Visiting Africa via an African University

Carol Sicherman has written a most intriguing history of Makerere University that will enhance perceptions of African universities generally and stir the memories of academics who have taught and done research there (of whom this reviewer is one: during the years 1963, 1971-72, and 1997-98 when I was interviewed by Sicherman). The title is especially intriguing because it raises several potentially philosophical questions. How does one interpret the title *Becoming an African University*? Does it mean “westernizing” African education, or “africanizing” university education, or “globalizing” African education? The author did not set out to answer such questions; indeed, she raises similar possibilities but “does not pretend to answer them” (p. 5) although she approaches them indirectly. Nevertheless she has produced a landmark study filled with numerous details, comparative evidence about other African universities, and careful analysis of several case studies to illustrate Makerere’s evolving quality and character. This careful and thoughtful analysis traces Makerere’s historical evolution from a British-dominated institution, through its transition to an African-based one which also suffered through Uganda’s travails during the Idi Amin era, and its ultimate emergence as an African university with its faculty responding to Uganda’s unique educational needs. In short, one finds that Makerere is rooted in the continent’s institutional evolutionary development and is an example of coping with issues—such as curriculum development and limited finances—which all such educational institutions historically face. Readers will find that appendix 1, “Uganda: A Selective Chronology” (pp. 323-330), and appendix 2, “Makerere: A Selective Chronology” (pp. 331-342), serve as useful reference tools to trace this evolution. The initial stage of Makerere’s historical development begins in 1922 when colonial agencies established a technical school designed to provide vocational training; a decade later preparation for the Cambridge School Certificate was added. Courses promoting professional training in fields such as teacher training, medical and veterinary services, and agriculture were gradually added; and the emergence of enduring personalities such as Dr. Bernard de Bunsen (administration) and Margaret Macpherson (faculty) promoted enduring academic substance. In 1937 the administration moved toward higher education, and by 1949 Makerere became a University College attached to the University of London and included students from all of the East African States. During the early 1950s women were admitted, administrative and residential halls were constructed, and British expatriates dominated the academic environment. In the early 1960s there was a gradual transition as African faculty and administrators—such as Ali Mazrui (faculty) and Yusufu K. Lule (administration)—replaced British officials as leaders, while basic patterns of behavior evolved in response to changing circumstances, e.g., the importance of ethnic identity, student unrest during periods of crisis or dissatisfaction, and the search for funds and donors to sustain the university. Although the level and intensity of these characteristics have changed over time they remain defining characteristics of Makerere. Meanwhile, the 1960s also reflected a transition in curriculum and teaching methods, and saw the development of interdisciplinary studies. These trends were characterized by efforts to replace Eurocentric, western academic standards...
of evidence and practices with locally relevant types of evidence; while this did not mean the end of teaching Western standards or methods, it brought Ugandan and African materials to the forefront. Africanized history courses replaced the history of European colonial activities, oral history was emphasized as a source of evidence, applied research projects were used to teach and develop social-welfare policy, and religious studies explored local practices and ceremonies. While changes of this nature were not without scholarly problems they stimulated the evolutionary process of Africanizing Makerere’s educational function, making it more relevant to Uganda’s cultural patterns. Sicherman’s frequent references to curricular practices at the University of Dar es Salaam, which were developed de novo by committed “leftwing expatriates” (p. 52) who produced the curriculum in the early 1960s, illustrate the sharp contrast with Makerere’s initial highlighting of British administrative behavior which unwittingly tended to promote notions of white racial superiority. The Apolo Milton Obote and Idi Amin dictatorial regimes from 1970 to 1986 represented different types of instability and repression but had essentially similar negative results. This was especially true during Amin’s era when Uganda’s citizens—especially Makerere’s students and staff—were often abducted and killed. This led to a “brain drain” which seriously damaged its education resources and curriculum, effectively rolling back the advances of the 1960s and limiting recovery in the 1980s. Instability and economic decline hampered departments and functions—from the library to the dormitories—while undergraduate life became a series of sacrifices and deprivations. Archival material in the library disappeared, stolen not for its historical value but for use as paper in shops to wrap meat and vegetables. Lack of funds meant that current issues of journals and books were not purchased. Buildings were neglected and fell into disrepair. The early 1980s were marked by a decline in international assistance from donors and agencies, yet the dream of a special educational institution did not die. The beginning of Yoweri Museveni’s regime was one of hopefulness and change. Makerere expanded its admissions, yet low salaries resulted in the decline of ethical and professional behavior; modernization of technology such as computers began and the curriculum was expanded to include evening courses for part-time students, while the number of private students soon exceeded sponsored ones. Departments began to offer skill-based courses, such as secretarial studies, while some provided income-producing consultancy services. Legal studies expanded into various categories such as commercial law, specializations in human rights evolved into graduate divisions that promoted internships with international agencies, and staff development programs produced faculty, which began to reverse the brain drain. But the economic situation did not improve and ethnicity remains a divisive factor, as Museveni gradually became more authoritarian with results similar to the Amin era. In short, it was a time of mixed results. To illustrate Makerere’s educational development Sicherman offers five cases studies of professional development.

(1) The medical school, from its developing years of 1922-1971, through the era of decline 1971-1976 with special emphasis on the consequences of the Amin atrocities, and its gradual recovery and attention to AIDS and promoting public health;

(2) The art school, as it evolved from its modest beginnings in 1937 to the gradual promotion of African traditions and behavior, depicting changing circumstances (such as the poverty of the times) and the variety of African art forms and factors, which minimized its professional development capability but did not dim its authenticity;

(3) Agriculture, initially introduced in 1924. It gradually developed as a degree program that evolved through elementary origins, adapting Western methods to African needs, through the instabilities of the Obote and Amin eras, and gradual recovery; it remains affected by gender differences and a gulf between theory and practice.

(4) Libraries, which today represent an excellent collection but began without a specific building until 1959, endured years of staffing problems and minimal professional prestige, suffered substantive losses during the Amin era, and gradually developed certificate programs to train librarians.

(5) Women and the rise of Women and Gender Studies, which began in 1991 with minimal resources and an overworked faculty of committed activists but which has produced an original, Africa-centered curriculum that links theory and practice, attracts international support, and represents one of the most respected programs in its field. Having dealt with the evolution of education issues, and illustrated it with specific case studies, Sicherman turns to three basic themes of administrative experience: relationships with Ugandan administrations, staff development, and public relations. The key factor of the first issue, government-university relationships, is essentially the limited autonomy of the university, initially with respect to curriculum, admissions, appoint-
ments, and financial control by colonial officials, and which eventually extended to aspects of surveillance and control by various Ugandan administrations over time. This affected the independence of faculty and students alike, especially in 1976 during the Amin era. Controls over financing and governance were somewhat minimized during the 1990s although these issues were never resolved, and Makerere has never achieved its desired level of academic freedom. As a second factor of administrative practices a major issue was staff development including recruitment and Africanization of faculty and curriculum. Historically this factor affected expatriates, their departure and African replacements, as well as the uncertainties of the Amin era; although the issue of promoting and protecting intellectual development was eased somewhat during the 1990s this issue too remains unresolved. Finally a combination of functions, which can be described as “beyond the Ivory Tower,” affect extramural courses, providing educational opportunities for local teachers to improve their training and promoting independent institutes, such as the East African Institute of Social Research, each of which enhance Makerere’s status but require a level of academic independence and financial support. Each of these administrative functions followed the historical patterns of professional development. Makerere has entered its current era coping with similar combinations of Africanization and globalization issues: increasingly expensive administrative costs, student resistance to rising fees, the brain drain, resolving concerns about expanding student enrollment and course offerings, and appeals from President Museveni to seek peaceful solution to its various problems. Sicherman concludes with a brief commentary regarding current conditions as of 2003, suggesting that Makerere “become more flexible in standards and less expensive to run” but diplomatically adds: “Whether such a goal is desirable is for the stakeholders to determine” (p. 319). While it may seem obvious in hindsight, a crucial lesson one may draw from Sicherman’s analysis of Makerere’s history is the importance of the origins of African universities and curriculums. The comparative evidence she offers in the text as well as numerous footnotes about various African universities, particularly the University of Dar es Salaam, illustrate the importance of African origins and initiatives in contrast to Makerere’s early British influence that in many respects remains as a significant factor with positive as well as negative impacts. Another crucial factor is Makerere’s dependence on the donor community, an unavoidable condition in a country whose minimal national economy and political uncertainty—as well as its status on the Failed States Index of 2007 ranking it 15th among 177 countries—limits its capacity to define its goals and methods.[1] Yet Makerere’s progress through eras of British domination and unstable government, search for African identity, survival through lengthy dictatorial regimes, donor dependence, student enrollments and defiance, and economic deprivation, have produced a buoyant collection of faculty and administrators who are determined to serve and advance their educational goals.

Readers interested in other analyses of Makerere’s status may be interested in David Court’s Financing Higher Education in Africa: Makerere, the Quiet Revolution (1999) or Nakanyike Musisi and Nansozi Muwanga’s Makerere University in Transition 1993-2000 (2006).

But given the breadth and originality of Sicherman’s analysis, which is based on nearly 900 bibliographic citations, nearly 100 interviews, and searches in numerous archives in Uganda, Great Britain, and the United States, this is a remarkable history of a remarkable university.

Note
