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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Africa's postcolonial states, universities and situated ideologies

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Arowosegbe's (2023) treatise on the crisis of higher education across the African continent raises many issues about the failures of Africa's postcolonial states and the situations of the continent's public universities. His courage in bringing to the fore the predicaments of Africa's public universities is commendable. Two issues in particular attract my attention. First, while he underscores the strained relations between the state and the academy and recognizes the existence of some divergent ideological underpinnings therein, his account neglects the impacts of ideological contradictions on society's political stability and socio-economic development. Second, his account omits the quandaries of private universities in Africa, an aspect of higher education across the continent that should not be overlooked if one is to holistically appreciate the predicaments of Africa's universities within the context of the role of the postcolonial state.

Therefore, to offer some nuanced perspectives on these subjects, I focus here on issues related to the style of state management of Africa's governing elites and the resistance politics of public universities' staff unions, particularly academic staff unions. My aim here is to bring to the fore how the intersection of these two issues and the social contradictions created by their conflicting ideologies relate to the predicaments of private universities in Africa.

On the one hand, Africa's governing elites started off at independence by entrenching the state's prominent regulatory role in economic relations. However, from the 1980s, governing elites gradually surrendered to free market capitalism. Later, from the early 1990s, they progressively embraced capitalism's neoclassical extension, neoliberalism, resulting in the gradual retrenching of the state from the economy. On the other hand, in the 1980s and early 1990s, public universities' staff unions drew on socialist and Marxist paradigms to champion issues that impinged on both the socio-economic and political affairs of their respective states and those of university systems in the areas of salary, autonomy and funding, to confront the

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capitalist inclinations of Africa's governing elites. But, from the late 1990s, while they had largely retracted from their overtly socialist and Marxist paradigms, their loud advocacy for a welfare state that intervenes in economic relations to protect the poor continued to push them into confrontation with the neoliberal measures of Africa's governing elites.

To raise productivity and enhance economic growth, neoliberal philosophy advocates that government interventions in economic relations are the problem rather than the solution to economic problems. Delimiting the state's role in economic relations, neoliberalism proffers that the state should ensure a stable monetary policy, plus radical tax cuts in the top production brackets, but high taxes for the lower consumption brackets, in order to 'provide a healthier economy' that will 'get the incentives for entrepreneurial activity aligned correctly' (Harvey 2005: 54) and to establish an efficient, non-discriminatory welfare state for all.

Neoliberalism's promotion of 'greater economic liberalism, unchecked competition and unbridled individualism' challenged university staff unions' preferred vision of a welfare state that discriminates in favour of the poor, and replaced it with a neoclassical version through the elimination or weakening of social protections and the installation of what Flew (2014: 52) described as 'the punishing state', a state that created significant socio-economic inequality. The confusion that was created by the conflicting ideological corridor between staff unions' fixation with the welfare of the poor, the changing dynamics of the welfare state and Africa's governing elite's neoliberal proclivities can be discerned in the confrontations that emerged between the two sides. Unequivocally, the position here is that the social contradiction created by that ideological impasse fundamentally contributes to the challenge of postcolonial development. I offer two premises for this viewpoint.

First, in the established ontology of group conflicts, two principal issues, among many others, stand out: the contents of contradictory ideological beliefs inspired by power relations and the personal characteristics of opposing ideological agents. Bianchin (2021: 187) has argued that 'the contents of ideological beliefs mirror the power relations they support, and they arise from manipulating the rationale for accepting the social practice they are designed to support'. Post and Sterling (2020: 80) have implied that mutually antagonistic ideological agents 'differ in terms of personality traits, value priorities, cognitive styles and motivational tendencies'. Thus, the contradictory ideological postures towards Africa's development by these two critical groups unavoidably forced unwilling acceptances on both sides. Inevitably, some prominent members of the academy were enlisted into governance by the political elite and ended up becoming political entrepreneurs, and either became divorced from the national social welfare advocacy of their academic unions or too weak or compromised to fight the cause of the academy, or, in some cases, were pitched against their former academic constituencies. Over time, these discordant ideological settings and the complicated circumstances they provoked have destroyed the potency of workable measures, wasted resources and truncated the purposeful developmental aspirations of African society.

Second, without doubt the state project needs knowledge to deliver on good governance. Foucault (1972; 1980) has established that power and knowledge are intricately imbricated, and, logically, any separation of their entanglement in state management is bound to produce systemic dysfunction. African state projects may

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not be able to deliver good governance where governing elites, representing power, and academic elites, representing knowledge, operate with aloofness and at cross purposes in terms of ideological power relations and motivations. Interestingly, the attitude of governing elites, who see themselves as the custodians of state power and seem to detest the general acclamation that universities constitute the knowledge estate, appears to have driven the two sides apart and to detract attention from the more interesting things going on, such as how university staff themselves have to navigate the changing and challenging field of academic opportunities in the midst of tumultuous politics, unfavourable labour practices and the perceived economic exploitation associated with neoliberalism.

How then do these factors relate to the emergence, proliferation and conditions of private universities in Africa? Following Arowosegbe's extensive focus on Nigerian contexts, I also draw on data from Nigeria to address this question.

Over time, Nigeria's Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) has become the most consistently active voice of opposition in the country, energetically criticizing whatever it has interpreted as state mismanagement or construed as bad governance. This is due, in part, to the failure of Nigeria's political opposition to effectively check the excesses of the governing elites or raise the alarm about their conduct. The Nigerian Association of University Teachers (NAUT), formed in 1965, was the forerunner of ASUU. Due to NAUT's passivity in the face of what was perceived as the mismanagement of Nigeria's oil wealth, and the consequential decline in university funding, ASUU was formed in 1978 as a more independent, militant and proactive union focused on ensuring adequate welfare, job security and better working environments for members (Sabo and Muhammad 2018).

Concerned that the wealth that Nigeria had realized from the oil boom of the 1970s had not been directed towards establishing a national social welfare system that could support the interests of its members, ASUU's agitations stretched beyond an exclusive concern for the welfare of its members, as it gave itself a new, larger objective of protecting and advancing the socio-economic and cultural interests of the country as a whole (ASUU 2017). It began to advocate for the national social welfare of all Nigerians, the majority of whom it perceived to be enmeshed in poverty.

Nigeria's governing elite continued to implement neoliberal measures through the privatization of public enterprises and the commercialization of public services. However, public outcry against a lack of transparency associated with the ruling elite's privatization measures cast aspersion on the entire gamut of neoliberalism in the country. Several neoliberal transformations directed towards the university sector by Nigeria's governing elite also troubled ASUU. The union directed its criticism of the governing elite's neoliberal reforms by organizing spasmodic strike action.

During the military era, ASUU's disputes with Nigeria's federal government centred around its demands for improved conditions of service, university funding, university autonomy, academic freedom, the right of Nigerian youth to education and an end to military rule. It also involved itself, with the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) and National Association of Nigerian Students, in struggles against the termination of the cafeteria system on university campuses, the removal of subsidies on students' hostel accommodation in federal universities, structural adjustment programmes and the World Bank's loan conditionality (Aidelunuoghene 2014). In the more recent democratic setting, disputes have centred on issues such as university

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funding challenges, the non-implementation of public universities revitalization agreements made by the federal government and ASUU in 2001 and 2009, the introduction of tuition fees, and government efforts to increase those fees for public universities. Other concerns have included the commercialization of the university sector through the licensing of private universities, the drafting of the federal tertiary education sector into the Integrated Payroll and Personnel Information System (IPPIS) for the payment of salaries, and the establishment of the student loan scheme (Godknows and Oyinmiebi 2024).

Since its inception in 1978, ASUU has carried out over thirty national strike actions, as well as internal strikes by the various chapters of the union. For instance, it went on national strike for five months in 1999, six months in 2003–04, four months in 2009, five months in 2010, five months in 2013, one month in 2017, three months in 2018, and nine months in 2020 (Aidelunuoghene 2014; Godknows and Oyinmiebi 2024). As calculated by Arowosegbe (2023: 607), 'between 1999 and 2023, some 1,315 work days were lost to ASUU's national strikes'. This amounted to forty-four months, or three years and eight months, wasted in the lives of Nigerian university students. Apart from the avoidable anxieties, the implications of that wastage on the financial and material resources of parents were considerable. As a result, ASUU's quest for public support has faced considerable challenges.

The response of the federal government to ASUU's national strikes has been multifarious. In 1985, Muhammadu Buhari's military regime arrested and detained ASUU's national leaders. In 1988, to weaken ASUU, Ibrahim Babangida's military government disaffiliated it from the NLC and legally established that ASUU members' check-off dues should be voluntary. In June 2001, Olusegun Obasanjo's civilian regime signed the public universities revitalization agreement with ASUU, which, however, it did not intend to honour. In December 2006, Obasanjo's government inaugurated a committee to renegotiate the 2001 agreement. In October 2009, Umaru Musa Yar'Adua's government signed a renegotiated agreement with ASUU (Aidelunuoghene 2014), yet, to date, its main provisions have remained unimplemented. In 2020–21, Muhammadu Buhari's civilian regime invoked the 'no work, no pay' rule to withhold eight months of salaries for university academics who went on strike during that period.

On the one hand, ASUU's criticisms of the federal government alerted the public to the negative implications of the government's neoliberal policies. This strained ASUU's relations with the state but elicited public sympathy for its arguments. On the other hand, ASUU's intermittent and prolonged strike actions inflicted considerable pressure on parents and students, and therefore strained ASUU's relations with the people, reducing popular support. As a result of all these factors, people's attention was increasingly diverted towards private universities.

However, private universities have faced their own difficulties in Nigeria. First, their initial advent during the Second Republic (1979–83) was interrupted by political rivalries within the elite. In 1979, the need to expand access to higher education among qualified Nigerians compelled the statutory transfer of university education from exclusive to concurrent legislative lists, thus empowering state governments to establish universities. Sections 27, 28, 29 and 30 of Part II of the Second Schedule of the 1979 Constitution made this explicit. Similarly, Section 36 (1 and 2) of the Constitution conferred on private organizations and individuals the constitutional

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right to set up and operate universities. In the period between 1979 and 1983, some twenty-six private universities were established in different parts of the country. However, in the context of the political differences and rivalries between members of the governing elite at the time and the proprietors of some private universities during the Second Republic, allegations about the use of substandard infrastructure and unqualified academic staff were levied against the new private universities. One well-known dispute took place between Dr Sam Mbakwe, then governor of Imo State, and Dr Basil Ukegbu, proprietor of Imo Technical University, Imerienwe, Owerri, Imo State, who challenged Mbakwe (and then lost) for the Imo State governorship elections in 1979 (Okorosaye-Orubite 2007).

A series of political skirmishes involving the new private universities culminated in the proscription of them all by General Muhammadu Buhari's military junta after the December 1983 overthrow of the Second Republic. The proscription came via the Private Universities (Abolition and Prohibition) Decree No. 19 of 1984. The official reason offered for this action was the need to regulate the university subsector to ensure quality and standards (Okorosaye-Orubite 2007).

However, in 1985, barely a year later, General Ibrahim Babangida's military junta, which had overthrown General Muhammadu Buhari's regime, repealed the decree and replaced it with the National Minimum Standards and Establishment of Institutions Decree No. 16 of 1985, thereby allowing federal and state governments, incorporated organizations and individual citizens of Nigeria to establish and run universities. The new decree was subsequently amended as Education (National Minimum Standards and Establishment of Institutions) (Amendment) Decree No. 9 of 1993 specifically to ensure and monitor quality and standards, and to provide for the legal protection of private organizations' and individuals' investments in private universities. Despite this favourable turn in the political environment, no private sector investor was willing to experiment with the establishment of private universities between 1985 and 1998, the era of the botched Third Republic, most likely due to lingering uncertainties provoked by the 1984 proscription (Gabriel and Abdulrahman 2023).

Second, the subsequent arrival and proliferation of private universities during Nigeria's ongoing Fourth Republic may have been hastened by the tense relations between the Nigerian state and ASUU discussed above. The union's radical posture against the state and its intermittent and prolonged strike actions seem to have created an urgency to break the public universities' monopoly of the higher education sector. This sense of urgency may have had the effect of constraining due diligence in the verification of resources for some of the prospective private universities before they were approved and licensed.

The proliferation of private universities scored the desired political points for the governing elite and offered parents and students a favourably broad range of choices. However, this proliferation became a source of concern for ASUU, even though the union was complicit in it, through its uncompromising attitude to government, its members' voluntary collaborations with the National Universities Commission (NUC) in the accreditation and licensing of private institutions, and its members' willingness to make themselves available in large numbers as adjunct lecturers for very low fees, which relieved some of the private universities of the pressure to hire well-qualified, permanent academic staff.

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Boxed in by funding challenges and profit motives, the management and operation of some of the private universities were marked by inadequacies in the early years of their establishment. These included downscaling merit in student enrolment, charging unrealistic tuition fees, hiring academically unqualified staff, seriously inadequate facilities, the toleration of poor discipline among students, and not following due process in accrediting professional courses from legally established professional bodies (Gabriel and Abdulrahman 2023), all due to the need to sustain enrolment figures. To address the situation, the NUC has been forced, in certain instances, to interfere. For instance, as Fatunde (2012) reported, in July 2012 the NUC withdrew the licences of seven private universities for failing to comply with the statutory provisions establishing them. It is, however, gratifying to note that, since then, many private universities in Nigeria have overcome the inadequacies of their formative years to become highly rated globally in terms of quality, standards and innovations.

Third, as a direct consequence of ASUU's radical behaviour against the state, perhaps the greatest quandary of private universities in Nigeria has been the absence of labour or trade unionism. This has robbed private universities of an important mechanism for checks and balances in their internal management and operation. It is not clear whether the Nigerian government officially prohibited staff unionism in Nigeria's private universities, or whether this has been discouraged by the leadership of private universities themselves. What does seem clear, however, is that having observed the difficulties provoked by ASUU's opposition politics and its incessant strike actions, the leaders of private universities have not demonstrated a predisposition towards encouraging trade unionism within their respective institutions – all 149 of them to date.

The challenge of postcolonial development in Africa and the predicaments of Africa's universities are interlocked. Tensions between the central government and the academy in Nigeria were prolonged by their respective situated ideologies, which created social contradictions that hindered socio-economic transformation and development. The experiences of Nigeria's university sector suggest that the difficulties of Africa's public universities may often be products of such circumstances. Private universities have come into existence and prominence across Africa largely due to the need to deal with enduring problems hindering Africa's socio-economic transformation. In Nigeria, ASUU's opposition politics and strike actions have been perceived to be part of those problems. The 'power estate' and the 'knowledge estate' in Africa need to close ranks for the good of the continent.

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