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Anticipating American University Education as an African:
1896-1926

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Thesis: Documentation of African students' experiences in the U.S. from 1896 to 1926 indicates that despite the variation in the students' identities, they expressed many of the same reasons for disdaining or idealizing one type of American college over the other.

Apart from their shared identity as period Broadway musicals, Schönberg's *Miss Saigon*, Ahrens and Flaherty's *Ragtime*, and Yeston's *Titanic* might appear to have scarcely anything in common. The first concentrates on a liaison between a G.I. and a Vietnamese woman in late-1970s Saigon, while the second is a romp through turn-of-the-century America and the third is the story of an ocean liner's doomed maiden voyage. This tremendous plot variation allows spectators to easily distinguish between the musicals, but few can deny that at least one quality unifies them: The presence of minor characters who immigrate to the United States with the intent of becoming millionaires overnight.¹ Considering that stage musicals have historically portrayed immigrants as romantics who imagine an America where anyone can get rich through luck alone, many people who have devoted their lives to the performing arts might be surprised to learn that by the late-nineteenth century, Africans were arriving in the U.S. specifically to obtain undergraduate degrees.² This is not to say that all African immigrants shunned capitalism and solely craved engagement with textbooks. Rather, early in their academic careers in the U.S., they often demonstrated an awareness of financial success as something that can only be achieved through a college or university education. According to sundry journal articles and primary readings, this awareness appeared pervasive amongst African students studying in the U.S. from Kwegyir Aggrey's 1896 enrollment at Livingstone College in North Carolina through Nnamdi Azikiwe's first term at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania nearly thirty years later (Odenyo, p. 1-4; Joanes-Quartey, p. 50).³

As early as 1873, a small but steady number of Africans began arriving in the States to be trained as Christian missionaries at Fisk, Lincoln, and other historic black colleges and

¹ The ambitious immigrants in the aforementioned musicals include a Latvian immigrant who transforms his silhouette craft into a career in filmmaking (*Ragtime*), a Vietnamese engineer whose ambitions range from being able to see Fred Astaire perform on stage nightly to running a pornography ring (*Miss Saigon*), and various third-class passengers crossing the Atlantic Ocean in April of 1912 (*Titanic*).

² Throughout this document, "Africans" exclusively refers to black Africans.

³ James Emman Kwegyir Aggrey, 1875-1927, Ghana-born educator and missionary. Nnamdi Azikiwe, 1904-1996, Nigerian statesmen and president (served 1963-66).

universities (Williams, p. 229).⁴ They had been recruited by both black and white Americans specifically so that they could learn the Gospel in a Christian atmosphere before returning to Africa, where their recruiters expected them to devote the remainder of their lives to spreading the word of Christ (King, 1971, p. 7; Williams, p. 230). Over three quarters of a century would pass before Americans – seeking to reduce African enrollment rates in European schools during the Cold War – advertised study abroad in the U.S. to thousands of Africans without stressing theology (Odenyo, p. 8-10). The 1870s and 1880s were therefore notable for the influence of Christianity on African enrollment in HBCUs, whereas the 1960s and 1970s can be identified as decades when African enrollment rates in predominantly-white American colleges significantly increased due in large part to the U.S. government’s perception of Cold War threats.⁵

Greater variety in Africans’ [documented] motivations for pursuing undergraduate education in the U.S. can be found in the aforementioned period of 1896 to 1926, when major industrial and technological developments made the U.S. seem an ideal country at which to consider studying if nothing else did. More interestingly, however, that period is noted for the flowering of African student rhetoric for and against enrollment in HBCUs.⁶ Historians may never know the precise number of African students who were enrolled in historic black and predominantly white American colleges during this period, as so few colleges and universities kept statistics on the national origins of their students, but documentation of many of these students’ experiences before and during their stay in the United States provides ample insight into why they might have idealized HBCUs over predominantly white colleges and vice versa (Slater, 1994, p. 48; Slater, 1996, p. 73-74). In contemplating the African students’ reasoning, a historian should hesitate to generalize about why these students pursued education in the U.S. Differences in age, nationality and other aspects of identity could have made two Africans have

⁴ In the context of this document, “historic black colleges and universities” refers to schools that are currently identified as HBCUs but may have just been known as predominantly black colleges between 1896 and 1926.

⁵ In particular, the U.S. government sought to compete with Russia’s efforts to recruit Africans for its colleges and universities.

⁶ It should be noted that most Africans pursuing undergraduate degrees in the United States from 1896 to 1926 were male. Most were also enrolled at HBCUs even if they dreamed of studying at Harvard and Yale.

dissimilar principle reasons for coming to the U.S. to study.⁷ Nevertheless, documentation of African students' experiences in the U.S. from 1896 to 1926 indicates that despite the variation in the students' identities, they expressed many of the same reasons for disdaining or idealizing one type of American college over the other.

During that thirty year period, one of the major factors guiding some African students' favor toward HBCUs appears to have been their perception that pursuing education at one would be easier for them than pursuing education at a predominantly white college or university. This perception was a reality with regard to admissions. A member of the Tuskegee Institute's class of 1916 once reflected that

Anybody who had any ability at all could get into Tuskegee Institute. And they had all stages all [the] way down to Sub-C Prep. If you came to Tuskegee with the will to do, but didn't have the money with which to do...and didn't even have a trade, they'd put you in the C Prep Class until you were sure of what you had. . . . In the Sub-C Prep you could know nothing and having nothing. You could come and work a day and go to school a day and learn. And only until they found out that the cases were impossible were they sent away. In some cases they kept them here working to get along as best they could until they could qualify (Ralston, p. 77).

Indeed, an African applying to Tuskegee between 1896 and 1926 would have been far more likely to gain admission than one applying to Columbia University in New York City or a state institution such as the University of California at Berkeley (Slater, 1996, p. 73). This helps to explain why social scientists have taken a special interest in recording the histories of the first black undergraduates at Ivy League and state universities (see Slater, 1994; Slater, 1996; Slater,

⁷ For example, strict bans on education in Nigeria or Uganda might drive a black resident to consider boarding a ship as a stowaway in order to pursue an American education. Other African countries might not have similar conditions for one to desperately seek study abroad opportunities.

1996-98). With black matriculation at predominantly white colleges and universities low prior to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, an African or African-American could earn a place in history strictly by virtue of being awarded the college or university's first degree for a black student (Slater, 1994, p. 48). Even then, a historian would have to question whether the alumni were open about their blackness as students or whether they passed for white throughout their undergraduate careers (Slater, 1994, p. 47).⁸ Gaining admission to Hampton or Tuskegee could thus be a source of pride but not a great feat in itself, especially considering that it was not extraordinary for an illiterate black student to gain admission. Mohammed Jama, a Swahili who dropped out of Tuskegee in 1917, mused that he had been admitted despite barely being able to read or write (King, 1971, p. 2).

Apparently, Tuskegee's emphasis on working with the soil made literacy skills negligible in admissions decisions. The institute entered the imagination of African students like no other between the 1890s and the 1920s. Alfred Bitini Xuma, a member of Tuskegee's class of 1916 and a leader of the African National Congress in the 1920s and 1930s, described Tuskegee as an institute that would allow students to easily work part-time to pay for their education or provide income (Ralston, p. 75-77). He might have also credited it and other historic black colleges with guaranteeing African students a better social life than predominantly white colleges, for at an HBCU, one could at least live and dine with ones classmates.⁹ Predominantly white colleges were noted for requiring black students to live and dine alone in order to avoid offending their white classmates (Little, p. 131; Slater, 1996, p. 75-83). In such a hostile and isolating environment, it would have been difficult for an African student at a predominantly white American college to feel the sense of brotherhood that he might have valued in Africa (Prince

⁸ One of the more extraordinary cases of a black student surreptitiously attending a predominantly white college occurred in the 1890s. Anita Hemmings had graduated from Vassar in 1897, a time when the college refused to admit black students. Robert Bruce Slater writes that "when she declared her race after graduation, the college administration expressed outrage at the deception but did not rescind her degree (1994, p. 48)."

⁹ De facto segregation in both the North and the South relegated students of color [at predominantly white colleges and universities] to off-campus housing and isolated areas of classrooms.

Nyabongo, p. 285-286). HBCUs therefore seemed more ideal to some African students than predominantly white colleges both in terms of accessibility and social atmosphere.

Still, a number of African students expressed a loathing for HBCUs. This was partially because HBCUs offered fewer degree programs than predominantly white colleges, which – in the students’ minds – meant that HBCUs were intellectually inferior to predominantly white colleges (Ojiaku & Ulansky, p. 383; Ralston, p. 78). However, many African students were also wary of HBCUs because they anticipated strained relations with African-Americans there. African students would write to their families with horror stories about their treatment by African-Americans, and as these stories spread, HBCUs acquired a reputation in Africa for poor ethnic relations. In 1891, George Peabody – a Lincoln University student and son of a Liberian prince – complained that his African-American classmates resented him and other African students because “we are free men and not freed men (Williams, p. 234).” His assertion that Africans’ not wearing the stigma of slavery earned them the enmity of African-American students would be echoed by other African students for at least eight more decades (Odenyo, p. 86).¹⁰ The consensus among African-American students seemed to be that African students received better treatment than them by local whites [around HBCU campuses] because the whites assumed that the Africans carried no grudge about slavery, and were therefore less threatening than African-American students whose parents and grandparents had been slaves (p. 87).

African students also often found that African-American students perpetuated negative stereotypes about Africa, such as that the country was a “Dark Continent” inhabited by “savage cannibals” that only knew pagan religions (Williams, p. 233). One Liberian student at Lincoln University wrote to the *Washington Bee* that a “mass of misrepresentation about Africa” prejudiced “the American Negro public against their brethren in Africa (p. 233).” Kwegyir Aggrey, too, confirmed that while he was a student at Livingstone College in the late 1890s, the

¹⁰ Odenyo’s chart and table-based analyses of African and African-American student relations in the latter half of the twentieth century are particularly relevant in this respect.

African-American students “looked at him like a wild man from the woods – eloquent and intellectual but really a reclaimed savage (Odenyo, p. iv).” Shared skin color was evidently not always just cause for African and African-American students to form a bond. African students at HBCUs were often spurned for their “general unlikeness to the other students,” and haughty “airs” of superiority that might have emanated from their homeland identities as royalty or men at the top rung of a social ladder (Odenyo, p. v; Williams, p. 235). Consequently, it seemed fair for some of them conclude that demonstrating humility and contempt for African “heathenism” was what it took to earn the respect of their African-American classmates (Azikiwe, 1937, p. 205; Williams, p. 236-239). Playing audience to this conclusion, some African students at HBCUs – including Edward Mayfield Boyle, a Sierra Leonian at Alabama Normal Institute around the turn of the century – felt that their strong sense of pride was not worth sacrificing in favor of studying among African-Americans (Williams, p. 237). Feelings such as Boyle’s were only intensified in the late 1910s and 1920s, when fetishizing African culture as wild and primitive was popular even in African-American communities throughout the United States (King, 1970, p. 16).

Of course, not every African student viewed African-Americans as a dangerous affront to Motherland culture. Some saw attending an HBCU as an opportunity to challenge the stereotypes they knew African-Americans held about Africa, while others believed that African culture was similar to African-American culture in a medley of ways – especially with regard to alleged parallels between the initiation rituals of African tribes and those of African-American fraternities (King, 1970, p. 16; Kuyk, p. 568; Ralston, p. 76; Williams, p. 228-229).¹¹ From the 1890s through the first half of the twentieth century, some African students could also claim a kinship with African-Americans because they had all probably grown up hearing the maxim “never trust a white man (Drake, p. 261).” Others were convinced that although African-

¹¹ Kuyk affirms that “structural parallels occurring within initial rituals of both American and African groups include patterns of notification, of payment, and of ceremonies of oath-taking, self-improvement, ‘having money,’ and dedication (p. 568).”

Americans perpetuated negative stereotypes about Africans, “pseudo-scientists” in the white race were largely responsible for the development of these stereotypes (Azikiwe, 1934, p. 150; Prince Nyabongo, p. 279-280).¹² Moreover, these pseudo-scientists were even more likely to be found teaching at predominantly white colleges in America than at HBCUs (Berman, p. 122-132; Sagini, p. 198-199; Slater, 1993, p. 67). It was therefore possible to make a valid argument for and against HBCUs with regard to the positioning of African students on campus in relation to their African-American counterparts. Yet while belief in the biological and cultural inferiority of Africans might have been more prevalent at predominantly white colleges than at HBCUs, to some Africans, the likelihood that those beliefs might also be perpetuated by their African-American “brethren” provided cause to delay enrollment at HBCUs. The derision of ones brethren could sting more than contempt by outsiders.

Arguably, the African students’ sense of a brotherhood beyond national boundaries was reflected in their tendency to express an interest in earning degrees from schools that had been commended by WEB DuBois, Marcus Garvey, Booker T. Washington and other leadership figures that they admired. These leadership figures could easily influence the status that certain HBCUs and predominantly white colleges might hold in an African student’s imagination. Washington was cited more frequently than anyone else as a source of inspiration for African students’ decisions to attend HBCUs in the United States between the turn of the century and the 1920s. By the late-nineteenth century, he had “already established that Africans and Afro-Americans are alike in certain respects and that the education that was being given to Black Americans in the South was also suitable for African-Americans in the Mother Country (Marah, p. 461).” Institutions modeled after Tuskegee – such as John Dube’s Zulu Christian Industrial

¹² Nyabongo wrote that “when I was at Oxford, my fellow undergraduates and I used to take much pleasure in pursuing the orientation of the minds of the pseudo-scientists and philosophers who quite gallantly specialize in the study of Africa and African people. These overnight authorities on Africans are the least qualified to discuss African affairs, but they contrive – and at times they do succeed – in patting the blacks on the shoulders and addressing the world, say: ‘I understand these fellows; you may not think so, but they too are human beings, just as are we; though a little below us in normal intelligence.’” Azikiwe likewise wrote of the pseudo-scientists that “The fact that they are performing a mission of mercy to ‘down-trodden and backward children of nature’ bolsters their fixations of arrogance and pride, and they unconsciously become evangelists of the myth of racial inferiority.”

School – consequently began appearing in African countries around the turn of the century (Berman, p. 294; Williams, p. 241).¹³ Nevertheless, some Africans thought that an American degree would invite better career opportunities throughout their lives than one earned in Africa, a country abhorred by outsiders for its “heathen” ways (Azikiwe, 1937, p. 205). In accordance with this, a considerable portion of African students intent upon studying in the United States applied to Tuskegee. Booker T. Washington could be understood as a definite influence on these students’ matriculation at Tuskegee by 1912, when his name regularly appeared in both black and white South African newspapers during Tuskegee’s International Negro Conference (Ralston, p. 75). Nnamdi Azikiwe would later claim to have been terribly impressed by Washington’s slogan “learn by doing” when he decided to attend college in the United States (p. 78). However, he primarily attributed his enrollment at an HBCU to Kwegyir Aggrey and Marcus Garvey (Jones-Quartey, p. 50). Aggrey had attended an HBCU, Livingstone College in North Carolina, and inspired Azikiwe with his biography and his visit to Nigeria in the 1920s (King, 1970, p. 28; Jones-Quartey, p. 50). Garvey, a man who often spoke warmly of the “Tuskegee spirit,” also inspired Azikiwe to attend an HBCU with his slogan “One God, one aim, one destiny (Jones-Quartey, p. 50).” Azikiwe essentially felt that if his role models were staunch proponents of black pride, then it would be sensible for him to attend a predominantly black college or university if he was to study in the U.S. He therefore enrolled at Lincoln University in 1925 (Williams, p. 229; Ojiaku & Ulansky, p. 382).

The following decade, he would return to West Africa and explicitly encourage a generation of Nigerians to attend HBCUs by ensuring their maritime voyage into the United States for education at Howard and Lincoln (Ojiaku & Ulansky, p. 384).¹⁴ Like Azikiwe, many other Africans attributed their decisions to study at HBCUs in the 1920s to their respect for Marcus Garvey and his Pan-African beliefs. By March 1922, Governor Coryndon of Uganda had grown so fearful of Ugandans responding to Garvey’s “Tuskegee spirit” by enrolling at an

¹³ John Dube, African nationalist, 1871-1946.

¹⁴ Twelve Nigerians sailed to the United States in 1938 with the aid of Azikiwe.

HBCU that he pressured the Colonial Office into blocking all passports for Ugandans attempting to travel to the American South (King, 1970, p. 17). His fear appeared validated by the spread of Garveyism in the *Negro World* and the mention of Tuskegee in the same publication – although Garvey’s association with HBCUs was far less substantial than that of other leadership figures such as Booker T. Washington (p. 16-18). DuBois’ influence should have disturbed Coryndon more, considering that African students inspired by him came to the U.S. to pursue degrees at HBCUs like Fisk – DuBois alma mater – but expressed an interest in transferring to Ivy League universities and predominantly-white liberal arts colleges after encountering DuBois and other members of the “Negro intelligentsia” up close (p. 24, 27). Their interactions with DuBois or with American adherents of DuBois evidently confirmed for them that it was DuBois’ graduate alma mater, Harvard, that more likely promoted his rise to prominence (Marah, p. 463; Slater, 1994, p. 49). They consequently aspired to attend schools such as Cornell and Columbia in the hopes that an Ivy League degree might increase their chances of rising to financial or political prominence (King, 1970, p. 27).

It is quite possible that both alumni and faculty of HBCUs who were from Africa – including Mama Nkomo, a South African-educated Rhodesian teaching history at Tuskegee in the 1920s, and Alfred B. Xuma, a Tuskegee student in the 1920s – might have successfully stressed the value of coming to an American HBCU to friends, family and associates in Africa (Ralston, p. 73; King, 1970, p. 19-25). Mohammed Jama of East Africa even identified the good word of Teddy Roosevelt about Tuskegee as one of his prime motivations to attend the Alabama institute in 1915 (King, 1971, p.1).¹⁵ Nonetheless, one can hardly help wondering what he might have thought of predominantly white colleges had he heard that Pixley ka Isaka Seme of Zululand graduated with honors from Columbia University only nine years earlier (Ralston, p. 74; Slater, 1994, p. 52).¹⁶ The influence that American college alumni and leadership figures

¹⁵ Jama’s father had been the manservant of Roosevelt’s son, Kermit. In 1909, Roosevelt promised Jama’s father that if Jama came to the United States, he would have the opportunity to be educated at Tuskegee.

¹⁶ Pixley ka Isaka Seme, African nationalist, 1882-1951.

could have exerted over African students' attitudes toward HBCUs and predominantly white colleges should not be underestimated.

Closely related to this was the belief [of countless Africans pursuing undergraduate degrees in the United States] that predominantly white colleges might foster their sense of economic and political efficacy, while HBCUs would have the opposite effects (Ojiaku & Ulansky, p. 382). This belief was validated from the 1890s through the 1920s in sundry ways. First and foremost, there were definite similarities between the African institutions of higher learning that appeared around the turn of the century and America's historic black colleges – which, in the minds of many Africans preparing to study in the U.S. between 1895 and 1925, were best represented by Hampton and Tuskegee. The African institutions and the most popular HBCUs were usually rooted in the philosophy of *educational adaptation*, which justified agricultural or industrial education for black people on the [often-unspoken] grounds that it would help them learn to appreciate not having high-salaried, white collar jobs (King, 1970, p. 16; Merah, p. 463-64). The availability of agricultural education and absence of liberal arts education for blacks in Africa immediately appeared suspect to Africans. White men struck them as strangely supportive of programs based on educational adaptation (Berman, p. 156). Even when Governor Coryndon attempted to ban African passage to the U.S. South out of fear that Ugandans would be so politicized by an American education that they would reject submission to whites, a number of white educators and politicians – especially those involved in the Phelps-Stokes Commission – tried to persuade him to consider making Tuskegee an exception to the ban (King, 1970, p. 17).¹⁷ Their support for Tuskegee hardly went ignored by Africans. Nnamdi Azikiwe would one day write: “So long as the African would be content at menial tasks, and would not seek complete social, political, and economic equality with the Western world, he is deemed to be a ‘good’ fellow. But let him question the right to keep him in

¹⁷ The Phelps-Stokes Fund of 1911 “specified that the income from [Caroline Phelps Stokes’] bequest be used for the erection of tenement dwellings for the poor of New York City, as well as for educational work among North American Indians and Negroes in the United States and Africa (Berman, abstract p. 1).”

political and economic servitude, and let him strive to educate himself to the fundamentals of these modern problems, [and] he is immediately branded as an ‘agitator’ (Azikiwe, 1934, p. 146).” Azikiwe added that, “If [an African] were encouraged to study economics and banking, instead of farming alone, he might be able to ‘fix’ prices, too (p. 146).”

It was obvious to some Africans that educational adaptation programs in Africa and their American HBCU counterparts were intended to prevent them from challenging the status quo by pursuing careers in big business or politics. Furthermore, the limitations of education at Hampton, Tuskegee and similar African institutes were manifested in the poverty of many Africans who had been educated at those places. Hampton and Tuskegee alumni were not earning a “decent livelihood (p. 147-48).” Instead, they were returning to Africa to teach agriculture at secondary schools. A few days in the U.S. Deep South would prove to an African that HBCUs founded in educational adaptation were probably just preparing students for financial woes. As of 1917, 61% of black males in the South were farmers and laborers (Berman, p. 32). Receiving a college or university education that would prepare one for working with the land was made less enticing by this tangible reality. Whether an African intended to pursue a career in Africa or in the United States, Booker T. Washington appeared to be one of very few HBCU alumni that had truly risen to prominence. But of course, he rose to prominence by accommodating the interests of whites and allowing Tuskegee to become “the very citadel of white patronage (King, 1970, p. 25).”

Some Africans desiring an American education expressed awareness of the fact that much of the rhetoric in favor of HBCUs came from people who had either not attended one or ultimately received a degree from a predominantly white university (p. 26). Africans who were actually at HBCUs appeared to be dropping out at great rates and writing home about their desire to transfer (p. 26). This naturally appeared foreboding to Africans who were considering enrolling at one. Although Kwegyir Aggrey promoted HBCU education and – even more explicitly – educational adaptation, his articulate manner of speaking also swayed favor away

from HBCUs because some Africans assumed it to be a product of the literary education that he received from Columbia (p. 28).

Finally, common sense dictated to some Africans that if one expected to become politicized by American education, one should probably attend a university with respectable course offerings in political science (Azikiwe, 1934, p. 146; Azikiwe, 1937, p. 137). They knew that these course offerings were more likely to be found at [predominantly white] liberal arts colleges than at Tuskegee, a school that emphasized industrial education. On the other hand, the “institutional poverty, necessity of white patronage and racial discrimination” around black college campuses had the potential to politicize an African unfamiliar with America (King, 1970, p. 29). Regardless of their broad liberal arts course offerings, predominantly white colleges still posed the [aforementioned] threat of indoctrinating Africans with negative attitudes toward their culture perhaps even more than HBCUs (Marah, p. 464). Moreover, by generally refusing to hire black faculty, they could inadvertently dissuade Africans from expanding their horizons (Slater, 1998-99, p. 97). An African who saw only white individuals occupying those positions of authority might learn to think it futile to dream of acquiring one. In short, an African student’s sense of political efficacy could be promoted or tempered by both historic black and predominantly white colleges in the United States. He could rationalize choosing to attend one over the other due to “political issues” alone.

Considering the complex economic, political and social issues that factored into various African students’ idealization of one type of college for the other, it would be unwise to begin contemplating whether a predominantly black *or* white college was ultimately best for “the average African” during the period of 1896 and 1926. Romanticism of either type of institution could clearly prove disappointing and fallacious for African students, regardless of whether the academic and social demands of particular colleges overwhelmed them or left them feeling unchallenged. Mechanisms for a taxing life were in place at both predominantly black and white colleges. With this in mind, the most successful African students’ keys to making the best out of

American college life appear to have been maintaining a strong sense of its benefits, promoting an open dialogue about its drawbacks and ultimately understanding that college need not be the best four years of their lives if they truly intended to make a difference in the world, as Aggrey, Azikiwe, Seme, Xuma and innumerable others did.

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