but it has also laid the institutional basis for the social establishment of intellectual communities and talents (Darley & Luethge, 2019). Despite this, Africa is still the least educated continent in the world. The continent's tertiary gross enrollment ratio is less than 3% of all student enrolments in the region, and it only accounts for 4% of all tertiary education students enrolled internationally (Yamada, 2019). This contrasts with the percentage of people who live in poverty, which is 10% for low- and middle-income countries and 58% for high-income countries (Middleton, 2007).

In the 1980s and 1990s, the World Bank (WB), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) implemented oppressive SAPs or Structural Adjustment Programs. These SAPs resulted in substantial decreases in government spending on social initiatives, particularly in the field of education, namely higher education, which proponents of neoliberalism believed had lower social returns compared to elementary education (Sawyerr, 2004; Middleton, 2016; 2007). The impact of

SAPs on the CEMAC countries is far from positive, as it has resulted in a situation where the growth of private higher education institutions coincides with a decline in the quality of education. These institutions' survival-driven nature may be the cause of this decline.

Furthermore, although there was a rise in the number of higher education institutions in Africa during the 1980s and 1990s (Zavale & Schneijderberg, 2022), it became evident that the higher education systems in several countries, including Cameroon, Chad, the Central African Republic, Gabon, Equatorial Guinea, and the Republic of the Congo, were underdeveloped and facing significant challenges. This was evident via the reduction in state support, the decline in educational standards, the inadequately equipped libraries and labs, the decrease in compensation, and the poor morale among academic members. UNESCO and CAMES, consisting of Cameroon, the Central African Republic, the Republic of the Congo, Equatorial Guinea, and Chad, entered into a Partnership Agreement on Higher Education on March 8, 2016. The purpose of this agreement is to enhance collaboration and capacity-building in the field of higher education quality assurance. The focus is on developing effective practices and establishing partnerships with similar organizations in other parts of Africa (Agbor & Taiwo, 2014).

According to the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), African leaders, educators, researchers, and external donors have become increasingly aware of the challenges facing African higher education and the need for renewal for the continent to achieve higher rates of growth and development and compete in a global economy that is becoming more knowledge-intensive (Middleton, 2007; 2016). This greater awareness has led to an increase in the total amount of money provided to finance higher education in Africa, which is a positive development. The objective of the reform has been centred on five primary categories of issues, even though these concerns have not yet been fully addressed with sufficient resources.

First, it is widely acknowledged that there is an urgent need for a thorough investigation of the philosophical underpinnings that form the basis of African institutions. This makes people wonder about the ideas that support public higher education at a time when it is becoming more private. They also want to know about the structure, content, and effects of the ongoing reforms across the continent, as well as the relationships between public and private entities in African higher education institutions, which have been met with opposition.

Second, there are concerns about management, specifically how African universities are addressing issues with quality control and funding. This is due to the implementation of new regulatory frameworks, increasing pressure to find alternative funding sources, changing demographics and massification, and rising calls for access and equity for underrepresented groups, including women, and the emergence of new forms of management (Middleton, 2007). Summarily, these issues focus on how African universities are implementing new regulatory frameworks (Mohamedbhai, 2014; Marchetta & Dilly, 2019; Nabaho et al., 2020).

Third, there are pedagogical and paradigmatic issues, such as the languages used for instruction in African universities and educational systems in general, as well as the dynamics of knowledge production, which refers to the societal relevance of knowledge produced in African higher education systems, as well as how they are disseminated and consumed by students, scholarly communities, and the public. Other examples of pedagogical and paradigmatic issues include the following: (1) The languages used for instruction in African universities and educational systems generally; (2) The research conducted by

Mkhize & Ndimande-Hlongwa (2014) and Zeleza (2009). As will be shown in the following discussion, these problems originate from gaps that have existed in Africa's higher education policy direction up to this point.

Some of the last issues that need to be considered here are globalization, the effects of emerging trends in ICTs, the growth of cross-border or cross-national higher education provision, and trade in educational services under the regime of the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) (Sauvé, 2022; Knight, 2002; Marginson & Van Der Wende, 2007). These reforms have had a significant impact on higher education in Africa, and they have been crucial in paving the way for fruitful cooperation between academics from Africa and other parts of the globe during the last two decades. Even though the points made by the authors are still relevant in modern times, it is vitally important for Africa that international donors like the World Bank and other international financial organizations shift their focus away from philanthropic foundations and aid toward the establishment of multilateral and bilateral relationships that benefit all parties involved. In addition, and because of the establishment of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) in 2018, African countries have a responsibility to pay special attention to the benefits of student and staff mobility at the continental level, without diminishing the value of collaboration with academics from other parts of the world.

Africa's higher education sector has a significant and distinguished past, and it is poised to progress and flourish in the future, despite the formidable and alarming obstacles now confronting African institutions. African leaders, educators, and academics, who do not indulge in the negative outlook of Afro-pessimism, have the primary responsibility of guaranteeing a prosperous and thriving future (Zeleza, 2006a; Zeleza, 2006b). Under the framework of the CEMAC subregion, several factors of policy continuity and change have either a positive or negative impact on their higher education systems. The subregion has shown three unfavourable characteristics (Bokamba, 2018; 1991): First, it has the most elevated mean illiteracy rate among all similar subregions on the continent. Second, the rates of school dropouts and class repeaters are the most elevated on the whole continent. Third, the languages commonly spoken in this subregion are remarkably small.

In contrast to the contention that expressed preferences of African intellectuals for a French-based education system that influenced the decision to continue using French instead of African languages in the 1950s, it was the colonial suppression of African languages that forced these intellectuals to adopt French (White, 1996; Ki-Zerbo, 1976; Gifford & Weiskel, 1971; Touati, 2007; Gardinier, 1984). Higher education policies in CEMAC countries have evolved through a series of decrees, ordinances, official memoranda/communiques, and practical decisions made by colonial administrators in the colonies (Bokamba 1991, p. 3). Although the situation was directly linked to the severe shortage of Africans who were qualified to acquire French rights during colonial rule, the current state of higher education in French-speaking Africa is incredibly appalling and difficult to comprehend (Coquery-Vidrovitch 2021, p. 2). This is because obtaining French citizenship, which is founded on the principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity, was their sole means of gaining access to education, an extremely rare situation. French-style education in Africa has had a significant impact on the social, cultural, and political structure. These disruptions are largely a result of persistent colonial higher education policies.

Conclusion

This study has critically examined the evolution of African higher education across precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial periods, revealing how indigenous knowledge systems once served as vibrant foundations for advanced learning in Africa. From the Per Ankh in Egypt to Islamic universities like Al-Qarawiyyin and the Ethiopian Orthodox education system, precolonial institutions promoted scientific inquiry, philosophy, medicine, and theology–long before the arrival of European colonial powers. However, colonialism disrupted these systems through policies that marginalized indigenous knowledge, imposed foreign languages, and restructured education to serve imperial interests. The legacy of these interventions persists in postcolonial African education, where Western models still dominate the curriculum, language of instruction, and institutional governance.

Using a historical-analytical and decolonial framework, this research highlights how colonial education systems varied across regions, yet uniformly functioned to entrench Eurocentric worldviews. By triangulating diverse historical sources, the study emphasized the enduring impact of colonial ideologies and demonstrated the potential of reclaiming Africa's intellectual heritage. Moving forward, the revitalization of indigenous knowledge systems, the use of African languages, and the development of community-driven, context-sensitive educational models are essential to reimagining higher education on the continent. This transformation must go beyond symbolic decolonization to structural reform–shifting from dependency to autonomy. In doing so, African higher education can reclaim its past, not as a relic, but as a guide to building systems that are innovative, inclusive, and rooted in African realities.

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