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## Reflections on the Historical Antecedents to Revitalize Higher Education Research in Africa

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### Abstract

A vibrant higher education sector is a cornerstone to the production and application of cutting-edge knowledge and human resources relevant to spearheading socioeconomic development. While this is true, Africa has a discouraging performance in research, as compared with other world regions. In raising its research performance, Africa is now receiving considerable attention to revitalize its higher education sector from both global and local forces. In a bid to enhance success of different local and global interventions that Africa is currently receiving, it is imperative to revisit the past to comprehend what has made Africa's higher education research be where it is today. Informed by the postcolonial theory, this paper seeks to establish the historical antecedents that have undermined the development of research in Africa. Several antecedents are established including the role of colonial higher education policies, incompatible supranational donor policies, unstable political landscape, interrupted academic freedom and autonomy, and unfamiliar language of academic, research and scholarly communication. The paper argues that any initiative that aimed at revitalizing research in Africa should place the present higher education research doldrums in its wider sociohistorical context where Africa's higher education sector had been hindered for decades by challenges, as discussed in this paper.

**Keywords:** knowledge production, higher education, supranational organizations, postcolonial theory, African universities.



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## Introduction

Higher education is widely accepted as the fulcrum of social, cultural and economic development of any nation. It is the producer of research-based knowledge and skilled human resources which are crucial to engendering countries' effective participation in knowledge-based economies, where knowledge has become a decisive factor and a critical area of advantage in the production processes and the determination of the standard of living (Bloom, Canning, Chan, & Luca, 2014; Kruss, McGrath, Petersen, & Gastrow, 2015). While this is true, the Africa's higher education sector has a discouraging performance in research (Abugre & Kpinpuo, 2017; Cloete, Bunting, & Maassen, 2015; Fussy, 2017). Africa makes a small contribution to the world's research output in terms of publications, number of researchers, patents, royalties and spin-offs, as compared with other world regions.

The *UNESCO Science Report: Towards 2030* indicates that Africa, home to 54 nations which constitute 15% of the world's total population, contributes only 2.6% of the world's research-based publications and 2.4% of the world's share of researchers (UNESCO, 2015, p. 36). The research output produced by Africa – as a continent – is less than the contribution made singly, for example, by Brazil. Brazil, which accounts to about 2.8% of the world's total population, contributes 2.9% of the world's research-based publications. Indeed, Africa's world research output is one-third of that of Germany. Germany shares 7.7% of the world's research-based publications and 4.6% of the global share of researchers (UNESCO, 2015), but with only 1.14% of the world's total population. These statistics affirm that Africa needs to catch-up by developing a vibrant higher education sector in order to produce more researchers and research-based knowledge to steer the continent's future development.

In raising the research performance of the region, Africa's higher education sector is now receiving considerable attention by researchers, academics, policymakers and nongovernmental organizations both locally and internationally. Different forms of support towards enhancing Africa's higher education are being received from both developed and even from emerging economies such as China, Brazil and India (Kruss et al., 2015). Similarly, regional organizations in Africa, such as the African Higher Education and Research Space (AHERS), the African Union (AU), the Southern African Regional University Association (SARUA) and the African Research Universities Alliance (ARUA), have prioritized the revitalization of the continent's higher education and research infrastructure on their policy agendas.

The overriding question is how could these recent initiatives help revitalize Africa's higher education sector work successfully to build upon previous or already existing interventions? One possible response to the question is that Africa needs to learn from past experience in order to guide its future decisions and actions (Assié-Lumumba, 2006; Kayira, 2015). Against this backdrop, it is imperative to revisit the past so as to comprehend what has made Africa's higher education as it is today. Informed by the postcolonial theory (Crossley & Tikly, 2004; Said, 1978), this paper critically reviews the historical antecedents that have hindered the development of Africa's higher education research. The paper argues that any initiative that aimed at revitalizing Africa's higher education research should place the present higher education research doldrums in its wider sociohistorical context where

Africa's higher education sector had been hindered for decades by challenges put forward by this paper.

By so doing, this paper will add to the existing body of knowledge on higher education research development in low-income countries by establishing the historical antecedents that have undermined the development of Africa's higher education research. Furthermore, the paper situates the established historical antecedents and related debilitating effects in the broader developing world context that share similar educational, social, political and economic characteristics to that of Africa, in a bid to devise viable higher education policies and practices necessary for improving knowledge production and valorization to bring about development.

The paper is structured as follows. After this introduction is a brief theoretical and analytical framework guiding the study. This is followed by a description of the research methodology that informed the study's data collection and analysis. The paper then presents the findings and a discussion of the findings. Finally, the paper provides a conclusion and recommendations.

Since the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, supranational organizations and researchers began to underscore the significance of knowledge in fostering development, as knowledge, particularly in the present global economy, edges out other production factors such as labor, land and capital (Bloom et al., 2014; Kruss et al., 2015; World Bank, 2008). Countries which have experienced economic development in recent decades, such as the four Asian Tigers – Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, and South Korea – have also been renowned for producing adequate scientific knowledge, which is applied in production processes.

Conversely, many developing countries have been accumulating physical capital without recourse to strategic research-based processes (Pinheiro & Pillay, 2016; World Bank, 2008). Most countries in sub-Saharan Africa are no exception in this, as a result, Africa had remained the world's only region with the lowest income and soaring numbers of people living in abject poverty (Urama, Muchie, & Twiringiyimana, 2015). Africa accounts for 34 nation-states of the 48 in the world dubbed Least Developed Countries (LDCs) by the United Nations in its 2014 review (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development [UNCTAD], 2014). Under this situation, Africa desperately needs a vibrant higher education sector in order to uplift its level of development. Many analysts view higher education in general and universities in particular, as central to the national resource development and ultimately for the success of the knowledge-based economies (Cloete et al., 2015; Kruss et al., 2015; Pinheiro & Pillay, 2016).

Generally, interventions are being made to revitalize the higher education sector in Africa to improve the research profile and engender research excellence on the continent. But for these interventions to register notable success and make a remarkable difference in Africa's higher education sector, revisiting the past experience is imperative in order to understand what has stunted and undermined Africa's higher education research endeavors. History is the best teacher as it reminds people of who they are, where they came from, where they are at presently, and where they must go and ought to be (Assié-Lumumba, 2006; Atuahene, 2011; Kayira, 2015). In other words, it is vital to re-examine the past to orient and learn from it and use the lessons learned from the past to guide choices and actions for the present and posterity. This paper intends to fulfil such a role.

In order to realize the present study's objective, the postcolonial theory serves as a theoretical framework. Education systems and socioeconomic structures in Africa continue to follow in the footsteps of Western values and viewpoints established during the period of colonialism and in the present new forms of neocolonialism and imperialism. Some forms of Western values and viewpoints are detrimental to African identity and self-independence, thus the application of the postcolonial theory in understanding Africa's higher education development and its problematical historical links with the former colonial powers.

The postcolonial theory finds its origin in literary and cultural studies with Edward Said being regarded as the founding father of the theory, particularly with his interventionist text of *Orientalism* (Said, 1978). The theory subsequently came to be applied in education to understand and critique the broader impact of colonialism on both colonial and postcolonial education (cf. Crossley & Tikly, 2004; Kayira, 2015). Crossley and Tikly (2004, p. 153) maintain that for developing regions such as Africa, "postcolonial theorising can help to challenge dominant discourses and make a positive contribution to the improvement of educational policy and practice in a way that may also foster critical thought and essential social transformation." As the present study seeks to establish the historical antecedents which limit and undermine the research-based knowledge production in Africa's higher education sector and learn from this past experience towards improving the quality of present and future decisions and actions, the postcolonial theory is, therefore, deemed relevant.

### *Methodology*

Documentary research informs the data collection and analysis processes in this paper. Documentary research involves examining and evaluating documents both in print and electronic format to generate meaning, gain understanding and advance knowledge on human behavior, events and actions from the past to the present (Bowen, 2009). Guiding by the main objective of the study, the selection criteria for the documents reviewed in this study were mainly three: the period in which the document was produced (e.g. colonial and post-colonial period); types of documents (e.g. peer-reviewed journal articles, books and official reports from African governments/universities and supranational organizations such as the World Bank and UNESCO); and the content of the document (e.g. higher education development in Africa, knowledge production in Africa).

Libraries of the University of Glasgow (Scotland) and Mkwawa University College of Education (Tanzania) provided access to some of the documents, particularly print books and academic journal articles. Online peer-reviewed journal articles and supranational policy and statistical documents were accessed through the Internet. After setting the inclusion criteria of the review documents, the documentary analysis process started with a systematic search of documents using keywords such as "higher education research in Africa," "African universities" and "knowledge production in Africa," followed by a careful evaluation and interpretation of the meaning therein.

Ensuring the selected documents elicit reliable data, Scott's four major criteria developed to handle documentary sources in social science research, namely *authenticity*, *credibility*, *representativeness* and *meaning* were followed in this paper (Scott, 1990). In this regard, the researcher consulted the original document(s) produced by individual authors or corporate entity (e.g. UNESCO, the World Bank), and noted the summaries or critiques of the

same document made by other organizations or authors. The researcher then carefully and repeatedly read the documents and often related his interpretation of the documents with the contexts in which these documents were produced as well as cross-checked with other studies that critique the documents.

The information generated from the documents was analyzed based on Braun and Clarke's (2006, p. 87) six stages of thematic analysis: *familiarization with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes* and *producing the report*. As the paper focused on establishing major historical antecedents that have influenced the stunting of Africa's higher education research, the thematic analysis process resulted in the following themes: the role of colonial higher education policies, incompatible supranational donor policies, unstable political landscape, interrupted academic freedom and autonomy, and unfamiliar language of academic, research and scholarly communication. In the following section, the themes are discussed and interpreted by relating and collating them to the analytical and theoretical framework guiding the study.

#### *Historical Antecedents to the Present Higher Education Research Doldrums in Africa*

As indicated in the methodology section, the study of documents and eventual thematic analysis process resulted in the following themes: the role of colonial higher education policies, incompatible supranational donor policies, unstable political landscape, interrupted academic freedom and autonomy, and unfamiliar language of academic, research and scholarly communication. These themes are presented and discussed as follows.

#### *The Role of Colonial Higher Education Policies*

The restrictive nature of colonial educational policies towards the development of higher education in Africa inevitably hindered the development of research in Africa. Over time, colonial educational policies shied away from allowing Africans to attain higher education in earnest because they were frightened of fomenting resistance to colonial rule by educated Africans (Zezeza, 2009). In line with the postcolonial theory, Africans in this context were made inferior, and colonialists perpetuated the thinking and feeling to the Africans that the colonial power ways of knowing and doing things were sophisticated. As such, the colonial powers educated only a select few to assist in colonial administration much in line with, for example, the British Divide-and-Rule Policy tailored by Lord Lugard in Africa as "indirect rule" whereas others such as the Belgians completely outlawed university education in their African colonies (Ekundayo & Ekundayo, 2009). In turn, the size of the African higher education system was so negligible that at the time of political independence from colonial domination mainly in the 1960's, the University of East Africa, serving Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda, for example, had graduated only 99 students in 1961. More broadly, Francophone and Anglophone Africa, comprising the bulk of sub-Saharan Africa, had produced only 154 graduates in 1963 (Zezeza, 2009). Indeed, many African countries such as the Central African Republic (CAR) and Chad attained their respective political independence without even a single local university.

As a result, many African countries at a time of independence lacked the educated corps to serve as public administrators and run universities. The senior ranks of African universities were then staffed largely by expatriates who perpetuated the academic models of the former colonial powers (Assié-Lumumba, 2006; Ekundayo & Ekundayo, 2009). As the newly-independent African states lacked educated personnel in many high priority development

areas, African national universities were tasked with the training of civil servants. The training of civil servants focused predominantly on teaching (Assié-Lumumba, 2006; Atuahene, 2011), something which laid a poor foundation for future research endeavors in these African national universities.

Although colonialism has been phased out as many African states gained political independence in the 1960's, its impact continues to be manifested in new forms of neocolonialism and imperialism, which the postcolonial theorists (Crossley & Tikly, 2004; Said, 1978) and higher education researchers (Abugre & Kpinpuo, 2017) emphasize the instant reverse of this prevailing situation. The type of higher education system that exists in Africa still to a large extent follows the colonial practices, as most African universities continued with a teaching-only role, despite the mission statements of these institutions claiming that they crave to become world-class research-intensive universities (Altbach, 2013; Cloete et al., 2015; Fussy, 2017).

In consequence, African universities are primarily consumers and users of knowledge produced elsewhere, particularly in developed economies (Cloete et al., 2015). The longer the Africans cling to the colonial education traditions, the more socially and culturally dependent on the Western-derived higher education they become, with the resultant education having little relevance to the local context and context-specific research problems (Assié-Lumumba, 2006; Brock-Utne, 2003; Cloete et al., 2015). To assume the post-colonial university role and relevance, Africa's higher education sector and interventions that are being directed to revitalize Africa's higher education research should address issues of how to detach practically from the sociohistorical ties with colonial traditions and construct the African-based sociocultural structures.

#### *Incompatible Supranational Donor Policies*

Africa's socioeconomic development has been and continues to be shaped by several supranational organizations such as UNESCO, OECD, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. These supranational organizations support development processes worldwide through the provision of loans and research-informed policies and practices to improve the countries' socioeconomic wellbeing. Based on their financial and intellectual influence, the supranational organizations often require countries to adopt policies which these supranational organizations consider "best practices" and have worked well in some contexts/countries, without taking cognizant of the social and economic variations present in the recipient nations. As a result, many developing countries have found themselves failing to put a meaningful dent in poverty after adopting incompatible policies and practices in their contexts. In this paper, the researcher chooses to discuss the influence of the World Bank in particular in compelling African countries to accept alien policies and how this has affected research and higher education development in Africa.

The World Bank has been chosen out of other supranational organizations because it is a leading donor source for higher education in developing countries and it is, indeed, a champion in Africa (MacGregor, 2015). It is vital to preface the World Bank with a brief introduction to set the context for the insightful discussion that follows. The World Bank was founded after the Second World War to support the reconstruction of Europe that had been ravaged by war. By the 1960's, the World Bank had shifted its concentration to the former European colonies with a mission to support developmental activities. In the beginning, the

World Bank was reluctant to provide funding for education until after its formal adoption of the human capital theory (HCT) at a later stage (Samoff & Carrol, 2003, 2004). The HCT embraces the belief that education is a defensible investment, which, if properly managed, could lead to economic growth and productivity.

In their formative years – soon after achieving their political independence – African countries were preoccupied with the battle against three enemies: disease, illiteracy and poverty. This preoccupation was geared towards reforming their people's lives negatively affected by colonial powers. In this fight, education, particularly higher education, became a strategic priority for the majority of the African nationalist leaders such as Félix Houphouët-Boigny (Ivory Coast), Kwame Nkrumah (Ghana), Jomo Kenyatta (Kenya), Julius Nyerere (Tanzania) and Kenneth Kaunda (Zambia), who strongly believed that their newly-independent nations demanded a well-educated and knowledgeable populace to gain their position in the international arena. This belief prompted many African states during the 1960's and 1970's to invest heavily in their national universities which resulted into an upsurge in student enrolments.

The enthusiasm for developing the higher education sector by African governments during their formative years was, however, short-lived following a disruption brought about by the falling of commodity prices, the crude oil price hike, trade barriers, declining GDPs, drought, political crises and reduced external funding (Atuahene, 2011; Samoff & Carrol, 2003, 2004). This resulted in a serious funding crisis for most of Africa's nascent universities. Consequently, there was a rapid deterioration of physical facilities coupled with and erosion of the quality of education on offer.

The seemingly intractable financial problems forced African governments to seek assistance from the World Bank (WB). The harsh economic realities of the time prompted some African leaders such as Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, who were fiercely opposed to financial aid from the Breton Woods institutions, because such assistance challenged their socialist convictions to jump onto the bandwagon of seeking the World Bank intervention. However, the World Bank's acceptance to support African governments was not condition-free. The World Bank conditions were developed as a universal dose for all ailing developing countries, particularly in Africa.

The World Bank pushed for mandatory Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs). It demanded, as a pre-condition for its loans, that African countries undertake SAPs, which uniformly prescribed economic liberalization, particularly the privatization of state-owned enterprises, significant reduction of government expenditure on social services, removal of subsidies and currency devaluation. Although many African governments initially resisted the World Bank's conditions, in the end they had to accept it (Atuahene, 2011; Samoff & Carrol, 2003). The economic doldrums made the crisis-riddled African nation-states swallow, first, the austerity measures towards economic recovery and, second, towards political pluralism.

In the education sector, the World Bank required African governments to cut expenditure from higher education to bolster secondary and basic education instead. The World Bank's basic education defensible policy believed that primary and secondary levels of schooling were more significant than higher education in fighting abject poverty. This belief stemmed from two major considerations: first, investment returns in lower levels of



education such as primary and secondary were deemed to be higher than those for higher education and, second, emphasizing on basic education entails promoting equity in accessing education (Bloom et al., 2014).

From the World Bank's basic education defensible policy, there had been over-investment of resources in higher education in Africa when much of the benefit of higher education accrued for individuals rather than the whole society. In the face of economic deterioration, the World Bank told Africa that the maximum level of education that the bulk of its populace needed was basic education: "How can you think about higher education when you cannot afford to provide basic education for many of your people?" (Banya & Elu, 2001, p. 28). At a 1986 meeting with senior African university leaders held in Harare, Zimbabwe, the World Bank dismissed higher education in Africa as a luxury and encouraged African countries to train their people overseas (Brock-Utne, 2003).

Directing more resources towards basic education at the expense of higher education as demanded by the World Bank was a tragedy for African universities. The university sector in Africa ended up being marginalized, neglected, under-resourced and under-funded by both the African governments and their developmental partners as a result. African universities experienced two decades of stagnation and the drying-up of research funding, the crumbling of physical and learning facilities, reduction in scholarships for further education and the cessation of hiring new personnel, with the brain drain becoming the order of the day as bright but frustrated African minds left the continent for greener pastures elsewhere (Brock-Utne, 2003; MacGregor, 2015).

In general, the World Bank's basic education defensible policy weakened Africa's higher education system, as the higher education sector in the region was no longer seen as the panacea to the development problem besetting Africa, but as the core of the problem (Bloom et al., 2014; Brock-Utne, 2003; MacGregor, 2015). In this regard, the basic education defensible policy overlooked the key broader point that all levels – primary, secondary or higher education – are interdependent. In other words, it overlooked the inevitability of a well-functioning higher education system for the achievement of success in the lower levels and for nurturing a pool of expertise and building of indigenous capacity for research to solve the local context-specific problems of poverty.

After two decades of downplaying the importance of higher education, the World Bank since 2000 has realigned its position, and now acknowledges the importance of higher education within the educational sector and national development as a whole (Bloom et al., 2014; MacGregor, 2015). One major reason could have prompted a shift of the World Bank's perspective. The year 2000 was the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, where globalization and the knowledge-based economy philosophies were at the peak. Two seminal reports: the OECD's (1996) *The Knowledge-Based Economy* and the World Bank's (1999) *World Development Report: Knowledge for Development*, promoted the knowledge-based economy philosophies by stressing that knowledge is a key resource for stimulating nations' socioeconomic development and the developing world could use knowledge to catch-up with developed countries.

Towards the realignment of its perspective on higher education, the World Bank and UNESCO in 1998 organized a Task Force to examine the future prospects of higher education in developing countries. The Task Force published an influential report in March 2000:

*Higher Education in Developing Countries: Peril and Promise*. The task force report declared: “Higher education is no longer a luxury: it is essential to national social and economic development” (World Bank, 2000, p. 14). In 2002, the World Bank published another report: *Constructing Knowledge Societies: New Challenges for Tertiary Education*. The report also underscores the significance of higher education as “more influential than ever in the construction of knowledge economies and democratic societies” (World Bank, 2002, p. 1).

The momentum towards fostering Africa’s higher education was further engendered by the 2006 World Bank-sponsored study entitled *Higher Education and Economic Development in Africa* (Bloom, Canning, & Chan, 2006). This work urges countries not only to pay attention to the rate of return analyses but also to focus on the spill-over benefits resulting from higher education, which were ignored by the previous minded studies. Bloom et al. (2006) testify that both public and private benefits accrue from higher education. Universities produce skilled and innovative workers who, in turn, can speed up the technological catch-up and productivity rates. The remuneration of these workers with high salaries enhances their capacity of spending, saving and investing, which in turn lead to increased revenues with spill-over economic benefits. Bloom et al.’s (2006) study recommends that more investment in the African higher education system might speed up the diffusion of knowledge and technology and help reduce poverty in Africa.

The 2008 World Bank report: *Accelerating Catch-Up: Tertiary Education for Growth in Sub-Saharan Africa*, further emphasized that improving higher education systems should sit at the top of the sub-Saharan Africa’s development agendas because skills and capacities for the knowledge-based economy are built at the higher education level (Bloom et al., 2014; World Bank, 2008). The four seminal World Bank reports since 2000 illustrate the World Bank’s change of policy on higher education after realization that a well-functioning higher education system is a means towards bolstering a nation’s economic development.

Despite the World Bank’s belated acknowledgement of the value of Africa’s higher education in fostering Africa’s development, it has remained steadfast in pursuing its neoliberal agenda (Bloom et al., 2014; Brock-Utne, 2003; Samoff & Carrol, 2004), which is contrary to promoting the egalitarian principles in the provision of higher education in developing nations.

The World Bank regularly imposes its favorable education policies and practices and often declares that it will not fund what it perceives as poor education policies or practices (Assié-Lumumba, 2006; Brock-Utne, 2003; MacGregor, 2015; Metcalfe, Esseh, & Willinsky, 2009). In the 2002 *Constructing Knowledge Societies* report, for example, the World Bank introduces a new condition: higher education only after satisfactory provision of basic and secondary education. The World Bank set 20% as the highest figure that should be remitted to tertiary education from a national total education budget:

Developing countries that devote more than 20 percent of their education budget to tertiary education, especially those that have not attained universal primary education coverage, are likely to have a distorted allocation that favours an elitist university system and does not adequately support basic and secondary education (World Bank, 2002).

A similar statement was made by the World Bank’s Senior Director of Education at the African Higher Education Summit in March 2015. The World Bank’s Senior Director told the delegates in the summit that 20% of the World Bank’s overall education investment in sub-

Saharan Africa goes to higher education and the World Bank “sees a strong demand for holistic support across all levels of education, because you cannot have good quality higher education if you don’t have good quality basic education” (MacGregor, 2015, p. 14). The implication is that African countries should not invest more in the tertiary-level education than the basic and secondary-level to level the playing-field and attain equality in education provision at all levels. In theory, the use of donor support remitted to Africa from overseas agencies could be decided upon by the Africans or African universities themselves. In practice, this is rarely the case given the economic influence of these supranational organizations.

The World Bank tends to forget that it once downplayed the tertiary education level in Africa and made it receiving dwindling funding; less than any other level of education. Indeed, the World Bank overlooks the fact that the tertiary education level is made up of sub-levels which also demand undivided attention and adequate funding. The World Bank defines tertiary education as “all post-secondary education, including but not limited to universities” (World Bank, 2013, p. 1). Colleges, technical training institutes, community colleges, nursing schools, research laboratories, centers of excellence and distance learning centers comprise the Bank’s definition of the tertiary education sector (World Bank, 2013), yet the budget allocation for this tertiary education sector is set at 20%.

African nations have to demonstrate that they deserve the World Bank support. This “deserving” is measured in terms of their acceptance of the policies and conditions that come with the support (Brock-Utne, 2003; Metcalfe et al., 2009). On average, governments in sub-Saharan Africa spend about 20% of their education budget on tertiary education (MacGregor, 2015), whilst the primary education level continues absorbing the largest share of the education budget in sub-Saharan Africa. In Tanzania, for example, the primary education level usually takes up to 60% of the country’s education budget and tertiary education absorbs 20% of the national education budget (United Republic of Tanzania [URT], 2014).

The 60% chunk of the Tanzania’s education budget goes to the primary education level despite its competing for budgetary allocation with six other education levels in the country: pre-primary; secondary; folk and vocational; technical; teacher education; and higher education. This implies that, except for the pre-primary and secondary levels of education in Tanzania, all the other four levels under tertiary education account for only 20% of the country’s total education budget, therefore presenting the lopsided nature of funding of tertiary education. At the same time, the tertiary education level, particularly higher education, is mandated to perform three capital-intensive functions: teaching, research and community service. As a consequence, studies have shown that the mission of many African universities is directed towards teaching, which thus results in sidelining the research endeavor (Abugre & Kpinpuo, 2017; Cloete et al., 2015; Fussy, 2017). Teaching is favored because it is an open activity that can be easily monitored by the relevant authorities overseeing these institutions. Indeed, the decision of whether to fund research within African universities is usually determined by how much funding is not consumed by the teaching and more urgent daily operational needs, as the government’s budget is limited to a small amount.

From this discussion arises a fundamental question: how can African higher education policymakers and researchers formulate suitable higher education policies for their countries

when they are at the mercy of restrictive conditions imposed by supranational organizations? Without being governed by the interests of African nation-states as a collective or as individual entities, the supranational organizations cannot provide the kind of support to Africa's higher education which is responsive to individualized nationalistic and nation-specific demands (Assié-Lumumba, 2006; Brock-Utne, 2003; Metcalfe et al., 2009). The compromise of Africa's democratic principles to formulate domestic policies and set national development priorities not only jeopardizes any initiatives to resolve higher education research crisis in Africa, but also undermines the continent's efforts towards poverty reduction.

#### *Unstable Political Landscape*

The political environment prevailing in some African nations has seriously undermined higher education research on the continent (Atuahene, 2011; Metcalfe et al., 2009; Ngirwa, Euwema, Babyegeya, & Stouten, 2014). Although Africa is endowed with more natural resources than any other continent, its populace remains destitute and conflict-ridden. Civil strife, political mayhem and persecution in countries such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Somalia, Liberia, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Algeria, and Uganda are manifestations of the seemingly intractable problems that many African nation-states contend with. In the 1990's, for instance, Africa topped the world in terms of civil wars experienced. In fact, from independence up to the mid-2000's, 27 African countries experienced coups d'état and 12 had unsuccessful coup bids (Metcalfe et al., 2009; Ngirwa et al., 2014), and recently in October 2014, the Burkina Faso National Army succeeded to stage a coup and took over the country's leadership.

The civil strife creates a sense of insecurity among the workforce in the continent and compelled some bright but frustrated African experts to flee from their politically unstable countries. Research indicates that economic and security reasons appear to be the overarching motives for brain drain seen in Africa (Benedict & Ukpere, 2012). One study found that one in every nine African-born professionals with a tertiary education were working and living in OECD countries (OECD & UN-DESA, 2013). Comparatively, the figure was one in 30 for Asian-born migrants, one in 20 for European-born migrants and one in 13 for migrants hailed from Latin America and the Caribbean. In other words, there was an increase of more than 50% of African migrants in the 10 year period from 1990/1991 to 2010/2011 – more than any other part of the world (OECD & UN-DESA, 2013).

Although brain drain is not unique to African professionals, as professionals from Asia and Latin America also regularly migrate to other countries, the scale and severity of Africa's brain drain is that it occurs on a continent with not only fewer numbers of researchers and experts, but also on a continent which trails the world in knowledge production and economic development (cf. UNESCO, 2015; United Nations Conference on Trade and Development [UNCTAD], 2014). Additionally, through this emerging brain drain, African countries are losing their educational investments as their skilled workforce and future tax-revenue contributors move to work in other countries. The professionals outside the country, who include university dons, create a high-level manpower gap seen as necessary for steering innovations, managing research production and dissemination, and for creating businesses.

Similarly, political hostile environments prevailing in Africa also discourage foreign direct investment (FDI) because external investors and donors usually fear cooperating with politically unstable nations. In March 2016, for instance, the United States-based organization: the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) withdrew a grant of almost half a million US dollars (\$472.8m), which was meant to fund the implementation of several development projects in the transport, energy and water sectors in Tanzania (Kimboy, 2016). The MCC board reached their decision following the nullification of the Tanzania's Isles (Zanzibar) 2015 general election by the Zanzibar Electoral Commission (ZEC), which the opposition party claimed to win and repeated concerns of the international community such as the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia that condemned the nullification as undemocratic and intended to infringe the opposition party's legal right to steer the country's leadership. On the whole, such negative developments tend to undermine the socioeconomic development of Africa in general and the growth of higher education research in particular.

#### *Interrupted Academic Freedom and Autonomy*

Academic freedom and institutional autonomy constitute an important condition for nurturing knowledge creation and dissemination systems in universities (Altbach, 2013). Such autonomy denotes the right of universities to make decisions on core academic concerns, such as teaching or research. Academic freedom also refers to the independence of pursuing core academic concerns without external interference. The role of university academics as public intellectuals is to question and challenge the social, economic and political issues afflicting the wellbeing of their societies. As such, university academics usually use the power of their expertise to challenge ruling governments in their countries. The practice of challenging the status quo by university intellectuals is tolerable especially in developed nations but intolerable in many developing countries devoid of democracy as it is perceived as a threat, and they tend to respond to any dissent with draconian tactics, which eventually leading to a drastic weakening of the higher education system generally.

Some university professors in Africa who dared to criticize ruling governments were reproached, fired, tortured, imprisoned or even assassinated for their viewpoints. In 1993, following student protests at Addis Ababa University in Ethiopia, 42 professors were peremptorily sacked, and five national lecturers and 16 international lecturers were dismissed from the University of Dar es Salaam (Tanzania) in 1977 and 1979, respectively, for criticizing government policies (Ngirwa et al., 2014). Equally, a renowned Kenyan playwright, political critic and academic Ngugi wa Thiong'o was arrested and detained without trial for one year after the publication of a radical anti-capitalism novel *Petals of Blood* in 1977 and the performance of a Gikuyu language, highly critical play, *Ngaahika Ndeenda (I Will Marry When I Want)* he wrote jointly with Ngugi wa Mirii. Ngugi wa Thiong'o has been living in exile since 1982, first in the United Kingdom and then in the United States. Kenneth Good – a political scientist who lived and worked in Botswana since 1990 – faced a similar incident in 2005 when he was expelled from the country after the presentation of his seminal paper entitled *Presidential Succession in Botswana*, delivered at the University of Botswana (Good & Taylor, 2006).

Furthermore, African governments, by virtue of their national constitutions, also tend to exert clandestinely their control over universities through the appointment of university administrators, particularly chancellors, vice-chancellors and even members of the university

governing council. Thus, African governments ensure a great deal of political interference in university affairs. In February 2016, for example, the Nigerian Minister for Education, dismissed 13 public university vice-chancellors (VCs) in the country and their respective governing councils without apparent reason. The minister immediately announced the VCs' successors (Fatunde, 2016). The mass sacking and replacement of VCs, however, was momentary, following the Nigerian president's intervention. A month later, the president apologized for the education minister's action after learning that the minister has violated the Nigerian University Act 2003 that gives power only to the university governing councils to select and appoint their VCs (Fatunde, 2016). Even then, the president's apology was amounted to a recall of the university governing councils but not the VCs because the newly appointed VCs had already reported to their duty stations.

In this context, government appointees have to act in favor of the government to secure their appointments. This situation usually leads to the development of two different classes within the university setting: pro-government administrators and impartial academic staff, looking at each other with distrust. In consequence, it becomes difficult for government appointees (senior university leaders) to defend the rights of those university researchers who want to go against the grain by exercising their intellectual freedom of analyzing national issues objectively to the detriment of the interests of the powers that be. This is one of the tensions in developing research in universities because a successful culture of research requires a sense of collaboration where individuals cooperate with others within and outside the university setting to produce knowledge and make use of this knowledge to improve the standard of living.

#### *Unfamiliar Language of Academic, Research and Scholarly Communication*

Competence in the global languages of academic and scientific communications, mainly English which has a global reach, is essential for university research communities (Altbach, 2013; Kirmizi & Karci, 2017), without which universities cannot function efficiently in the global research and knowledge networks (Gaus & Hall, 2016; van Weijen, 2013). Most of the universities in Africa operate in a European language, either English in Anglophone Africa, or French in Francophone Africa, or Portuguese in Lusophone Africa. Many scholars in Africa adopt English, Portuguese or French as their second or third language. As such, these scholars have to use languages that were not spoken during their formative years of childhood and had not been thoroughly mastered. Arguably, the language of academic learning and scholarly communication excludes the majority of African scholars from participating in prestigious formal public discussions. Indeed, research attributes the rote learning situation prevalent in African classrooms to unfamiliarity with the language of instruction by both the teacher and the student because the unfamiliarity with the language of instruction limits the effective development of abstraction skills, system thinking and fluency in communication (Brock-Utne, 2003; Kirmizi & Karci, 2017; van Weijen, 2013).

African academics and researchers are, indeed, required to be involved in international forums of knowledge production and dissemination, through presenting their findings in international conferences and publishing their research in international peer-reviewed journals. African academics are, thus, placed at a major disadvantage because of the issues of their language fluency. Recent studies have examined impediments that researchers from non-English speaking countries face when attempting to publish their research findings in international, peer-reviewed English language journals (cf. Gaus & Hall, 2016; van Weijen,

2013). These studies found that writing in English is more taxing and time-consuming for non-native English speakers than for natives. Researchers experienced difficulties in reading and paraphrasing works of others and expressing clearly their own ideas in writing. Such impediments mean that only a few papers by African scholars are accepted for publication in top-tier international journals, which are normally used as a means of computation for the research productivity of the continent. The implication is that when considering publishing their research in high-ranked international journals, African researchers have to spend an enormous amount of time preparing manuscripts and employ native English proofreaders to polish the language of their manuscripts before submitting to journals, which is expensive and thus calls for a considerable investment of resources as well from governments and higher education stakeholders.

Furthermore, research activity does not end with the production of knowledge or the publication of this knowledge in peer-reviewed publication outlets. Rather, the knowledge produced from any research undertaking must reach the end-users, mainly the non-academic community. The non-academic community should receive at least a synopsis of the published research knowledge in a format, style and language that they can understand. The choice of a former colonial language in most of the peer-reviewed scientific publications places African researchers at a disadvantage when it comes to disseminating their scientific knowledge to the non-academic community. Unless they decide to translate their peer-reviewed publications into African languages, the publication of research in Western languages as per current practices, creates a language barrier to knowledge dissemination to the wider population of the nation. In consequence, the scientific knowledge produced or published in English, French or Portuguese rarely reaches beyond the academic population, who turn out to be the privileged elite and not the commoners who desperately need exposure to value-added knowledge that would enhance their contribution to the development process.

## **Conclusion**

In raising the research performance of Africa's higher education, this paper has based on the premise that it is imperative to revisit the past to comprehend what has made Africa's higher education research as it is today. Informed by the postcolonial theory, the paper sought to establish the historical antecedents that have undermined the development of Africa's higher education research. The paper has established several antecedents including the role of colonial higher education policies, incompatible supranational donor policies, unstable political landscape, interrupted academic freedom and autonomy, and unfamiliar language of academic, research and scholarly communication.

In light of the foregoing, the paper concludes that any initiative that aimed at revitalizing Africa's higher education research should place the present higher education research doldrums in its wider sociohistorical context where Africa's higher education sector had been hindered for decades by challenges as discussed in this paper. The paper recommends that Africa's governments and higher education stakeholders should understand that research is a capital-intensive undertaking and thus it should be adequately financed to enable the production and dissemination of abundant cutting-edge knowledge and skilled human personnel to sustain their countries and chart a more autonomous development path.

The paper adds to the existing body of knowledge on higher education research development in low-income countries by establishing the historical antecedents that have undermined the development of Africa's higher education research. Furthermore, the paper situates the established historical antecedents and related debilitating effects in the broader developing world context that share similar educational, social, political and economic characteristics to that of Africa, in a bid to devise viable higher education policies and practices necessary for improving knowledge production and valorization to bring about development.

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