GRIOT, MALLAM, PROFESSOR:
West African Higher Education, Past and Present
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"The concept of education (must) be freed from the view that it was somehow alien to Africa…"[1]

It was dusk as the young teenager made his way through the now darkened Gambian village. He reached the round grass enclosure, stooped and entered the smoke-filled space. He greeted his *karamo* (teacher) then knelt and coiled his bare legs beneath him on the *baso* (bamboo mat) with the other boys. He took up his wooden *wala* (writing tablet) which his grandfather had used so many years before. He picked up the small clay *duwa* full of ink and carefully dipped his *kala* (pen) in it. He glanced up at his karamo, silhouetted by the firelight and prepared himself for the lesson (O'Halloran, 493).

This scene of a Quranic school in Gambia is timeless and when the Mandinka words are removed, universal. Centuries before the Saint Mary's University Extension Program was a reality, education was already an integral part of West African society. Pre-colonial West Africans, before the advent of Islam, almost a millennium ago, had long known that the education of their young adults was a means by which culture and knowledge could be continuously transmitted in order to ensure the future survival of their society. In West Africa, traditional education was all embracing in its efforts to train effective citizenry. This was usually carried out by age sets or age groups. Young men and young women from an early age would be grouped if they were of similar ages usually no more than 3–4 years apart. This is similar in a sense to the university or high school concept of the "Class of 2005" through which age sets proceed through an education system. The goals of this West African education system were many and included the development of the physical skills necessary to imitate adult achievement in the community; attain traditional wisdom and acquire cultural heritage through oral tradition; incorporate vocation skills through apprenticeship programs of craftsmen, artists, weavers or blacksmiths; and most importantly, to inculcate a deep loyalty to the community (Fafunwa, passim). For many West African societies, the community-individual relationship was unbreakable. The two formed a single coherent unit, one that was indivisible (Brown and Hiskett, 23).

In every West African culture these educational goals were conveyed orally by family and elders called Griots. As with many other societies of the world, adolescents proceeded to a role in the life of the adult community

through a formal initiation process once the educational goals had been achieved. For the most part, this traditional education provided all the requisite needs of an individual and society within the economic, political, social and cultural context of pre-colonial West Africa. This education was focused on the need for stability and coherence within the community. In sum, each society maintained an education system that suited its culture and ensured its continuity.

By the eleventh century, this culture was about to change as a new dynamic cultural influence, Islam, began to make inroads into West Africa. Islam had broken through the geographic confines of its founding homeland in Arabia in the seventh century and spread rapidly west across North Africa, north into Spain and France and east into India and South East Asia. West Africa, south of the Sahara Desert, was not unaffected by this swiftly expanding faith which would have an enormous impact in the centuries to come.

At the outset, it must be made clear that the initial and long-term contact between the centres of Islam in North Africa and West Africa was for the most part non-aggressive. The expansion of Islam into Bilad al-Sudan (Land of the Blacks) was peaceful and commercial (Levtzion and Pouwels, passim). The first large-scale state to be affected was Ghana, a prominent regional state that stretched across much of present day Mali and Mauritania between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries. Long distance trade across the Sahara Desert both to the north and east had been in evidence for centuries. The conversion of these states to Islam meant that the trade routes were increasingly under the control of Muslim merchants. The empire of Ghana established a monopoly over the gold trade from the south (that is, from the headwaters of the Niger and Gambia Rivers) and thus was a favoured destination for Muslim traders. The King of Ghana, a non-Muslim, had welcomed Muslim merchants to his capital and subsequently employed many literate Muslims in his court. The Muslim faith with its law (the Sharia) and literary traditions attracted converts and many traders were scholars as well as merchants. Initially, successive rulers would convert to the faith for purposes of commerce, court literacy and interstate diplomacy with North Africa and later with other states in the region.

The empire of Mali succeeded Ghana in the early thirteenth century and the influence of Islam achieved its first intellectual flowering. From the thirteenth to the late fifteenth centuries, the Mali empire controlled and thus taxed virtually all the north-south trade that passed through West Africa. It straddled the area from the city of Gao in the east to the mouth of The Gambia River that emptied into the Atlantic Ocean. Vast caravans, each with thousands of camels, linked West African trade to North Africa, Europe and east to Asia. It was clear that conversion to Islam brought untold benefits to the people of Mali; they were part of a vast commercial diaspora, and shared a common religion, a lingua franca (Arabic) and a common legal system under the Sharia.

The high point of the empire occurred during the reign of Mansa Musa (1312–1337). Mansa Musa undertook his pilgrimage (Hajj) to Mecca and his entourage remained for a considerable time in Cairo. The caravan was so wealthy in gold from West Africa that during his visit the value of gold in the local market declined by 25%. Upon his return to Mali, Mansa Musa brought many Muslim scholars to encourage the intellectual life in the city of Timbuktu (Goody, 219). By the middle of the fourteenth century, the Moroccan traveler Ibn Battuta, on a visit to Mali, was praising the Muslims of Mali for their study of the Quran (Levtzion & Pouwels, 67). Within another half century, there was a sizable scholarly community with many Muslim scholars travelling there from North and Northwest Africa.

Although the Mali empire went into decline and was replaced by the Songhai empire, the scholars of Timbuktu were favoured by the new king Sonni Ali. Quranic schools proliferated in the 1500s to the extent that by the middle of the century, there were well over 100 schools that formed a broad base for higher levels of education in the Islamic sciences with close contact being maintained with scholars in Egypt at the famous Al Azhar University. Timbuktu had become a city of merchants and scholars (ᶜulama). The ruler of the Songhai Empire, Sonni Ali, noted that without the ᶜulama the world would be no good.

The Islamic education system began at a young age with pupils (usually 90% boys) acquiring by rote learning an elementary knowledge of Arabic through recitation of the verses of the Quran. For some, this would be the beginning of a long career in textual learning that would allow them to become qadis (judges) or imams (teachers) and thus join the small community of ᶜulama (Goody, 165).

Once the memorization of the Quran was completed, students would study the commentaries of the Quran, examine the ethical works on right conduct, study the Sharia which would include penal law, contracts, inheritance and marriage or the Hadith (traditions of the Prophet). Students would proceed at their own speed as this was their life's work. When completed, the scholar could wear a turban as a mark of distinction much like the academic caps common in Western Europe.

Promotion to higher learning was limited by the student's economic status — that is, their ability to travel to distant centers of learning, to pay a scholar teacher and take the time to study. The ᶜulama class was a small one but one that wielded enormous influence in the Islamized courts of Mali and Songhai by keeping records, conducting correspondence and occupying positions of political influence (Goody, 191). By the mid-sixteenth century, many larger towns in West Africa contained permanent education centres around the mosques which were counterparts in origin and function to the medieval universities of Western Europe. In that period, Timbuktu and the University of Sankore were famous across the region attracting scholars from Morocco, Tunis and Egypt and was known as the city of books (Dubois, 307).

This would be the zenith of Moslem higher education in West Africa. In 1591, an invading Moroccan army destroyed the Songhai empire and by the early seventeenth century, the large specialized scholarly community of Timbuktu was unable to support itself and began to drift away to other scholarly centers or were dispersed to various locations in the region. Timbuktu's moment had passed and the city underwent an intellectual decline.

By this time, there was a new religious and cultural force in West Africa not from the desert this time but from the Atlantic Ocean. In the mid-1500s, Portuguese ships sailed up the Gambra (later Gambia) River and were impressed by the number of Muslims that worked for town and village chiefs as secretaries, counselors and diviners. Many of these had come from the dispersal of learners from Timbuktu (Brooks, 116). It is apparent that many of the Muslim clerics had taken over the roles and functions of the traditional priests in the African education system. Thus, Islamic culture and education had become deeply ingrained in the Senegambia and would easily withstand the efforts of this new faith — Christianity — to displace it.

The Portuguese traders were followed in the seventeenth century by French and English ships lured by the dream of riches that could be gained from West African trade. Drawn by the gold that had made its way across the Sahara and would later prove illusory, they stayed for the slaves. The struggle, at times violent between England and France for control of the West African coastal trade, continued for the next two centuries and will not be detailed here. Suffice it to say that by the early 1820s, Britain had gained control of the mouth of the Gambia River and there had established its capital Bathurst (later Banjul). Although sea-borne slave trading from The Gambia had ended in 1840, Bathurst remained an important centre of trade on the West African coast. The last half of the nineteenth century is notable for the geographic division of Africa among European powers. Stories of enormous wealth in Africa had circulated among explorers, civil servants and the military and this together with the desire for guaranteed markets in the form of colonies, prompted the great (and small) powers of Europe to penetrate and lay claim to new territories in Africa. By the early 1890s, the interior of The Gambia as it is now known, had become a Protectorate of Great Britain and would remain so until it won its independence in 1965.

Education higher or otherwise had not been seen as a priority to the British colonial government. This had been left to the Muslim mallams who continued as they had been doing for centuries before and to the various Christian missionaries, Catholic and Protestant, who came to proselytize and educate. As with Islam, their education was identified with religious instruction. In the 1820s, missionaries representing the Society of Friends and the Wesleyan church arrived. The first permanent Catholic Church mission was built in 1849 and the Church of England also constructed churches and schools. Until the end of the nineteenth century, mission activity was

focused on Bathurst owing to the unsettled conditions up the Gambia River. The British government in Bathurst did not support education in any way adequately with 8 times as much money going to the cost of maintaining the police as went to grants for education. In addition, the British followed a policy of indirect rule which meant they governed through local authorities in the towns and villages of Gambia and few of these were in favour of Christian teachings cloaked in the garb of Western education.

Owing to the policy of indirect rule, the Colonial government believed it important that the sons of chiefs be provided a western education for after all they would govern in the future. Consequently in 1923, Governor Armitage founded a school up the Gambia River in Georgetown specifically for the sons of chiefs and it was named after him (Gailey, 177). In Bathurst, there were four secondary schools — all missionary run but by 1938 these contained only 69 boys and 128 girls. In addition, there was a Muslim School with 238 pupils in Bathurst and one at Georgetown with 56 pupils where the traditional Muslim curriculum was taught as well as the rudiments of English. There was, of course, a hesitancy on the part of Muslim parents to send their children to a non-Muslim school for they had to balance the future prospect that children may have with a secular education which included the English language with the danger of the erosion of the Muslim faith in such a secular yet pro-Christian environment. As for post-secondary education, neither the Gambian Colonial Government nor the Missionary groups had the financial wherewithal to support it. Nor, quite frankly, did they believe there was a need for it. This, however, was not true for other parts of the British empire in West Africa and decisions made there would certainly affect The Gambia.

During World War II, the British Government in London had initiated discussions as to which British universities could introduce higher education to their colonial empire in West Africa. Clearly, it was necessary that in the post-war reconstruction and development there would be a need for an expanded pool of educated African elite to further the goals of post-war colonial planning. Before the end of the war, then, the concept of university development in the colonies was an important colonial policy matter. After all, both Oxford and Cambridge Universities had for decades trained those young men of the colonial service who went out to the colonies and put into practice these "developmental concepts" for the good of the Empire. If self-government were to be possible in West Africa in the foreseeable future, universities would have to provide the necessary training of Africans for a social, economic and political foundation upon which the structure of self-government could rest.

The British colonial governments of West Africa were consulted about the need for African higher education. The response from Nigeria and Ghana was somewhat supportive but tepid while the governments of Sierra Leone and Gambia were not enthusiastic. In the latter, these two colonies lacked the

financial resources to expand into institutions of higher education. Besides, Sierre Leone's Fourah Bay College, which offered degrees in theology and Arts, had been affiliated with Durham University since 1876 and attracted Africans from all four major colonies. Not unrelated, in all colonies, it was clear that more educated Africans would mean fewer positions in the colonial service for the British as the civil service became Africanized. At the same time, public opinion in West Africa was very supportive of having higher education institutions (Nwauwa 290–300). In fact, the demand for indigenous institutions of higher education was over a century old. In 1868, Sierra Leoneon physician J. Africanus Horton wrote that

> "The improvement of West Africans … can never be properly accomplished, unless by the aid of the educated native portion of the community." (Vanderploeg, 192)

Other West African intellectuals like Edward Blyden (Liberia) and James Aggrey (Ghana) sought the same result. With the end of World War II, action would finally be taken.

Between 1945 and 1948, the University of London, with funding from the British Government, entered into special academic relationships with colleges in Nigeria and Ghana. By 1948, the first intake of one hundred and four students were enrolled at University College, Ibadan, Nigeria and ninety students at the University College of the Gold Coast in Ghana. These institutions were to represent with some minor local modifications replicas of the British university system complete with high tables and academic gowns (Ashby, 23). Sierra Leone would continue to maintain Fourah Bay College with links to Durham University while Gambians who wished to pursue higher education were expected to attend one of the three institutions in Nigeria, Ghana and Sierra Leone or go to Britain.

As noted above, before World War II, there had been no advanced level education in The Gambia beyond secondary school. When the war ended, several new primary and secondary schools were constructed and finally in 1952, Yundum College for Teachers was established to train men and women for teaching positions at the elementary level (Gailey, 180). A small number were provided with funds for an education at West African institutions or a university in Britain. A number of non-government sponsored students were already studying in Britain and some had even gone to North America. These cohorts provide a graphic example of the major problems that faced an independent Gambia through the rest of the twentieth century — too many of these students at overseas institutions, especially in Britain and United States, would not return to Gambia when their education was completed. The resulting brain drain of this educated population continued to impoverish The Gambia as it enriched Britain and North America.

After independence in 1965, the Gambian government set out to ad-

dress what was perceived by many to be the colonial government's greatest failure. In 1976, a new ten-year education plan was introduced that included free primary education and a number of technical schools (Gamble, 104). Gambia College had replaced Yundum College with schools of primary health, nursing and midwifery, education and agriculture. A Management Institute was set up in the 1980s. Still The Gambia had no university. It was well understood by many Gambians what a university established within the country would provide. Its role would be to explore the fundamental nature of the society in which it existed. It would also be positioned to generate through research, new knowledge building on what had gone before. Through its students, it would be able to attach the Gambian past to the Gambian present and to shape what is to come by a critical assessment of current knowledge and practices — essential tools for future citizens. It was clear to Gambians that in order to develop economically and socially, it was not only necessary to educate its citizenry but to maintain that citizenry in situ to contribute to the future of the country.

By the 1990s, there were harbingers everywhere that universities in Africa were troubled places (Nwauwa, passim). Those built in the Western mould had proven exceptionally expensive to maintain in many African states especially those plagued by the problems of poverty, disease, hunger and illiteracy (Mosha, 93). With foreign exchange problems and an economy based on tourism and the export of peanuts, The Gambia was not well placed financially to erect libraries, laboratories and student hostels as other African states had done. In addition, there were many qualified Gambians abroad. Could a competitive wage be paid to attract these men and women to a University in The Gambia? Could The Gambia reverse the brain drain that had taken them overseas in the first place?

Thus the problem was how to mobilize in a cost-effective way, the qualified academic staff needed and to establish a Gambian institution of higher learning which the population desired. Such an undertaking would at the same time staunch the flow to overseas locations of those young people who could contribute to development in The Gambia. In addition, the country had to avoid a common problem to all African universities which was the educational stratification of the population; a situation that invariably leads to not equality of opportunity but the opportunity to be unequal. What was needed was an educated elite that was intellectually in tune with the tenor of developmental changes that the country needed but was not shackled to the ideological objectives that the government of the day may be pursuing (MacKenzie, 118). Not an easy challenge.

The remainder of this volume will outline and analyze an innovative program begun in 1995 by the Gambian Government and Saint Mary's University and the Nova Scotia-Gambia Association both of Halifax, Canada, to try to address some of these issues by offering the opportunity of Canadian degrees in higher education to qualified Gambians.

Note

1. Godfrey N. Brown and Mervyn Hiskett. *Conflict and Harmony in Education in Tropical Africa*, Cranbury, N.J., Allen & Unwin, 1975, p. 424.

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