

**THE ROLE OF THE UNIVERSITY IN NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT:  
FIXING THE NEXUS BETWEEN KNOWLEDGE AND GOVERNANCE**

*Being a Convocation Lecture delivered at the Federal University Gusau  
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*By Usman Bugaje*

*Imitating others,  
I failed to find myself  
I looked inside and discovered  
I only know my name.  
When I stepped outside  
I found my real self.<sup>1</sup>**Rumi***

## **INTRODUCTION**

The first part of the topic of this paper, ‘The Role of the University in National Development’ is a very familiar one and many convocation lectures have tried to address aspects of this subject severally. I have chosen to bring it back for two reasons. One, it has not been exhausted. Far from it, in my view it has not really been addressed yet. Two, national development falls within the realm of governance and governance in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is a corporate scientific business. Thus, governance is inextricably linked to Knowledge. So the second part of the topic, ‘Fixing the nexus between knowledge and governance’ speaks to this inextricable link and the need to fix it for any meaningful national development to be delivered.

In doing this I intend, to address three aspects of this subject: First, the role of the University in boosting industrial growth through research and development. Second, how research in the University should inform and evaluate policy. Third, how the University should provide the intellectual leadership by constantly interrogating the norms, designing new metrics and staying at the cutting edge of both scientific and social thinking. For no development can happen without knowledge. Moreover, if knowledge has to lead development, then the University has to provide this leadership. Who else?

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<sup>11</sup> Azima Kolin and Maryam Mafi (Trans), Rumi: Whispers of the Beloved. London, Thorsons, 1999. P. 29.

## **An Idea of a University**

Before proceeding into the subject, I feel it is necessary to tarry a little and ensure that we are on the same page in our understanding of what a University is and what it is supposed to do. This is not only to avoid being presumptuous, but more fundamentally to bring more clarity, accuracy and precision into our discussion; features that are missing in many of our discourses in this country. So what exactly is a University? What is it supposed to do? And why does it need to do what it does? These are of course not new questions. They have been asked and answered before. But they are the kind of questions that have to be asked every now and then, because every epoch and every generation would have to have its own answers. To be knowledgeable we have to remain in this constant struggle to learn, as Rumi would say, ‘The Angel is free because of his knowledge, the beast because of his ignorance. Between the two remains the son of Man to struggle.’

Simon Leys was a Sinologist, who taught for about 40 years in the University, and resigned six years ahead of time. When his Vice Chancellor wrote to say that his students should be seen as his customers, he has captured this in a talk he gave on ‘An Idea of a University’, which forms a chapter in his collection of essays titled the *Hall of Uselessness*.<sup>2</sup> Leys admitted that he was paying homage to an earlier classic, ‘the Idea of a University’ written by Cardinal Newman, over 150 years ago. “C. S. Lewis, observed that, to assess the value of anything – be it a Cathedral or a corkscrew – one should first know its purpose. Intellectual impostures always require convoluted jargon, whereas fundamental values can normally be defined in a clear and simple language. Thus, the commonly accepted definition of the university is fairly straight forward: “a University is a place where scholars seek truth, pursue and transmit knowledge for knowledge’s sake – irrespective of the consequences, implications and utility of the endeavour.”<sup>3</sup>

Leys proceeded to explain that, for a University to function it requires four things; two of which are essential and the other two are important but not essential. The two essentials are a community of scholars on the one hand and a good library for humanities and well equipped laboratory for the sciences on the other hand. The two important but not necessarily essential are students and funding. It is easy to see why the first two are essential. It may not be so easy to see why the other two are not. I think he just downplayed the significance of the last

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<sup>2</sup>Simon Leys, *The Hall of Uselessness: Collected Essays*. NYRB, New York, 2013

<sup>3</sup>ibid. P462

two to accentuate the significance of the first two. For he admitted that students and funding are important.

Leys then turned his attention to two features of the University that have been constantly under attack: its elitist character, as an ivory tower and its utility. He felt it was important to address these two persistent concerns, not only to show what the University is not, but also to emphasize the fact that these two features are actually, what gives a University its intrinsic character and allows it to perform its role. Defending the elitist character of the University, Leys argued that,

The demand for equality is noble and must be fully supported, but only within its own sphere, which is that of social justice. It has no place anywhere else. Democracy is the only acceptable political system; yet it pertains to politics exclusively and has no application in any other domain. When it is applied elsewhere, it is death – for truth is not democratic, intelligence and talent are not democratic, nor is beauty, nor love – nor God’s grace. A truly democratic education is an education that equips people intellectually to defend and promote democracy within the political world; but in its own world, education must be ruthlessly aristocratic and highbrow, shamelessly geared towards excellence.<sup>4</sup>

Tackling the problem of utility, Leys went way back before Christ, saying, “The heart of the problem is memorably expressed in the paradox of Zhuang Zi, a Daoist Philosopher of the Third Century B.C. He was one of the most profound minds of all time: “People... know the usefulness of what is useful, but they do not know the usefulness of what is useless.” The superior utility of the University – what enables it to perform its function rests entirely upon what the world deems to be its uselessness.”<sup>5</sup> Leys was trying to attack utilitarianism, which attempts to limit its vision to only what the eyes could see, knowing that the eyes can only see as much. Pointing to the shallowness of utilitarianism he warned that, “When a University yields to the utilitarian temptation, it betrays its vocation and sells its soul. Five centuries ago, the great Renaissance scholar Erasmus defined with one phrase the essence of the humanist endeavour, *Homo fit, non Nascitur*. (One is not born a man one becomes it). A University is not a factory, producing graduates, as sausage factory produces sausages. It is a place where a chance is given to men to become what they truly are.”<sup>6</sup>

We must not gloss over this dangerous idea of utilitarianism introduced (some would say founded) by Jeremy Bentham an English philosopher (1748-1832), of the European

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<sup>4</sup>ibid P463.

<sup>5</sup>ibid P464.

<sup>6</sup>ibid.

Enlightenment period, for it has curtailed and clouded our vision of reality. Bentham defined as the "fundamental axiom" of his philosophy the principle that "it is the greatest happiness of the greatest number that is the measure of right and wrong."<sup>7</sup> Regrettably, "Bentham's influence had cast its beam over every cranny of their (western) political life; one could not open a serious book on politics without being pulled into yet another discussion of the merits and limits of utilitarianism."<sup>8</sup>

The period of European enlightenment is both a period of human ingenuity and a period of human folly. "To talk of measuring justice by a security of its consequences could not but be startling and provocative."<sup>9</sup> To construct a moral system entirely on the temperaments of the human mind is clearly the height of human folly, knowing fully well that the human mind is vulnerable to optical illusions and cognitive errors. Ironically, that is what philosophy is supposed to cure. However, in a way, philosophy has provided the cure but it cannot help those that refused to take the cure. When Socrates was asked, in Athens, apparently by those irritated by his unsettling questions, "of what use are philosophers?" He did not hesitate to reply that, "philosophers were of no use". The man was about to walk away happily, when Socrates drew his attention that he did not ask why? He then asked, why? Socrates replied him, "They were of no use because people did not know how to make use of them!" As Shaykh Abdullah ibn Fodio would say, "No harm comes to the sun, simply because blind men deny its light. No harm comes to the pool of water simply because the camel refused to drink from it."<sup>10</sup>

Of course, Simon Leys is not the only person who has written on the idea of a University. There are a number of others. While space and time constraints would not allow full coverage, it is necessary to complement Leys views with one or two others. For those who may find Leys view on the utopian side of the spectrum, about 15 years ago, a group of scholars from a host of countries across several continents including Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, Brazil, Russia, India, Poland, etc., undertook a group research on the transformational role of Universities. They identified the various roles that Universities play. They identified the economic, political, social, and cultural roles that contemporary Universities play or are made to play. They recognized that, even as Universities transform societies, citing the case

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<sup>7</sup>[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jeremy\\_Bentham](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jeremy_Bentham)

<sup>8</sup>Daniel T. Rodgers, *Contested Truths: Key words in American Politics Since Independence*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1998. P19.

<sup>9</sup>*ibid* P20.

<sup>10</sup>M. Hiskett, (trans.) Abdullah Ibn Muhammad, *Tazyin al-Waraqat*, Ibadan, Ibadan University Press, 1963.

of the collapse of communism, where they provided the half opened door for external ideas to permeate, and the collapse of apartheid in South Africa where they provided some of the spaces to germinate, some of the critical ideas on how the industry funds research and often ask for reform of the curriculum in order to produce the manpower required. In each aspect, they agreed that having that “protected space in which both critique and opposition could ferment” was a defining feature unique to Universities that gave them the leverage to play those roles.<sup>11</sup>

Perhaps we should listen to those outside the ivory tower, if admittedly sympathetic. Julius Nyerere, one of the cerebral African political leaders, had occasion, in 1970, to roll out his understanding of what a University is and should be doing. For Nyerere, “A University is an institution of higher learning; a place where people’s minds are trained for clear thinking, for independent thinking, for analysis, and for problem solving at the highest level.” Nyerere proceeded to identify three distinct functions:

to transmit advance knowledge from one generation to the next so that it serves either as a basis of action or as a springboard for further research; to provide a center for the attempt to advance the frontiers of knowledge by concentrating in one place some of the most intellectually able people who are not preoccupied with day-to-day administrative or professional responsibilities, and making available to them good library and laboratory facilities which are necessary to support learning; and to provide, through its teaching, for the high level manpower needs of society.”<sup>12</sup>

So the University is that space on planet earth where man has the maximum freedom possible to explore his thoughts and ideas without any fear or hindrance. It is one space where human creativity and ingenuity are allowed full reins without constraints of political correctness or the fear of persecution. It is also a place, where one can ask questions, on any and everything. It is a place that we can and must be critical. Critical thinking and problems solving are an important component of University education. But all these must be done for a higher purpose: the preservation and progress of human society. And here comes the important issue of relevance. A University must empathize with its wider society and strive to meet its needs

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<sup>11</sup>John Brennan et al, *The Role of Universities in the Transformation of Societies: An International Research Report*. Association of Commonwealth Universities, London, 2004

<sup>12</sup>H. J. Mosha, ‘The Role of African Universities in National Development: A critical Analysis.’ *Comparative Education*, Volume 22, No 2, 1986. P94.

and address its challenges in the context of its realities. In trying to meet these needs, our Universities may have to consider alternative epistemology so that we do not fall victims to the presumptuousness that characterize western intellectual tradition from whence the modern University takes its roots. This issue has been, very well articulated in the famous speech of the Late Waziri Junaidu of Sokoto to the congregation of the Ahamdu Bello University in 1972.

It is important to capture the understanding of the University and its role by some of the Africa leaders. Julius Nyerere had occasion to say that, “Students must be helped to think scientifically; they must be taught how to analyse problems objectively, and to apply the facts they have learned-or which they know-exist to the problems which they will face in future.

African Universities and nations need to be crystal-clear about their development priorities and ensure that they are constantly working towards their realisation. African Universities should continuously exercise their enshrined right of objectively criticising government action through reliance on empirical research... Finally, African Universities will be judged not only by their intelligent discussion, good experiments in the laboratory or greenhouses, or excellent research, but also by how far such achievements are being used to create a better society in which the people of Africa can lead decent lives.<sup>13</sup>

Sir Ahmadu Bello the Sardauna of Sokoto, also had occasion to say that, “A University must be both National and international. The first duty of every University is the search for and the spread of knowledge and the establishment of truth, and as such, it must be international in outlook. But it must also serve the need of the nation in terms of man-power production and the promotion and preservation of local culture and traditional institutions. Any University which fails to aspire to these two objectives has lost its purpose and will lose recognition and respect.”<sup>14</sup> The Sardauna was keen to ensure that Universities should not only solve problems of their societies but should endeavour to preserve their value system. He was keen because he was worried, and rightly so, that our Universities, being western in their origins and having been founded on the values of godless-era of European enlightenment, must not be

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<sup>13</sup> H. J. Moshia (1986) *ibid* P107

<sup>14</sup> Sir Ahmadu Bello, ‘On University Education and the Role of University in Society’, in Alhaji, Sir Ahmadu Bello Sardauna of Sokoto: His Thoughts and Vision in His Own Words, Makurdi, Oracle Pub Co. nd. P138.

allowed to supplant our hallowed values which define our belief system. In other words, a University must not imitate blindly, it must be itself and true to the society it serves.

We should now return to the substance of this paper: the role of the University in national development, specifically looking at this link between knowledge and governance. We have to discuss this in context and with the future in mind. We have to therefore establish our bearings and have some base line position on which to make our projections or define our challenges. At the end of 1999, the then Education Tax Fund (now Tetfund) organized series of workshops to assess the state of the country's educational system and plan for the future. The proceedings were published and a concluding paragraph of the first paper, authored by one of the editors, Ibraheem Sulaiman, seems to summarize the state of affairs at that time. "Education in Nigeria is in crisis." Sulaiman says without mincing words, "Quality of teachers is low, so naturally is the quality of what they deliver. This is largely the result of broken and unfulfilled promises by policy makers." He continues to give some breakdowns,

Instructional materials and facilities are scarce, and sometimes not available at all. This presents a severe handicap for the teachers, and severely limits the efficiency of the learning process. Add to that the primitive state of Nigeria's infrastructure, which inhibits the introduction of new methods and techniques in teaching and learning process. So Nigeria continues to lag behind, and is yet to wake up to the reality of information technology, and the imperatives of science and technology. **Nigeria does not fund education very well. So education does not develop as it should, and the nation does not develop, as it should. The nation declines and decays.**<sup>15</sup>[*emphasis mine*]

The last three sentences captured the situation aptly. Nigeria does not fund education, the result of which it does not develop and thus declines and decays.

Okwudiba Nnoli, the other editor of this volume, wrote the last chapter in which he tried to discuss the prospects for the future, emphasizing the role of education in all societies. Echoing what Sulaiman concluded, he observed that, "No society can survive for long without a system of education through which it imparts to future generations the art of living and surviving in their peculiar environment, and of transforming that environment for their betterment." Explaining further, he wrote that, "This need for the correct content of education suggests that education has two aspects to it: the routine, and the changing or creative. Routine education deals with the transmission of existing knowledge, pertaining to all areas of life, to all members of the population. This is the socialization function of education ... on

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<sup>15</sup>O. Nnoli, I Sulaiman, (Eds), *Reassessing the Future of Education in Nigeria*, Abuja, ETF, 2001. P 8-9.

the other hand, changing or creative knowledge refers to knowledge in the making, the routine knowledge of tomorrow. ... the branch of education that deals with such knowledge is research.”<sup>16</sup> It is to this branch of education that this paper wishes to focus its attention.

It is worth noting that the ETF had in 2011, become Tertiary Education Trust Fund, TETFund, with the mandate to promote research by improving facilities and training staff in tertiary educational institutions.<sup>17</sup> This is an intervention fund, which is supposed to be both selective and strategic in its application. Having set the stage, we can proceed to consider the link between the industries and the University.

### **Knowledge and Industry**

It is important to remember that the decline and decay in Nigeria is a direct result of our failure to give education the priority it deserves. As such, today we are paying for this neglect in adequate funding of education. Our peers like Brazil and Malaysia have gone well ahead of us. In the 70's Nigeria and Brazil established defense industries; while Brazil has long been manufacturing Mig-fighter Jets and sophisticated submarines, our own industry was, until recently, producing only furniture in Kaduna! Similarly, Malaysia took palm oil seedlings in the 60's from here (Nigeria), today it is the largest producer of palm oil in the world and have turned it into hundreds of other products, including an alternative fuel for a home generator, which they use for charging their new Malaysian electric cars. One could continue to give such painful examples of our folly, but suffice to say that this has to change if we are to survive and thrive in the increasingly competitive environment of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, no country can develop without industrialization and no industrialization can take place without knowledge transfer, research and development of products. Indeed, the role knowledge plays in development today has led to the famous axiom that, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century knowledge is the greatest capital. Universities are the institutions designed to produce knowledge and propagate it. We only need to study the experience of others who have deployed knowledge to develop. Many of the emerging Asian economies have in the last three or four decades done various models of industry-university linkages in transferring knowledge and what is today, called Research and Development, (R&D). The astonishing

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid Pp 199-200.

<sup>17</sup>S. E. Bogoro, TETFund and the Development of Tertiary Education in Nigeria: Strategies, Performance and Challenges', A Paper Presented at the ISS, Bwari, Abuja, May 17, 2019.

transformation of China is perhaps the most dramatic phenomenon yet in the application of knowledge to the transformation of a country's economy.

We should take a quick look at the Chinese model, even as China is neither a democracy nor a free market/liberal economy and all these developments took place under a central control of national government.

In a recent case study done by Abbas, A. et al., they observed that, “In China, the National Natural Science Foundation of China (NSFC) supports Universities by funding research for a maximum duration of four years. This funding is allocated only at the start of a project and projects are evaluated by the government on their completion. ... In China, the government usually encourages practice-oriented projects, despite the high risk involved. Theory-oriented University-Government research projects are a key source of new knowledge creation aimed at helping industry and aiding economic development. Chinese government financial investment policies encourage research and development activities (Huang et al., 2017). The purpose of this is to encourage the creation of new knowledge. The government in China allocates approximately 40 billion<sup>18</sup> Chinese Renminbi (RMB) every year to support these research projects.”<sup>19</sup> This collaboration between the University, Government and Industry is called the Triple Helix and has been the key behind the Chinese success story. It is worth sharing a bit of the details. “University-government collaboration provides a platform that enables universities to generate and protect their knowledge before commercialization through IPR law. To commercialize the newly generated knowledge to the industry, Universities must follow their internal rules and procedures, as well as government issued policies and guidelines (Baba et al., 2009; Perkmann et al., 2013). The procedure for the generation and commercialization of new knowledge is built into the collaboration process. Direct methods include collaboration and licensing. Once intellectual property rights are applied for, the newly created knowledge is commercialized so that it can be used in industry. The government helps to commercialize new knowledge by arranging meetings with industry representatives. The most common method in China for distributing intellectual property

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<sup>18</sup>This is about 5-6 billion USD and about Double the annual budget of Nigeria for 2020.

<sup>19</sup>Asad Abbas et al., ‘University-government collaboration for the generation and commercialization of new knowledge for use in industry’ in *Journal of Innovation & Knowledge* 4 (2019) 23–31

rights is “622”. Here, the research team gets 60% of the intellectual property of any new knowledge, while 20% belongs to the school or department, and 20% goes to the respective University.”<sup>20</sup>

At the moment and as far as I know, there is no concrete link between our Universities and our industries, or what remains of them. We have got to find a way to make our Universities to establish link with our industries, whether Government is ready to play its role or not. The kinds of government we have seen in the last 20 years doesn’t give some of us the hope that government will soon wake up to this responsibility. My reasons are not far fetched. Most of the political leaders are coming from the least educated part of the community. The University should not wait for government that is not ready (there). Universities should take the initiative to reach out to the industries to cut a deal that will be mutually beneficial. Once it works, government will come, if only to collect VAT. Waiting for government can take eternity and the Universities should know better.

### **Knowledge and Policy**

**The economy** – the disconnect between government policies and knowledge available even in the public domain is perhaps too obvious to warrant copious evidence. The fact that in the first half of the last twenty years under a democratic government, poverty only doubled and in the second half, poverty has so deepened that we are just about becoming the poverty capital of the world, despite policy advises from many professionals, as well as warnings from some of our development partners, for me, is enough evidence of this disconnect. To be sure, the real worry is that our University with its array sound economists, many of whom consult for the World Bank and other International economic and financial institutions, do not always find way to make inputs. Even if our governments will listen and have the discipline to implement good economic advises from the world economic bodies, sustainability demands that we cultivate our homegrown expertise whose understanding of the terrain would be better and commitment higher. Perhaps another glaring evidence, if evidence is needed, of this disconnect is the fact that the current federal administration did not see the need to have an economic team in its first term in office. It carried on ignorantly and arrogantly and indeed all our fears came to pass. The value of our currency collapsed in weeks and they couldn’t help the country, but they knew how to help themselves. We

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<sup>20</sup>Ibid.

couldn't solve the subsidy conundrum to this day. We have accumulated unprecedented debts within four years, with nothing to show for it, and still digging deep, for reasons the citizens of this country, who will bear the brunt of all this folly, cannot still fathom. That we now have a team of economic advisers, we hope this after-thought, as it were, will come to our rescue.

**Agriculture** is another area where this gap between policy and knowledge exists with disastrous consequences. During the first half of our 20 years democracy, precisely between 1999-2007 there was an attempt to stifle the numerous agricultural research institutions of funding so that the knowledge they produce would not inform agricultural development. The federal budget of the period will bear this out. Even when subsequent administrations tried to rectify the situation, they continued to ignore the good policy advises coming from these research institutes. Government officials would readily and happily attend their ceremonies where they will be showered with praises and journalists take vantage pictures for their headlines<sup>21</sup>. But they will shy away when invited to a gathering of scholars where facts and figures will be laid on the table and are likely to expose a lot of their claims and show their failings.<sup>22</sup>

You read about “CBN disburses N44 Billion to 330,000 rice farmers (March 2018)”; another “CBN disburses N55 Billion to 250,000 farmers in two years, (Feb. 2018)”; Occasionally you also read about “Political farmers” hijacking Anchor Borrower program – Bayelsa rice farmers lament”<sup>23</sup> I tried to find out researches done by our Universities on evaluations of these programs against the claims of government officials, they were scanty. The few I came across appear to be very economic with the truth. A group from the Covenant University carried out a collaborative research to evaluate general funding of agriculture and concluded that, “deposit money banks loans and advances do have impact on the development of the Nigerian economy and therefore recommended that banks should improve on mobilization of resources and how such resources are allocated. As regards public finance, Federal Government recurrent expenditure allocated to the agricultural sector impacted the sector positively, **while the Federal Government capital expenditure allocated to the sector did not**”. This may not be unconnected with the findings of Ben-Caleb, Adeyemi and Iyoha

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<sup>21</sup><https://allafrica.com/stories/201903180065.html>

<sup>22</sup>The Neglect of Agriculture and the End of Oil: What is the Alternative? *Arewa Research and Development Project 9ARDP) Newsletter*, vol.2, no.3, April-June 2016

<sup>23</sup><https://agronigeria.ng/tag/anchor-borrowers-programme/>

(2013), whose study concluded that budgetary reforms had not been able to tame the spate of indiscipline in Nigeria's budgetary process."<sup>24</sup> [*emphasis mine*]

I find the governments discourse on the rice issue most unscientific. We know the domestic consumption is somewhere around 6 million metric tons annually. We also know that domestic production, about 3-4 years ago, to be about 3million metric tons. So we expect to hear the rise in domestic production and the gaps that exist and the plan over time to close this gap. But what we hear is about some rice millionaires that we can't see much less verify. And if indeed we are producing enough rice, why is the cost of rice defying the golden rule of demand and supply? Why is the current price more than double the pre-rice millionaires' price? Why do you close the boarders to force people to buy an expensive rice that is not really there? The whole policy defies logic. Why are our scholars in the universities, who should have the facts and can do the field work to gather the data, keeping quite? How much of the data available in the research institutes goes into this policy? Can we continue to develop agriculture in this manner?

Another area of concern in this respect is the **security sector**. The Boko Haram insurgency has gone on for one whole decade now! Since then, rural banditry, kidnapping, ethnic and religious clashes have taken over the whole country. No part of this country can be said to be safe and all this happened in the last ten years. Conferences after conferences, reports after reports, speeches after speeches, the rage continues unabated. A group of academics have studied the Boko Haram insurgency, the rural banditry and other manifestations of the security challenges and have published books and reports and done some advocacy; all to no avail.<sup>25</sup> Meanwhile we read field reports describing how our soldiers are under equipped, under fed, under paid. We also read about top officers caught with mind boggling cash, we read about soldiers about to vanquish enemies being withdrawn, we read about top officers who have reached their retirement age reappointed severally with all the consequences. We read about cache of arms intercepted and nothing is heard about their prosecution. We hear about unspeakable breaches and unprintable stories and yet daily citizens are being murdered, kidnapped, traumatized in their numbers. So far, no officer has been dismissed, no commander has been prosecuted and government officials appear to be happy and going

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<sup>24</sup><http://m.covenantuniversity.edu.ng/Profiles/EVBUOMWAN-GRACE/Effect-of-Government-and-Private-Sector-Financing-on-the-Agricultural-Sector-in-Nigeria>

<sup>25</sup>M. Kuna and J. Ibrahim, (Eds.), *Rural Banditry and Conflicts in Northern Nigeria*, Abuja, CDD, 2015.

A. R. Mustafa, *Sects and Social Disorder: Muslim Identities and Conflict in Northern Nigeria*, Woodbridge, 2014

about their business as if nothing wrong is happening! Please tell me, what is it that informs this policy or lack of it, as it were? Where in the world can this go on for this length of time, in this day and age and nothing happens? Where is our knowledge? Where is our courage? Where is our conscience?

### **Knowledge and Governance**

I keep repeating the fact that Governance in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is a corporate scientific business, to underscore the fact that governance today must be led by knowledge otherwise you end up with an unmitigated disaster of the kind Nigeria seems to have become. If a hospital is built, by either government or private group no one will bring his relatives and loved ones to run that hospital irrespective of their qualifications. Rather, we will look for trained and licensed doctors, pharmacists and nurses to run it. If we should find that there is high mortality in the hospital, we shall be forced to check the qualifications of the personnel and dismiss those culpable, to save people's lives. This is the most sensible thing to do; it is actually common sense. If you need cognate knowledge to run hospitals, you also need cognate knowledge to run every institution or establishment. Indeed, to run a government, of which a hospital is only a fraction of, we need people with cognate knowledge of that work. The consequence of taking people ignorant of the work is no less. It only looks less because we have become a bunch of irresponsible lot and we feel free and go about our business only in the Rumi's sense of a beast being totally free because of its total oblivion!

In a democratic dispensation, top government personnel are recruited through the political parties and elected at the polling units, where citizens cast their votes to elect those to hold the top political offices thereby determining the future of their societies. They are then charged with enacting the policies and allocating the resources of state according to the priorities of the manifestos of their parties. This system presumes that the citizens have sufficient knowledge to make good choices. Where this presumption does not hold, the system does not deliver the desired governance. How could this escape the eyes of our scholars who ought to see this coming? Even if they were to be oblivious for whatever reason by the time things started going wrong as they have indeed gone wrong, (for how wrong more do they need to go) scholars ought to be alerted just as symptoms would alert a doctor to begin a diagnosis and craft a prescription to save life. Well, Yusuf Bala Usman had picked this up early in these two decades of democracy. The occasion was a symposium on Good governance in Nigeria held in Kano in 2001. He chose to write on 'Ignorance, Knowledge and Democratic Governance in Nigeria' and he grounded his argument thus:

Democracy is built on the equality of citizens; the freedom of these citizens to associate with one another for the realization of their ideals and the defense and promotion of their interests; and the freedom of these citizens to choose between the various political parties and candidates and see the actualization of the platforms they have voted for, if their choices win. This is only possible if the citizens are well informed about their country, government, circumstances, ... the practice of democracy requires knowledge. Without knowledge, the association the citizens enter into is one based on irrational, but no less powerful, instincts of fear, greed, envy, fascination, or hatred.

To strengthen the point he added that, “Without knowledge, the exercise of the democratic right to choose lacks a stable and rational basis and, therefore, does not enable the citizens making the choice to make the party and the candidates accountable.”<sup>26</sup>

He thought he should clarify what he actually means by ignorance. He thus says,

“Ignorance is not the same as illiteracy. Knowledge is not the same as literacy, or even the same as acquisition of educational certificates, or academic ranks. Some of the most highly literate Nigerians, and the most highly educated by virtue of their certificates and ranks, are some of the most ignorant over many crucial areas of natural and human existence and over our national life, like our geography, history, economy and politics.”<sup>27</sup>

He then proceeded to conclude with one of the consequences of this politics of ignorance, “State Governors of many of the northern states, and the other non-oil producing states, being part of this network of ignorance, are also throwing around meaningless claims about solid minerals and agriculture. Instead of studying our geology, ecology, history, economics, and constitutional and legal development, they resort to the same cheap politics of claiming sovereign right for their states where they have none. The blind confronts the blind and the country’s politics sinks into a welter of baseless tribalist and racist claims at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Anti-democratic organizations using the fascist political tactics of intimidation and the threats, and use of violence, flourish in this political contest based on

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<sup>26</sup>Y. B. Usman, *Beyond Fairy Tales: Selected Historical Writings of Dr Yusuf Bala Usman*, Zaria. Abdullahi Smith Center for Historical Research, 2014. P 210-211.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid. P211.

ignorance.”<sup>28</sup> Now almost two decades since he wrote this, the situation is far worse now, than it was then. What this means is that another two decades down the line along this trajectory, we may not be talking about what has gone worse, we may have to talk about whether the country will be standing there at all or not. For if in the 21<sup>st</sup> century where knowledge is the greatest capital, our politics is informed by ignorance and our leadership recruitment mechanism is skewed in favour of the ignorant, then indeed we are in trouble. By way of update, an opening paragraph of a document launched by the Arewa Initiative for Good Governance in Kaduna in 2017, seem to capture our situation today.

**HAVING OBSERVED** how in the last two decades or so, our country has continually failed to develop; indeed how every cycle of elections leaves us worse than the previous one; specifically how poverty has deepened and become entrenched despite our enormous human and material resources; how corruption has become endemic and systemic, defying even regimes that rode to power on the crest of fighting corruption; how our social values are eroding and society gradually decomposing; how the economy has been underperforming; how the political economy is pauperizing the masses thereby fuelling crime and insurgencies; how the teeming jobless youth have been abandoned with no hope on the horizon; how the millions of out-of-school-children have been ignored as their numbers keep swelling; how governance has been reduced to prebendal politics; and how our political parties, especially their leadership recruitment mechanisms, keep churning out incompetent, irresponsible and corrupt leaders.<sup>29</sup>

At the roots of all these is ignorance, which has created a rouge political culture which now drives our politics. And when governance is not informed by knowledge, especially in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there cannot be development. If we cannot develop, then we cannot but continue to sink under the weight of poverty, conflicts, crimes and system failure.

Now where were our Universities when all this was happening? Admittedly, the Universities were one of the first casualties of this politics of ignorance. The Universities may have been ignored. The Universities may have even been seen as the enemy and targeted for destruction. But all these would not absolve the University from its responsibility. We should

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<sup>28</sup>Ibid. P218-219.

<sup>29</sup>Charter of the Arewa Initiative for Good Governance, Launched in Kaduna on October 28,2017. P.1.

remember that universities existed in closed societies of the old Soviet and Maoist China, but they provided the window which generated the very ideas that led to the opening and transformation of those societies, even as they bore the brunt of their struggle. Scholars are supposed to be the conscience of societies and they cannot rest when the society is in trouble. Scholars are the only class that can speak truth to power because they have the knowledge to speak from and that knowledge should give them the courage of their conviction. This is why they are scholars. I get worried when ASUU behaves like a trade union of factory floor workers. ASUU should not speak only when issues affect the university, ASUU's constituency is beyond the walls of the University. ASUU is the conscience of the nation and must speak anytime and on any issue that affects the nation. ASUU must lead the civil society organizations by virtue of its knowledge and keep the political leaders on their toes, until they deliver. And ASUU must realize that abdicating this responsibility is precisely what makes it vulnerable to what Bala Usman calls the politics of ignorance.

In our history, we have a model to draw from. The leaders of the Sokoto Caliphate met similar situation where ignorance had taken the better of their societies and the few teachers have kept to themselves while the Hausa rulers were oppressing and terrorizing the rest of society. Shehu Usman bin Fodio took a decision to fight this ignorance and got a coterie of others and started what was a simple process of knowledge dissemination. Over time it created the momentum until it reached the tipping point when change came. A time when governance became informed by knowledge and it became open and accountable and society became safer and freer. The literature on this subject is much and in good supply to warrant any further delineation. But it will help to remind us what Prof. Smith of blessed memory, a prominent historian of the Caliphate, said about history and about our responsibility as teachers.

Historical study opens up a world of such experience which is closed to those who pass their lives in the deliberate condition of historical amnesia, which is favoured by our colleagues the modernizers, who believe that they are better off than their forebears and that no study of the what their forebears thought and did can be of any use to them. We know how unscientific this belief is because the assumption of advancement can only

be proved by historical comparison. Historical study is therefore necessary.<sup>30</sup>

Our poor understanding and appreciation of our history has left us vulnerable to the confusion in the west and unsure of the ideals to guide our lives. Again it is the responsibility of the university to inform and guide society based on knowledge and not whims and caprices. Prof Smith observed,

In this matter of ideals also, it is the uncomfortable truth that we, as teachers, are, or should be, particularly involved. For surely it is our business to inspire the young, to give them a glimpse of things worth fighting for, a vision of ideals which they should seek rather than leave them to flounder in the terrible mental confusion of this corrupt society into which they have been born.<sup>31</sup>

So, distinguished scholars of this University and indeed Nigerian Universities, you can't leave governance in this country to be driven by ignorance while you stay in the "Ivory tower" complaining. For what then will be the difference between you and the ignorant? If Shehu Usman would traverse these distances on mules and camels in an epoch when there were no vehicles, no printing press, no electricity, much less computers and internet! What will be your excuse? If Shehu would confront Bawa Jan-Gwarzo, the legendary tyrannical ruler of Hausa States, and later he had to deal with Nafata, what will be your excuse today? To what future are you throwing your country if you continue to allow it to grope in the dark, as it were? If you should abdicate this responsibility, who would? To what use are you putting your knowledge if you can't solve the problems of this country? To what use are you putting your IT network connections that allow you to communicate with millions of people in just seconds? What would you want to be remembered for? For coming and seeing and doing nothing? Or for aiding and abating, even if inadvertently? Permit me to ask you once again, but for the last time, where is your conscience?

I thank you for listening.

**To recapitulate**, this paper has tried to draw attention to the inextricable link between knowledge and governance and the urgent need to make our governance be informed by

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<sup>30</sup>A. Smith, 'The Contemporary Significance of the Academic Ideals of the Sokoto Jihad.' In Y. B. Usman Ed., *Studies in the History of the Sokoto Caliphate: The Sokoto Seminar Papers*, Zaria, ABU, 1979. P244.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid P245.

knowledge. In the competitive environment of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, where knowledge is the greatest capital, this is the only way to survive and thrive. At the moment, this link is dangerously weak, and it puts our future in jeopardy. Worse still, our political culture is not only driven by ignorance but it is also anti-knowledge. We have got to salvage our future by finding ways to make our universities become not only relevant but at the center of our development. This may look like a tall order. Perhaps it is, but our future is contingent on our ability to restore the primacy of knowledge in governance. We may have to start by dusting our idea of a university and making scholars to return to the front where they become the conscience of their society and take the intellectual leadership and determine the direction of our society. The alternative is a continuous degeneration and decay in our scientific and social thinking, which will inevitably lead to the decomposition and extinction of our society. The choices we make today will determine which direction the country moves. May we have the courage to make the right choices.