

UNIVERSITIES ON THE MOVE

The African University in Development by Asavia Wandira (Ravan Press)

Reviewed by Colin Gardner

In the world at large, the last thirty years or so have been years of incredible change. It is difficult to believe that there has ever before been a period in which so many shattering things have happened — and I'm thinking not so much of sharply-defined events (though there have been plenty of those) as of psychological developments and socio-political evolutions. Established empires and patterns of control have subsided or crumbled, new superpowers have reared up, but, most important, hundreds of millions of people have begun, under the leadership of their politicians and intellectuals, to view themselves with a new kind of self-consciousness and to assert themselves with unprecedented vigour. For most individual developing nations, as far as real growth and progress are concerned, the steps that have been taken so far may seem small; but for mankind as a whole the very initiation of the new humanizing process has been a giant stride. Despite the confusions and anxieties and enmities of the past three decades, it has been, in many respects, a wonderful era.

Meanwhile, back at home, we have just celebrated — what? Thirty years of National Party rule. Of course there have been some minor changes here too: our rulers may be moles, but they can't take us all down so far beneath the surface that we are unable even to hear what is going on in the normal world of the daylight. But the epoch has been a disaster. The powers-that-be have tried to resist all the creative currents that are transforming the rest of the world. The only alterations that have been made willingly have been in the safe realm of terminology . . .

But, to return to what it is tempting to call the real world, a period of rapid change has made people aware that institutions which the Western World had got into the habit of regarding as more-or-less static may in fact be — indeed should be — mobile, flexible, malleable. One such institution is the university. And a continent which has seen a considerable amount of psychological and sociological change is Africa (I exclude South Africa, though of course the majority of its people have *felt* with the times even if they haven't been allowed to move with them).

Professor Wandira's book is very precisely named: it is called *The African University in Development*. What the title suggests is both the development of the African university and the relationship between the developing university and the developing country which it is its task to serve and, indirectly, to help guide.

The book tells us a good deal about the history of university institutions in Africa. It then treats fairly fully recent and present developments and problems within African universities: the tensions between national concerns and

international reputation, between traditional academic values and various kinds of experimentation, between the private interests and sensibilities of staff-members and the complex pressures brought about by their position in the university and in society. Professor Wandira deals most imaginatively and wisely with these conflicts and with such questions as the localization of staffs, the partial Africanization of syllabuses, evaluating and maintaining standards, budgeting when there is little money available, and making administrative decisions in completely new circumstances.

Many of the challenges and problems that African universities are facing are different — too different, alas — from those that South African universities have confronted or have been allowed to confront. Our universities (both "white" and "black") are desperately attempting to maintain or generate some validity within the cool twilight atmosphere of a prison. Universities in the rest of Africa are creating and sustaining their being and their meaning in the warm but bracing air of a new cultural reality. Professor Wandira's book gives one a vivid sense of the quality of the best minds that are at work on the issues that he discusses. Of course it would be wrong to romanticize the advantages of free Africa. Universities there find themselves, from time to time, in the midst of every sort of social and political difficulty. In fact Professor Wandira, who becomes for the reader of this book a symbol as well as a proponent of intelligent patient optimism has himself experienced some of the vicissitudes occasionally produced in the new Africa. He is now Professor of Education at the University College of Swaziland, but he was "for a brief but momentous period" (as the dustjacket modestly puts it) Vice-Chancellor of Makerere University in Uganda. But then again the actions of President Amin are not typical of Africa.

The most striking feature of Professor Wandira's book is his view of the African university's specific role in the development of the country that it serves. He believes that, though it must maintain the traditional functions of teaching and research, the African university must concern itself with the intellectual and cultural stimulation of the whole community. It must be committed to extension work, adult education, part-time courses, correspondence tuition, refresher conferences, and so on. Indeed the author believes that a member of staff at a university in Africa has weighty responsibilities:

"In the selection of staff, universities tend to be guided by academic achievement and to play down the kind of man the academic is himself. Of course, members of society who do not attend his lectures or understand the sophistication of his subject, will not hesitate to judge the academic by the kind of man he is. They will

ask: 'Does he understand other men?' 'Is he devoted to his duty?' 'Is he duty-minded?' 'Does he drink?' 'If so, how much?' 'Does he dress properly?' 'Is he corrupting our youth?' 'Can he change youth in the right direction?' But how many appointments boards put these questions in the forefront of selection procedures? Many ignore the fact that if leadership in a situation of change demands that academic leaders should be sensitised to the demands and discipline of change, if there is no getting away from the censor of society upon the most educated and better paid sectors of the community, then university teachers must not only be good managers of the learning processes, they will have to be exemplary managers of their own lives and of public affairs committed to their care. The more senior the academic, the greater his responsibility in this respect. When he attends committees outside university or joins with other men in voluntary work, he will be expected by the community outside the university to show 'correct' attitudes and values and a sensitivity to the great issues of his time. To this he must add exceptional ability as a committee man, a good understanding of public business and leadership in the solution of problems. Though administration may not be his speciality, failure to administer a committee or a public service agency committed to his care will produce the most severe criticism, Why, it will be asked, should men of so much learning fail to grasp the most elementary of official routine and public procedures? Sensitising academics to the values and worrying issues of their time is thus not enough for their training. They must be good managers of change as well as upright men. The excellence of the academic cannot be limited to his speciality or to purely university tasks. It must extend to all tasks which society may increasingly call upon him to perform as well as to the kind of life he leads.

The question that must be asked is whether present-day official conceptions of the job of an academic are sufficiently elastic to include these extra-curricular demands in a developing country." (pp. 111-112)

That in my view is a most interesting passage. I am a little

worried by the occasional suggestion that public opinion could become important in the wrong kind of way ("Does he dress properly?") or that, worse, the political powers might wish to exert too great a pressure on academic thought ("he will be expected by the community outside the university to show 'correct' attitudes and values . . ."). But the main thrust of the statement seems to me to be excellent: a really dedicated university staff-member should be, particularly in a developing country, a person who is constantly aware of the relationship between his specifically academic concerns and the whole life of the surrounding society.

And that is true also – or should as far as possible be made to be true – of South Africa. So is Professor Wandira's nicely balanced final paragraph:

"This discussion leads to one final conclusion. In seeking an identity which can be developed by Africa itself, the African university seeks those qualities, structures and concerns which will distinguish it from other universities and will better prepare it for service to its own continent. In asserting fellowship with other universities, however, the African university identifies itself with abiding concerns that transcend both time and space. The general and the particular thus remain inextricably interwoven at the centre of African university development. The dilemma of creating relevant models for African university development therefore lies in the difficulties of reconciling the legitimate but particularistic concerns of society with the desirable but universalistic perspectives of the genius of the world university community. The identity of the African university in development will depend on the balance it can, from time to time, strike between the particularistic and universalistic tendencies of its continent. In seeking that balance, the African university can learn from times gone by and from other universities and should, in turn, contribute to the common pool of knowledge those concepts of the university in development which it has found to be of lasting worth."□

SACHED TRUST

Commentary by Peter Brown

During May Mr David Adler, executive director of the South African College for Higher Education, and Mr Clive Nettleton, director of its newspaper programme, were each banned for five years. Although other members of the SACHED staff have been detained their detentions seem to be related to their activities in other organisations. In the case of Mr Adler and Mr Nettleton the bannings are almost certainly directly related to their SACHED work. What is it about SACHED that might make the Government want to do this? SACHED was established in 1958 to try to meet the problems, it was felt, would face many black students when admission to them to the "open" universities (Wits' Capetown and Natal) was prohibited by government legislation. It was anticipated that there would be a considerable number of black students who would be unwilling or unable (perhaps because their agitation against the closing of these universities made them "undesirable" in the eyes of the admitting authorities) to get into the

new ethnic "tribal" colleges. In order to meet the needs of such students and others who might be excluded from or unwilling to participate in the lower levels of the Bantu Education system, SACHED was set up to provide courses which would lead to degrees obtained by correspondence with the University of London. It continued to work to this end for twelve years. By the late 1960s however it had become clear that the tying of courses to the University of London was not satisfactory. Students had to take A Levels before they could start their courses and the result was that it took years to get a degree and, not surprisingly, a great many people dropped out before they had qualified. Students began to ask why they couldn't be helped to qualify through the University of South Africa (UNISA) instead of London. And so, according to the latest Annual Report of the SACHED Trust, "It was decided that it would be more useful to switch the course to helping these students. From that time bursaries were given to UNISA