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## Rethinking Stale Ideas about the Birth of Higher Education in Nigeria: Tim Livsey's *Nigeria's University Age: Reframing Decolonisation and Development*

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Historians generally know that the first generation of universities came into existence in Africa from the 1940s when dramatic international and local developments after WWII changed some of the central planks on which colonialism rested (Anyanwu 2011). However, limited attention has been given to the intersections of higher education and the university as development. In this highly original and brilliantly-conceived book, Tim Livsey sheds light on the different strands of politics, operating at local and international levels, in the making of the University College Ibadan and the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. The story of these foundational universities transcends the simplistic narrative of the importance of education in nation-building, to encompass the big questions of curriculum, architectural design that struggled to balance local with global ideals of order, modernity, decolonization, cosmopolitanism, and the making of postcolonial elites.

Straddling the fields of history of nationalism and decolonization, development and education, *Nigeria's University Age* compels scholars to revisit some of the stale narratives about the colonial legacies of African higher institutions (Nwauwa 1997). From Livsey's deeply researched book, we learn that the architectural design and planning of the University College involved conflict and compromise on how a university campus should look, the kind of life students would live, and how their daily schedule would shape knowledge transmission and socialization needed to educate globally-competitive African intellectuals. Balancing indigenous ideas of place-making with cosmopolitan and global practices of orderliness, beauty, and tranquility was a difficult decision among colonial officers, development experts, university administrators, and architects. For the first time, Africanists are given an uncommon glimpse into the politics of designing a university

for a colony seeking to remove the yoke of imperialism during the 1950s. The university was not conceived as a separate entity from the host community and elite conception of development, Livsey insists.

In addition, this book expands institutional history beyond the hero worshipping that is found in works celebrating landmarks in the history of higher institutions (Mojuetan 2000). While this genre of works can be useful for research, they are inadequate in mapping out contentious ideologies about expectation imposed on colleges as site of elite power. Institutional history that focuses more on the biographies of individuals and less on ideas that shaped peoples' place in it is inadequate (Aderibigbe and Gbadamosi 1987). In filling this lacuna in African studies, Livsey re-reads the autobiographies of the foundational students of the University College Ibadan. One is intrigued by the memory of social and gender relations in these autobiographies. Instead of simply recording the nostalgia of campus life in 1950s and 1960s, Livsey complicates auto-biographical narratives, teasing out elements of gender, ethnic, and class relations. It is fascinating to read the perspectives of foundational female students like Adetowun Ogunsheye within the context of the imbalance in access of women to higher education, a problem that has not disappeared in the twenty-first century. When Livsey recounts the 'Europeanization' of students' culture, he juxtaposes it with cultural nationalism, espoused by individuals and groups who thought that university graduates should have a mindset of an African.

Another significant theme of this book is the recolonization of Africa in the late 1950s. Unlike their predecessors, the last generation of European adventurers in Africa were highly-skilled workers whose role appeared 'indispensable' as the British invested in critical sectors that required expatriate knowledge. The 'recolonization' of Africa by expatriates was ambivalent, given that it contradicted the policy of Nigerianization promoted by the nationalist leaders who headed the regional governments of the 1950s. Livsey cleverly maps out the implication of this development on race relations and nationalism. Expectedly, allegation and counter-allegation of racism in the appointment and remuneration of the few foundational African staff of the University College was a turning point in the history of race relations at the moment when Nigeria, like other countries across the continent, was expected to be celebrating pride and honor.

As one would expect, Nigerianization was a slow process at University College Ibadan. Of 99 senior staff in 1952, a group that included lecturers, professors, and high-ranking administrators, only 10 were Nigerian. The implication of this in terms of knowledge production and dissemination cannot be far-estimated. As Nigeria was removing the yoke of British colonialism, its indigenous ideas and knowledge were being suppressed by the introduction of European curriculum. Instead of decolonizing knowledge, the university became a site through which notions of European superiority were reintroduced and reinforced. This development paved the way for the rise of African historiography, a genre of knowledge that challenges the Eurocentric conception of history taught at Ibadan, by insisting that Africa must be studied from the perspectives of Africans. Livsey captures the intellectual currents of the era by relying on colonial newspapers such as the *Nigerian Spokesman*, *Nigerian Tribune*, *Southern Nigerian Defender*, and *West African Pilot*. No other written primary sources are as critical as these nationalist newspapers in unmasking the intersections of Nigerianization, higher education, labor, racial pride, and decolonization.

Livsey has written a truly fascinating book that compels scholars to rethink stale ideas about the birth of higher education in Nigeria. His sources, ranging from archival materials

to oral history, center African narratives in ways that give a lot of beauty to the historian's craft. By inserting the story of Nigeria's first universities into the broader history of development, Livsey expands on our understanding of how people framed the idea of progress beyond such physical infrastructure as dams or industry.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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## What is a University for? The Rise and Fall of Developmental Higher Education in Africa

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At the heart of Tim Livsey's ground-breaking new study is the question: what is a university for? Academics often take for granted their own vision of a university, as an open space for ideas and free thinking, and assume it is held universally. But it is clear that for states, donors and indeed many if not most students, universities have more prosaic or personal functions. For many of the first generation of students at the University of Ibadan, as at other new universities in decolonising countries, it provided a path to individual as well as collective advancement, either entrenching the existing privileges of elites or providing a fast track to power and privilege for poorer entrants. For all such students, Livsey's work demonstrates, their individual hopes often fused with their hopes for their new nation-to-be, investing their aspirations with a powerful legitimising patriotic veneer. Academics zealously guarded their universities against actual or perceived political 'interference' but also used the university as a space to advance their own political agenda. Administrators sought to ensure the autonomy of their universities, but equally sought funding from external agencies such as Western donors and the Ford or Rockefeller Foundation, each of which had, unsurprisingly, its own agenda for higher education in Africa. Politicians saw universities both as personal projects linked to their own vision for national advancement, or more prosaically as utilitarian organisations to provide skills necessary for modernisation.