Global Credentials, National Currencies and Contemptuous Ambitions

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This article is prompted by the recent crowning of one of the maverick leaders, “His Excellency Sheikh Professor Alhaji Dr. Yahya Abdul-Azziz Jemus Junkung Jammeh Babili Mansa” (as it appears on the official website of the Presidency), of the tiny African country of the Gambia in declaring himself as both “Professor” and “Doctor” in a bizarre combination. Many may also recall the historical trail of a preposterous head of state title in “His Excellency [former] President for Life, Field Marshal Alhaji Dr. Idi Amin Dada, VC, DSO, MC, CBE” of Uganda.

This becomes newsworthy because it involves an act of “egregious” crowning, with commandeered supreme academic credentials, involving an incumbent head of state. Likewise, a “credentialed” lecturer masquerading as a professor, a nurse as a medical doctor, a purser as a pilot, a sergeant as an army general are slowly creeping into the academic, professional and business scenes—with huge implications for the respective professions and the larger society. Who would consider taking their sick child to a fake doctor or flying with a pilot with bogus credentials? The immediate and catastrophic consequences of this malfeasance are simply too evident to dwell on. This article discusses growing credential issues and their implications in Africa.

External Issues

The opening dramatic scenarios aside, the very catalysts of this growing and worrying trend of credential “gobbling” without the requisite skills resides predominantly in the degree markets beyond national and continental borders. This is because the credential-producing entities in African countries, for all their strengths or lack thereof, are generally subject to national regulation and scrutiny.

It is often not easy for African institutions to establish the authenticity and value of self-declared credentials granted beyond their borders. This has encouraged many to acquire credentials from unrecognized and bogus institutions for use in employment as well as for
status purposes. For instance, Kenya’s mandate for all members of parliament to hold a first degree has pushed a few to secure credentials through suspect means.

As African countries are grappling with raising their quality assurance and accreditation regimes, they have yet to systematically scrutinize foreign credentials of personnel in top political, economic and educational positions. In the credential market place in Africa, we find mixed trends of growing “inflation” of credentials—from less-well recognized institutions—and “capitalizing” on degrees from well established brands.

**Internal Realities**

As a matter of fact, most of Africa’s students still study in publicly funded and sanctioned institutions that have firmly embedded, though not fully enforced, quality regimes. The private institutions are also regulated by education and other government authorities leaving limited wiggle room for foul play—which is often dealt with severely when such is uncovered. Not so long ago, for instance, Kenya closed some 80 private institutions on account of their poor performance.

Credentials from national bodies—such as universities for example—are often easier to certify and authenticate than those based overseas as national institutions are better known to authorities, employers, and the general population. This however presupposes that the authorities themselves are seriously concerned about rooting out academic corruption or that the authorities themselves are not direct beneficiaries or perpetrators of such malpractice in the first place.

It is relevant to recall a series of headline news on the granting of a PhD to Zimbabwe’s First Lady which, many charge, was granted under “institutional duress” by the University of Zimbabwe, the country’s flagship university, where she allegedly registered for only some months. It is curious, however, how President Mugabe, a holder of a half-a-dozen bona fide and earned academic credentials, permits such a blunder to take place in his den—though he himself is yet to retire the nomenclature of the “Professor of Diplomacy” as he is sometimes addressed. To the mélange of the colorful African cases above, it is important to add the new president of Nigeria, Mr. Buhari’s humble, but *la contraire* engagement with an academic body to extract his contested secondary school credentials while he owns multiples of them from (postsecondary) institutions at home and overseas. South Africa has also seen its fair
share of similarly high profile scandalous cases, but with disgraceful ends—thanks to the relentless pursuit of the robust media. In reaction to a series of embarrassing cases, the government has started cracking down on fake qualifications with Parliament adopting tougher sanctions on those appointed to senior positions.

**Tightening regulation**

Scandalous credential news involving high profile individuals generally makes sensational—and humiliating—conversation. Such a conversation is, however, possible to the extent that powerful entities allow it to take place. For instance, some months ago Ethiopia successfully prosecuted and condemned a high-profile bogus PhD holder from Harvard University to prison while at the same time remaining mum on comparable cases. To be sure, there is very little recourse on such crimes when it involves officials—either directly or indirectly—especially in authoritarian countries where civil liberties and media autonomy are heavily constrained.

A long list of suspect and blacklisted diploma mills (such as [ConsumerFraudReporting.org](http://ConsumerFraudReporting.org)) is available online; they are instrumental in the fight against corruption in the academic market place. Nations and institutions cannot, however, depend on these resources alone and thus should establish bodies that verify and authenticate foreign credentials. National quality assurance agencies must be mandated and given capacity to undertake this task—for both prospective as well as incumbent workforce in any institution serving the public.

To be sure, credentials acquired from “global” institutions, such as Harvard, Oxford, Max Planck, Sorbonne, or Tokyo, may not require further certification if they are indeed acquired from these institutions. Needless to say, these credentials, if genuine, are major global currencies of known proportion—and established value. But then, these are only the Gucci’s and the Lamborghini’s of the academic market place, rare in the vast majority of African institutions and countries, to be of relevance and significance to the rest of the world.

**Public opinion**

Scandalous news involving officials and high-powered individuals flashing bogus degrees has been prominent in the media around the world. Thus, the “doctoring of doctorates” is not
only an African phenomenon, although the media attention to such issues is often constrained. In fact, several Asian countries face rampant academic and professional fraud to which at times violent protests break out contesting the intervention measures.

As in the peculiar cases noted above and many others, powerful entities with bogus and suspect credentials roam freely—in the face of befuddled nationals, cowed officials, silent counterparts and mocking global observers—even by muzzling the media or utterly disregarding public opinion. Such malfeasance, however, is known to desecrate the sanctity of the academic profession, undermine the integrity of legal systems and deeply corrode the moral fabric of society.

**Conclusion**

The global market place of credential production and acquisitions—both bona fide and bogus—is expanding. This makes it imperative to establish institutions and processes at national levels that moderate the currency of credentials as well as establish their veracity, such as, for instance, South Africa’s Qualification Agency. In countries where quality assurance bodies exist, they need to expand their role to undertake these tasks. In countries where establishing such bodies has been impossible, a sub-regional approach may be ideal.

Given the current scarce or feeble courts of public opinion in Africa, the mockery of the academic tradition by high profile bodies who are supposed to be its chief guardians but act with impunity must be confronted head on. One of the principal allies in this struggle may be other high-powered individuals of solid standing—including jointly caucusing political leaders. Otherwise the conversation of global credentials and national values of academic degrees may be dangerously thwarted by contemptuous private—and wanton—ambitions with deleterious consequences.

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