

# Flashpoints and Flashdance: Students, Unions And Social Conscience in Bayero University Kano, 1966-1990<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

When Bayero University College was contemplated into being a full-fledged university in 1977, its founding philosophy was that

...overall, the basic guideline for the university is that whatever curriculum is developed must be inspired by the three constants of its environment: an Islamic culture, a time-tested commercial civilization and complex political community. Thus, whether in medicine or basic sciences, economics or geography, sociology or public administration, the starting point for our students needs to be the actual experience of this culture zone (BUK Academic Development Committee archives, Volume III, 1978 p. 397).

It is the university's adhesion to these "three constants" of its environment that moulded a conservative persona for it, coupled with its closely knit structure, appearing a times almost like a family unit than a diverse community. It is this persona that provided an interesting focus of the emergence of student union activities as facets of large international youth generational movements; raising against fellow students or against constituted authority.

Student unions in any college campus have always served two traditional purposes. The first is to provide a range of services to freshman entrants to college to enable them a more successful social transition from home to the beginnings of adult world, acquisition of personal responsibility and creation of a new social configuration. These functions are, naturally enough, available also for the returning students. The student unions do this through various

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1. I would like to thank Dr. Isa Alkali Abba for bringing my attention to some aspects of student unionism in Bayero in the mid 1980s. My gratitude also goes to Dr. Muhammadu Uba Adamu for providing me with insights about student union activities, of which he was an active member, between 1964 to 1968. The materials for the rest of this paperr were derived from my own observations as a student within the Nigerian university system in the mid 1970s. First published in Abba, I.A., Tsigu, I. A., and Adamu, A. U. (1994), ***Building The Citadel: Thirty Years of University Education in Kano, 1964-1994***. Kano, Nigeria: Bayero University Kano (The Vice-Chancellor's Office). First Published in 1994 by Bayero University Kano, Nigeria

clubs and societies, student fairs, and provision of a whole network of social activities where, at the end of the day, students can unwind. These counseling provisions normally complement whatever guidance and counseling services that the colleges provide in this regard.

The second function of student unions the world over is un-intentional; and that is serving as flashpoints of social conscience. It would seem that despite divergent religious, social and political ideologies in their predominant societies, students all over the world are united by common biological factors affecting transition from adolescence to adulthood with the common ground being the college environment which provides a readily available conduit for expression of newly acquired social freedom and conscientiousness. This often manifests itself in the evolution of often violent anti-establishment principles and practices leading to student protests and unrests. Most often these behaviors are not restricted to the college campuses, but spill over to the larger society leading to clashes with established authorities, and often death and destruction. Thus due to the colorful nature of student unrests in various social contexts, it is often too easy to ignore the actual functions of student unionism, and admit that it goes beyond organizing protests against the establishment.

Student involvement in political issues that go beyond the cope of providing welfare services is what often attracts analysis of student unionism as flashpoints of youth destructive behavior on campuses. Again it must be emphasized that such flashpoints are inevitably started by a select few, either genuinely motivated by the issues concerned, or manipulated behind the scenes by outside agents (of either the government or the opposition).

It would seem, however, that college freshman experience and the subsequent exposure to works by radical writers of whatever persuasion have a combined effect on students, leading to an emergent doctrinaire class with the desire of transforming the society through perceived democratic approaches.

Students' interpretation of the concept of social liberal democracy, even in democratic societies, has consistently served a starting point at which student radicals emerge. Thus the 1960s saw the emergence of various clusters of student interest groups in various campuses across the world. First there were the dedicated revolutionaries who gorged themselves on the political theories of Mao and sprinkled their bedroom walls with the romanticized posters of Che

Guevara. Then there were the leftist careerists who perceived student unionism as a platform of emergent tango with trade unionism with political leanings. These are followed by rebels without a cause, who, in developed countries personified the James Dean persona and digested, in toto all the gloried youth rebellion churned out by Hollywood studios. Finally, there was the emergent class of social nihilists, with neither a cause nor a direction; but controlled behind the scenes by outside campus political forces. These categorizations are reflected in the observations of the international trend of student union activism across the century.

### **The international scene**

Perhaps one of the few early student activist protests was in China where on May 4, 1919 students launched protests against League of Nations' (later, United Nations) concessions in China to Japan.

However the most volatile period of student unionism across the globe was in the decade of the 1960s. The South Koreans formed the Republic of Korea in May 1948 with Seoul as the capital. Dr. Syngman Rhee was chosen president but a movement spearheaded by college students forced his resignation on April 26, 1960. In the United States, sit-ins began on February 1, 1960 when 4 black college students in Greensboro, North Carolina refused to move from a Woolworth lunch counter when denied service. This introduced the idea of sit-ins as a form of protest, because by September 1961 more than 70,000 students, whites and blacks, had participated in sit-ins.<sup>2</sup>

When John F. Kennedy was inaugurated as U.S. president in 1961, he emphasized youthful idealism, and vigor. After his assassination on November 22, 1963 a series of political and social reform movements took root in the U.S., later spreading to other countries with the help of ubiquitous U.S. film and television programs and heavy overseas travel. Opposition to U.S. involvement in Vietnam, especially among university students (Moratorium protest November 1969) turned violent (Weatherman Chicago riots October 1969). New Left and Marxist theories became popular, and membership in radical groups swelled (Students for a Democratic Society, Black Panthers).

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<sup>2</sup> The World Almanac and Book of Facts, (Pharos Books, 1990), Microsoft Bookshelf 1992, s.v. "1960." CD-ROM Edition

Maoist groups, especially in Europe, called for total transformation of society. In May 1968 rebellious students in Paris and other centers rioted, battled police, and were joined by workers who launched nationwide strikes. The government awarded pay increases to the strikers May 26. In elections to the Assembly in June, de Gaulle's backers won a landslide victory. Nevertheless, he resigned from office in April, 1969, after losing a nationwide referendum on constitutional reform.

On June 10, 1987, middle class office workers, shopkeepers, and business executives joined students in anti-government protests in Seoul. They were protesting President Chun's decision to choose his successor and not allow the next president to be chosen by direct vote of the people. Following weeks of rioting and violence, Chun, July 1, agreed to permit election of the next president by direct popular vote and other constitutional reforms. In Dec., Roh Tae Woo was elected president. In 1990, the nation's 3 largest political parties merged; some 100,000 students demonstrated, charging that the merger was undemocratic.<sup>3</sup>

By the mid 1980's, China had enacted far-reaching economic reforms highlighted by the departure from rigid central planning and the stressing of market-oriented socialism. Some 100,000 students and workers staged a march in Beijing to demand democratic reforms on May 4, 1989. The demonstrations continued during a visit to Beijing by the then Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, May 15-18. It was the first Sino-Soviet summit since 1959. A million people gathered in Beijing to demand democratic reforms and the removal of Deng and other leaders. There were protests in at least 20 other Chinese cities. Martial law was imposed, May 20, but was mostly ignored by the protesters.

Chinese army troops entered Beijing, June 3-4, and crushed the pro-democracy protests. Tanks and armored personnel carriers attacked Tiananmen Square, outside the Great Hall of the People, which was the main scene of the demonstrations and hunger strikes. It was estimated that 5,000 died, 10,000 were injured, and hundreds of students and workers arrested.<sup>4</sup>

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3. The World Almanac and Book of Facts, (Pharos Books, 1990), Microsoft Bookshelf 1992, s.v. "South Korea." CD ROM-Edition

4. The World Almanac and Book of Facts, (Pharos Books, 1990), Microsoft Bookshelf 1992, s.v. "China." CD-ROM Edition.

Even in totalitarian regimes students have acted as catalysts for change. In Albania, pro-democracy demonstrations led to the appointment of a new government. On February 6, 1992 students at Enver Hoxha University went on strike. They called for political and economic reforms and the ouster of some leading government officials.

### **The Nigerian Grand Stand**

The nature and form of student unionism, especially in its more expressively colorful form in Nigeria is no more different than from other college campuses across the world. It would seem, however, that the Nigerian students' reaction to social and political issues were unaffected by the nature of the political machinery; whether civilian or military government, students have always sought violent means of expressing themselves.

The University of Ibadan, the base for one of the first generation universities in Nigeria expectedly set the pace and led the race with its first student demonstration in 1962 in reaction to the Anglo-Nigerian defence pact. Ethnic priorities sparked off another rioting at the University of Lagos in 1966 when the issue of Vice-Chancellorship of the institution came up. Lest it be thought that only political and ethnic issues provide the catalyst for violent expressive behavior on Nigerian college campuses, in 1968 students at the, by now more militant universities of Ife and Lagos protested over what they considered poor catering services.

But so far the protests and demonstrations have been, for the most part, picnic events that provided a conduit for perhaps pampered youthful exuberance and expression of newly gained adult independence. However, in 1971 the truly violent nature of the students' perception of social issues was expressed in a demonstration by the students of the University of Ibadan, over catering facilities. Police were called into the campus and one of the students, Kunle Adepeju was killed by a shot from one of the police rifles. The date of his death, February 1, 1971 became another milestone in the history of student unionism in Nigerian higher institutions. Subsequent confrontations between constituted authority and students either on the campuses or in the campus cities and towns have always led to the deaths of many students; sometimes in the hands of the police, and other times in the hands of the military, both often called to quell the rioting.

A more memorable instance of another clash between students and authorities was reaction of students to the introduction of the compulsory National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) scheme in 1973 by the then Military Government. Under the scheme, college graduates were expected to be posted to serve for a year in a State different from their own, with the overall aim of fostering national unity and greater understanding among the various Nigerian peoples. The political polemic of the Government was lost on the students, as they perceived the NYSC as being an attempt to delay either graduate studies or their rapid entrance into the labor market to be part of the rat race. Rioting against the NYSC scheme erupted in February 1973 from students of the University of Ife and University of Lagos, followed by the students of Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. In Bayero University Kano a hasty decision was taken by the University council to allow students with either First Class or excellent Second Class Upper degrees to by-pass the NYSC and proceed immediately for the graduate studies: this no doubt reduced the amount of the rioting in the university. Nevertheless, rioting or not, the NYSC scheme was firmly established as one of the most enlightening programs of self-awareness among Nigerians by the Government.

While for the most part student activism manifesting itself as rioting and demonstrations had been a Ibadan-Ife-Lagos axis affair, there were strays of the breed in northern Nigerian universities, albeit on a less radical and more subdued stages. The Ahmadu Bello University (ABU), Zaria, being the premier northern Nigerian university, led the way with its own brand of solidarity and expression with the views and opinions of other students in the land. On December 1 1971, for instance, ABU students demonstrated against the then Rhodesian crisis by attacking the Kaduna consular offices of the British High Commission.

### **The Great Divide**

Surprisingly, despite the universal bondage (often termed "solidarity") that binds students on the common feelings of opposing anything the establishment is for, in Nigeria significant differences, based on ethnic grounds started cracking the unified front of student unionism as expressions of youthful exuberance.

For instance, cleavage between Northern and Southern university students in Nigeria on either ideological or political grounds manifested itself early enough

in Nigerian history, especially after independence. In Bayero University the firing salvo was released in 1966 when, although a campus of the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, Bayero University student union enunciated the first concept of *a-wa-re* (Hausa: *separate the country*). This followed the brutal murder of northern political leaders in January 1966 especially Sir Ahmadu Bello, the Sardauna of Sokoto, Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, the Prime Minister, among others. Student protests against the perpetrators of the northern political massacre were expressed in marches and speeches by the Bayero University students (though at that time considered Ahmadu Bello University Zaria students) which call for the splitting of the country and creation of a "pure" Northern Nigerian territorial enclave which will ensure the survival and existence of Northern Nigerian Islamic cultural values.

Bayero University student union activists were therefore the first to provide a politically explicit platform around which the Nigerian federation can be split -- almost a year before the concept became the catalyst that sparked off the Nigerian civil war in 1967 which almost tore the country into at least two separate countries, before its uncertain ending in 1970. Soon after this incidence students all over the country became united in a common view of improving the lot of improvised "masses" outside the campus walls, and working out ways of forcing the government to either address students' problems on the campuses or enlighten the society about implications of government political stands in virtually all aspects of policy decision.

And yet such "radical" views tend to end up quadmired in contradictory perceptions of personal significance on the part of the students. This is clearly reflected in the 1978 rioting. Acting under the directives of the National Union of Nigerian Students, NUNS, students in most universities started demonstrating in April 1978 against the hike in feeding charges in Dining Halls from then N0.50 (fifty kobo) to N1.50 (one naira and fifty kobo) per meal. To the students, such blatant exploitation by the Government, especially as Nigeria was riding high on the crest of the oil boom windfall was unacceptable. Police intervention led to the worst aspect of the crisis at Ahmadu Bello University Zaria where quite a few students were killed (figures differ according to sources: students claimed as many as 10 of their colleagues were "murdered"; while the Government insisted only "few" lives were lost). The April 1978 rioting were tagged "Ali Must Go"; aiming the students' anger at Col. Ali, the then hapless Minister of Education.

But perhaps the great divide in student unionism in Nigerian campuses came in 1979 when northern Nigerian universities (Ahmadu Bello, Maiduguri, Jos, Bayero) protested against the newly instituted admissions policy to be federally controlled by the newly created Joint Admission and Matriculation Board (JAMB) which was to ensure that university admissions were based on merit, measured by examination outcomes. It was on this assumption that northern students demonstrated against the JAMB in February 1979, causing a temporary closure of all the northern universities by the Federal government. A consequence of this was that

Students were splitting on ethnic lines, with Southerners favouring JAMB and Northerners determined to annihilate it...In no time at all the southern press was attacking the demonstrating students, and supporting the principle that university admissions be based only on exam-proven academic achievement (which they still dub "merit") — a principle that will obviously favour the better resourced south (*West Africa* 9th April 1979 p. 626).

Northern students riots demanded the rights of the individual universities to conduct their admissions themselves, rather than be foisted with students from the central government. Significantly, no southern university participated in the demonstrations. A point that was not lost on Northern students who argued that with generous scholarship schemes they were not really too affected by the "Ali Must Go" antecedent crisis; yet they lent full support for Southern causes, while suffering the heaviest casualty. Indeed this served as a departing point between Northern and Southern student unionism for quite some time.

The echoes of the 1979 Iranian Islamic Revolution also provided a focus for further divergence between northern and southern students with regards to student activism and provided a convenient point of departure for the two groups. Whilst student protests and demonstrations in southern universities had predominant political tinge in them, always pitching the student body against constituted authority, northern Nigerian university students' clashes and protestations were often on a more ideological plane. Concern with the needs to maintain Islamic purity among the Muslim population, and the desire to ensure that the campuses were as sacred as possible for conventional worship by the Muslim students often led to violent clashes, this time not between the students and authority, but between the students themselves. For the most part, some Northern Muslim student elements, often within the broader Muslim Student Society (MSS) cite the Iranian revolution as a source of inspiration.

Posters of Ayatullah Ruhullah Khomeini, the Iranian spiritual leader at the time of the Islamic Revolution became the anthem for emergent Islamic militant tendency among Muslim student groups. Nowhere was this more expressed than on Bayero University campus.

The emergence of the MTV (Music Television cable network) and Rap Video culture which epitomizes the emergent African American youth expression in the late 1980s further served to make most Nigerian university campuses as a conflict congruence between flashdancers and the more concerned Muslim "fundamentalist" students.

For instance, in March 1983 the Bayero University Muslim Students Society (BUK MSS) attacked members of the students' union executive and subsequently disrupted the social activities organized by the students union on the grounds that alcohol was being served and that the activity was anti-Islamic in nature. Alcohol sale and consumption has been a long established taboo in Bayero University campus since its inception in 1964.

Similarly, in March 1987, the BUK MSS attacked their Christian colleagues in their personal expression of their grievances over the mass killings of Muslims residing in Kafanchan, Kaduna State. Exactly a year later, in 1988, BUK MSS clashed with mainstream students on the campus over the latter's demonstration against the expulsion from Nigeria of Dr. Patrick Wilmot, a West Indian leftist scholar at ABU by the Nigerian Immigration authorities. While conventional students protested against the deportation, BUK MSS protested against the protestors insisting that the latter's protests were pointless.

In February 1991 another clash occurred between Students Union Executive of BUK and BUK MSS over St. Valentines' Day lovers party celebrations. BUK MSS disrupted the party held on the day on the grounds that it was immoral and anti-Islamic.

Extending the romantic protests further, the BUK MSS which had always been against female students visiting male hostels attacked a Post Graduate female student who visited her classmate in his room in February 1992. This attack provoked a severe reaction from other students (both Muslims and non-Muslims) leading to a pitched battle between what are now clearly tagged "fundamentalists" and "liberals". The BUK MSS was of course categorized as the

fundamentalists, while any student, whether Muslim or not, is considered a liberal democrat -- so long as he/she does not actively support the BUK MSS.

Subsequent chronicle of student unionism in Bayero University has turned into an annual bout of clashes between predominantly BUK MSS and other students over either internal (to the university) or external (reflected in the larger social polity) issues.

### **Towards a Theoretical Perspective**

This paper sets out to provide a brief sociological survey of student unionism in Bayero University Kano, but situating within a larger national and internal context. While no sustained empirical study of the rationale of the behaviors of students, especially in Bayero University has been conducted to determine the reasons for the various, of destructive behaviors manifested by the students, nevertheless it is intended to draw from theoretical perspectives to determine the explanations of youth behavior; regardless of religious orientation.

As Braungart (1984) argued, the conflict and tension created by newly formed or perceived ideals and the existing social and political conditions lie at the root of generational movements. Young people are particularly sensitive to social discontinuities and contradictions in the society that they will someday inherit. Thus the literature has spawned massive attempts at explaining youth behaviors especially within certain theoretical frameworks and models.

Thus the issue of student union behavior is essentially a study of youth or generational behavior. Mushaben (1984) in a survey of the role of youth movements in the emergence of West and (then) East German peace movements deduced three theoretical models to explain generational behavior. The *experiential model* (expounded by Karl Mannheim 1928, 1965) moves beyond the chronological dimension by locating a cohort in historical space, ascribing to it a particular consciousness or a sense of "shared destiny" that is expected to mold an individual's political orientations and behavior for life. This would seem to be particularly apt in third world countries where the university is normally considered the training ground for future leaders or future revolutionaries. The University experience seems to bring out the political aspirations in the minds of most students, and subsequent contact with radical writings, especially in the social sciences seems to fan the fire of anti-

establishmentarianism that characterizes, by and large, student behaviors on campuses.

The *maturational* or *life-cycle* model espoused by Eisentadt (1956) presumes that a tampering of values and a re-definition of political roles and behaviors will occur, as these are allocated on the basis of age. The *interaction model* provided by Davis (1940) and Huntington (1977) stresses the cyclic nature of generational conflict, and consequently, the cyclical pattern of socio-political development, that arises from each new cohorts' reaction to the values of one preceding it. Thus it is often the case that student firebrands in one generation, having graduated from the colleges, became "establishment" will be the first to react *against* the current crop of student radicals on campuses!

However, Flacks (1972) has argued that theories organized around the idea of stages of economic and political growth offer little help in accounting for the protests and youth-regime conflicts that erupted and subsided almost simultaneously among countries that varied enormously in their economic and political structures. Thus while generational conflict models, despite their attraction offer little help since they fail to either specify adequately the conditions that produce collective conflict between age groups or to indicate which groups will come into conflict (Kamens 1983).

Further, student protests must not only be limited to perceptions of generational evolution or destructive behavior. In third world countries, there are certainly more numerous factors that come into the mix. Various scholars (e.g. Cornelius 1969 and Hibbs 1973) have linked mass political violence in Third World countries to the stresses and strains of development, urbanization and other forces of change (e.g., commercialization, inflation, etc). Thus countries facing serious financial and economic problems in pursuit of economic development, especially following the IMF prescriptions are always flashpoints of social destructive behavior. It is only natural that the university campuses, where such economic policies are likely to be more interpreted by the community of scholars, should serve as a starting point for organized protest and reaction against government policies.

There is thus a lot needed to be done to fully understand the phenomena of student activism, especially in a situation such as Bayero University Kano. I

hope this paperr has provided a basis for stimulating and sustaining the debate towards a more empirical analysis in the future<sup>5</sup>.

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5. Mustapha Ibrahim Lemu's Doctoral thesis, with strong emphasis on Northern Nigerian higher institutions including Bayero University Kano, has extensively covered the emergence of student unionism in Nigeria within a theoretical framework. See Ibrahim, M, *Conflict Resolution in Higher Education: An Empirical Study of the Aetiology and Management of Student Crisis in Nigerian University System*. Unpublished Ph.D thesis, Department of Education, Bayero University, Kano, 1994.