On refusing the Balkanization of the African university

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Neither the African governments nor anyone else can be satisfied with the present performance of the universities on the continent. If quantitatively speaking the results are not bad, as soon as one tackles the question of all the content of education, the quality of education and, above all, the problem of the distribution of students among various faculties, the picture looks completely different.'—D. Najman, Education in Africa: What Next?, Paris, Editions 2000, 1972.

Higher education since 1960

When French Africa gained its independence, in 1960, the only two higher educational establishments of any importance in West Africa were the University of Dakar and the Centre for Higher Education in Abidjan. After the colonial era there began a period of fumbling and indecision, which was also, and predominantly, a period of micro-nationalism. It was only to be expected that Africa would have to feel its way uncertainly towards the right path or paths: it was young and inexperienced, and the problems which it had suddenly been forced to confront on gaining independence were so numerous, and so extremely difficult to solve, that it could not fail to hesitate.

However, to a much fuller extent than at any other moment in its history, Africa seemed to have realized that it was advisable to train professional staff who could make a reality of political independence, which was still no more than a simulacrum. The Institut des Hautes Études in Dakar, established in 1950 by the colonial authorities, did

1. We shall confine our remarks to French-speaking Africa and, to be more precise, to West Africa. But it is obvious that many of the problems we shall raise apply to almost all of the dark continent, and also to other developing countries throughout the world.
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indeed become a Senegalese higher educational establishment in the eyes of the law, but it was governed by a joint Franco-Senegalese Commission, so that:

... whereas a French university in the service of Africa should have become a federal African university staffed to an increasing extent by African teachers and controlled by the Republics concerned, instead, the statutes became Senegalese while administrative control remained in the hands of the French. True enough, France continued to pay the salaries of all the teaching staff, and even now makes a 70 per cent contribution to the operational budget of the university, whereas Senegal pays 30 per cent, which is a very heavy financial burden for the latter.1

In the early 1960s, the Abidjan Centre for Higher Education, established in 1958–59, which had been developing steadily, automatically became a university, and a national university at that, at a time when it could have become, in fact as well as by statute, a university of the Conseil de l'Entente, for example.

But—and this is the paradox—whether in Dakar or in Abidjan, the University continued to be a French University in Africa. The content of the courses remained identical with that of the colonial era, even though its objectives were supposed to have ceased to be the same. What is more, the Africans took pride in scrupulously maintaining the structures of French higher education and in insisting not only on the equivalence between French and African diplomas, but often on their total identity. The slightest reform decided upon in Paris was automatically applicable, and applied, in the African universities.

When, impelled by a wholly praiseworthy upsurge of nationalism, a given African State created its own CAPES (Certificat d'Aptitude Pédagogique à l'Enseignement Secondaire), the curious fact might be observed that it nevertheless allowed those of its students who thought the national examination 'underdeveloped' to go and sit the examinations for the 'big, real CAPES' in France.

As for the baccalauréat, in all these French-speaking States it is

1. Fougeyrollas, 'L'Africanisation de l'Université de Dakar', Problèmes et Perspectives de l'Éducation dans un État du Tiers-Monde, p. 35. Mr Fougeyrollas' article was written in 1969, and since then Senegal has supplied the University of Dakar with almost its entire operational budget and has paid in full the salaries of all African teaching staff. For several years now the Senegalese Government has also been concerned to revise the structures of the university and adapt the content of its courses to life in present-day Africa.