

EDITORIAL

An Academy at the service of overseas countries.

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The role of scholarly Academies has evolved in the course of time and it is not the same in all countries. The founders of Academies generally expected from them an important stimulus to scientific discoveries useful to their country. This situation still prevails to a large extent in countries of the socialist bloc where the Academies not only participate in the definition of scientific policy, but also carry out themselves, by means of a network of specialized institutes, research and studies prescribed with a view to expected applications or even information for political use.

For various reasons, the scholarly Academies in most western countries have let themselves become dispossessed of an appreciable part of their initial responsibilities. Few among them have their own research institutions and it must be admitted that they no longer represent the principal motor of the scientific discoveries made in a country; they now crown the most outstanding work rather than initiating it.

However, it would be an error to see the Academies as merely decorative groups of scholars.

Their recruitment, which is made by co-option, permits them in principle to bring together the most eminent scientists, without worrying about any other considerations, and sheltered from pressures that would bring about the elimination of free-thinkers, who are often the most creative.

Thus the Academies can contribute effectively to the progress of science, to the expression of informed opinions, especially on controversial questions, and to the definition of ethical rules in the progress of science. They affirm and maintain in the heart of states and across frontiers the solidarity of researchers. Because of this they represent privileged partners in international scientific collaboration. A useful field of action remains open to them if they are dynamic, especially should a common interest in one subject of study stimulate their work.

Such appears to me to be the case of the Royal Academy of Overseas Sciences, which was created in 1928 under the name of the "Institut Royal Colonial Belge", received the rank of Academy by royal decree on the 25th of October, 1954 and its present name by the royal decree of the 8th of December, 1959. Of the seven Royal Academies in Belgium, it is the only national one, recruiting its members equally from our two great Dutch- and French-speaking communities.

The statutes of the Academy define its purpose: to contribute to the progress of scientific knowledge of regions overseas.

The Academy comprises three sections, called "Classes": Moral and Political Sciences; Natural Sciences; and Technology.

The Academy pursues its objective by internal action: the presentation and discussion in its sections of scientific papers written by members or external researchers.

But the Royal Academy of Overseas Sciences wishes above all to open itself to the outside world, and especially to the developing countries.

This external action is exercised in the first instance through its publications. Today the Bulletin of Sessions (Bulletin des Séances) has reached its 57th volume and includes more than 55,000 pages. In the collection of Memoirs, there are some 695 titles representing about 11,000 pages. Exchange arrangements ensure the diffusion of this information throughout the world, and very widely in the countries of the inter-tropical belt.

The Academy organises public symposia and seminar meetings which have been increasingly successful. Among the general themes treated during the last few years have been the following: Cooperation and impact of civilizations, Malnutrition in the Third World, Cities and countryside in the developing world, Remote sensing as a factor in development, The process of lateritisation, etc.

Of course the papers presented at these meetings have formed the contents of widely distributed publications.

From 1948 to 1963, the Academy published 30 maps forming a general atlas of the Congo. Accompanied by explanatory notes, these maps represent a collection of documents of great scientific value. Conscious of the experience and unique practical knowledge of the Academy, the Government of Zaïre has just asked the AGCD to charge the Academy with a cooperative project consisting of the publication of a National Atlas of Zaïre which will cover the different aspects for which good information is necessary for development: the situation and relations of the country, the natural environment and the population and economic activity.

The Academy has written, at the request of the Secretary of State for Development co-operation, a report on a scientific approach to a food strategy for a developing country, taking Zaïre as an example. This report was presented in 1983 to the Secretary of State who immediately made it the fundamental document for his own working group studying co-operative projects in the field of agriculture and food in Zaïre.

Since 1985 the Academy has also provided the secretariat for the Belgian Liaison Committee of the Technical Centre for Agricultural and Rural Co-operation (CTA), an organisation stemming from the Lomé Convention between the European Economic Community and the group of African, Caribbean and Pacific States. The strong representation of the Faculties of Agronomy, Veterinary Medicine, the Institute of Tropical Medicine and of consultancy offices within the Academy made it especially qualified to be the Belgian base for this organisation which aims at putting scientific and technical information at the disposal of those active in rural development in the A.C.P. States.

In collaboration with the CTA, the Academy is organizing for November 1986 in Brussels, a Seminar, with a substantial African participation, on the theme of Food and Nutritional Strategies: Concepts, Objectives, Execution. As numerous studies have already been devoted to these problems, the organisers will emphasize the study of specific cases, with the aim of arriving at conclusions which are as practical as possible. With this aim in mind, the seminar will be concentrating on the study of strategies followed in some ten African countries, naturally including the four pilot States already working in collaboration with the EEC: Kenya, Mali, Rwanda and Zambia.

With the Brussels Office of the United Nations, the Academy is also preparing an Information Day on the theme of Environment in the Third World.

The profound changes that have taken place over the last thirty years in North-South relations and in the forms necessary for the conduct of research and information on overseas countries have imposed a simultaneous change in the activities of the Royal Academy of Overseas Sciences. The few facets of the activity of this institution outlined above show that it has been able to adapt itself well and that it is resolutely attentive to the appeals of the Third World.

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