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The role of Universities in promoting Inter-Cultural and Inter-Religious dialogue in Africa

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Abstract
Africa is one of the continents that make up the global community. The communities in Africa comprise of people from diverse races, ethnicities and belief systems. Overtime, these communities have clashed along tribal lines and faith inspired conflicts. There is a growing concern in Africa over the need to establish unity entrenched in Pan-Africanism. Africa has more than 1900 universities both faith based and secular oriented. These universities attract a multitude of students from different parts of the continent and the world at large. With such dynamics, these institutions of higher learning could breed a new vibrant tolerant generation by fostering values of dialogue and peace amongst the African people. The main objective of this paper was to examine the role of a university in fostering inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue in Africa. The paper was composed using library research where analysis was made using credible multimedia, academic papers and publications etcetera, to enrich the study. From this, conclusions and recommendations were made for instance the need to decolonize the philosophy of African Universities, promoting research and community outreach engagements while involving the students. Promoting and engaging students in courses that are non-discriminative in terms of culture and faith such as astronomy, astrophysics, space exploration and science.

Keywords: Inter-Religious, Inter-Cultural, Dialogue, Universities, Peace.

Introduction:

Universities are centers of higher learning that impart skills, knowledge and attitudes among the citizens. In addition, universities are meant to create knowledge through intensive and rigorous research that helps to transform society through knowledge creation and dissemination as well as informing policy makers and implementers. Moreover, universities must be engaged in community outreach programs and contribute tremendously to the transformation of society. In addition, universities ought to disseminate the interests of the nations in terms of values and attitudes.[1]

There are numerous tertiary institutions across Africa that attract students with a variety of dynamics such as race, color, tribes and religion. Africa is home to both oldest and newest universities and institutions of higher learning.[2]

The table below indicates the number of universities in Africa as of 2021

Country	**Number of universities**
Nigeria	279
Tunisia	203
Morocco	148
Kenya	123
South Africa	121
Algeria	102
Somalia	83
Egypt	73
Ethiopia	70
Uganda	67
Ghana	66
Sudan	59
Libya	58
Tanzania	51
Zambia	44
DRC	40
Senegal	34

[1] Ashu, Frederick Ebot, Moses Seemndze Lavngwa, and Michel Auguste Tchoumbou Ngantchop. 2023. "African Philosophies of Education and Their Relevance to School Leadership in Africa: A Guide for Educational Systems and School Leaders." *Open Journal of Philosophy:* 32-47.

[2] Waruru, Maina. 2023. Africa is home to oldest and youngest universities – Map. August 3. Accessed January 7, 2024.

Benin	29
Malawi	28
Cameroon	25
Rwanda	22
Angola	21
Côte d'Ivoire	20
Zimbabwe	19
Burundi	19
Mozambique	17
Burkina Faso	17
Botswana	14
Gabon	12
Madagascar	12
Mauritius	11
Cabo Verde	9
Mali	8
Togo	5
Namibia	4
Liberia	4
Gambia	4
Mauritania	4
Chad	4
Seychelles	3
Congo	2
Eswatini	2
Lesotho	2
Niger	2
Djibouti	1
Reunion	1
CAR	1
Equatorial guinea	1
Comoros	1
Total	1945

*Source: Statista (2023)

From the table above, it is evident that the number of universities in Africa is growing rapidly and is approximately 2000 universities in Africa. Some of these universities are faith based while others are secular. There are other variations for

instance some are older and more advanced than others. Moreover, even the rankings are not the same. Nevertheless, they are still all institutions of higher learning and admit students from all parts of Africa. According to World Bank report 2020, over 9 million students are enrolled in African universities and tertiary institutions. These students are the representatives of African society.[3] As of 2018, the average faith distribution in Africa was 56% Christian, 34% Muslim and the rest to other faiths and beliefs.[4] The rest of the percentage involves people belonging to the indigenous African traditional religions, atheists and agnostics. Moreover, the people of North Africa are predominantly Muslims while Christians are mostly in the South and Sub-Saharan Africa are a mixture. The exact number of ethnic groups and tribes in Africa remains unknown. However, it is estimated that there are approximately 900 to 1500 different languages spoken on the largely heterogeneous continent.[5] With such dynamics and demographics, it becomes important for the academic institutions of higher learning to ignite the discussion of establishing an education that can promote peace and produce graduates that are tolerant and have the ability to establish and maintain peace in African societies without abandoning their respective faiths and cultural values.

Problem statement

The existence of faith-based violence and intolerance in Africa as well as Inter-tribal conflicts in Africa has crippled the social economic development on the continent. Okogu argues that with a multitude of tribes and ethnicities, Africa has suffered enormously from the negative forces of tribalism and depreciation in African values which has claimed lives, destruction of property, moral degeneration, civil wars and stagnated development all over the continent.[6] The universities and tertiary institutions produce obsolete knowledge which is incapable of addressing the challenges of the communities in Africa.[7] The

[3] World bank. 2020. Tertiary Education in Sub-Saharan Africa. World Bank., 1-13

[4] Howard, Brian. *Religion in Africa: Tolerance and trust in leaders are high, but many would allow regulation of religious speech*. (Afrobarometer, 2020).

[5] Campbell, Michael C, and Sarah A Tishkoff. 2008 "African genetic diversity: implications for human demographic history, modern human origins, and complex disease mapping." *Annual review of genomics and human genetics* 9: 403-33. doi:10.1146/annurev.genom.9.081307.164258

[6] Okogu, J. O. 2016. "Tribalism as a Foiled Factor of Africa Nation-Building." *Journal of Education and Practice* 7 no.7: 92-94.

[7] Waghid, Yusef. 2016. African philosophy of education: a powerful arrow in universities' bow. July 29. Accessed 2024. https://theconversation.com/african-philosophy-of-education-a-powerful-arrow-in-universities-bow-62802.

universities and tertiary institutions in Africa can steer the young generation towards deliberating holistically about African affairs and values for the contemporary and the betterment of Africa's future.

Objective

The main objective of this paper was to examine the role of a university in fostering inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue in Africa

Methodology

This paper is purely a library research study where relevant documents and reports have been reviewed and analyzed to generate ideas and arguments on the topic. In addition, this is a position paper whose argument is that since African universities attract students with comprehensive dynamics and diverse demographics, this chance can be optimally utilized to promote religious-cultural dialogue and peace.

Role of Universities in promoting Inter-Cultural and Inter-Religious dialogue

The universities being centers of higher learning have a role to play in shaping the wellbeing of the African people. Changing the mindset of the graduates and inculcating values of religion-cultural tolerance as well as co-existence in all disciplines taught in universities and other tertiary institutions is paramount. In this paper I have discussed four key areas which I strongly believe that both the universities and other tertiary institutions in Africa may focus on to promote both religious and cultural tolerance among Africans.

The philosophy of African Universities

There is need to decolonize the philosophy of the African universities. Many universities in Africa were established during colonial times and they were introduced to serve the interests of the imperialists. Even the universities that were established after independence later absorbed the same vision plagiarizing the values of colonialism. The values and core aims of the universities and tertiary institutions in Africa should be Afrocentric. Moreover, Africa already has held the deep philosophical ideas such as Ubuntu in which the awareness of one's self is molded by their consciousness of everyone in the society, 'I am, therefore we are'.[8] The values should be integrated with religious morals, ethics and principles to further enhance ideas such as peace and co-existence. Furthermore, the African philosophy of education must be tailored in such a way that it can address the

[8] Ashu, Frederick Ebot, Moses Seemndze Lavngwa, and Michel Auguste Tchoumbou Ngantchop. 2023. "African Philosophies of Education and Their Relevance to School Leadership in Africa: A Guide for Educational Systems and School Leaders." *Open Journal of Philosophy:* 32-47.

challenges faced by the African people such as famine, civil wars, marginalization, diseases among others.[9]

Content taught

The knowledge delivered to African students in the universities should be more practical and universal. It should help produce critical thinkers and problem solvers. In addition, the content can be more holistic enabling the students to acquire multiple skills and developing a comprehensive perspective about the African society.[10] A multi-disciplinary approach in African education could enable the learners to be engaged and focused on the bigger picture of transformation and development of all people in the continent regardless of their religious affiliation or cultural and ethnic orientation. This can be achieved by also blending vocational studies with the content taught in the institutions of higher learning.[11] Promoting Africa's indigenous languages and cultures by integrating them in the content and the curriculum of university and tertiary education. In addition to this, special attention may be given to lingua-franca especially the local ones for instance Swahili and Hausa in sub-Saharan Africa and west Africa respectively. This could promote unity, strengthen brotherhood amongst the African people, improve on the sense of identity and most importantly be used as a tool for cultural-religious dialogue among the people of Africa. Furthermore, universities can use religious and cultural studies to address critical global issues such as climate change and environmental conservation for the betterment of humanity and for future generations.

Community engagement

Universities should be involved in the process of strategic development and growth of their surrounding communities. This could be achieved by connecting the university with community-based activities such as fixing communal challenges for instance access to safe water, public health, social welfare and environmental protection as well as waste management among others. Mugabi argues that a significant number of African universities have not fully embraced the idea and practice of community engagement as some have only understood it

[9] Waghid, Yusef. 2016. African philosophy of education: a powerful arrow in universities' bow. July 29. Accessed 2024. https://theconversation.com/african-philosophy-of-education-a-powerful-arrow-in-universities-bow-62802.

[10] Ashu, Frederick Ebot, Moses Seemndze Lavngwa, and Michel Auguste Tchoumbou Ngantchop. 2023. "African Philosophies of Education and Their Relevance to School Leadership in Africa: A Guide for Educational Systems and School Leaders." *Open Journal of Philosophy:* 32-47.

[11] Gyagenda, AbdulSwamad. 2023. "Need for a Total Revamp of the Ugandan Educational System towards Enabling Local Graduates to Compete on the Global Scale," *International Journal of Academic Research in Progressive Education and Development*, 12 no.1: 767–777.

to be limited to collaborations with fellow institutions while others abandoning it all together.[12] He furthermore suggests involving students and the academicians in solving the real problems of the society while working alongside the government, non-governmental organizations, cultural and religious leaders.[13] However, to what extent do the universities in Africa engage in community outreach programs? The problems of communities bring people together regardless of their gender, culture or religious denomination hence giving the students a better perspective on life. For instance, there is a challenge of access to clean and safe water in many parts of Africa, critical global issues such as climate change, environmental degradation, waste management, global warming and others. If students participate in the process of finding solutions to such problems, it may broaden their perspective and understanding that the challenges threating the existence of the humanity are far beyond gender, race, nationality or religion. Moreover, solving societal problems communally in itself promotes the idea of unity and co-existence.

Research and innovation

Research is an important component of the university that entails creation of new knowledge and ideas and availing such to the public. Innovation involves identifying new and easier methods and procedures of dealing with situations for the betterment of life. African universities' performance in terms of research and innovation is still weak compared to that of the global scale. African Universities still lag behind and were beaten by far by foreign western universities in terms of research output and relevance, a paradigm shift is thus suggested which will help to review the philosophy of African research agenda and create one that is more culturally engaging.[14] The universities in Africa as well as tertiary institutions should engage their students more in research and innovation to better the livelihoods of the African people. Consequently, research will help the younger generation develop a different perspective about Africa and the need to study the challenges facing Africa as whole rather than concentration on inter-tribal or religious conflicts. In addition, the universities may develop this by establishing research agendas that have values of Pan-Africanism engraved in them, uniting African people amidst their diversities and promotion of religious tolerance. This could be achieved by integrating religion and culture as a channels to promote research and innovation.

[12] Mugabi, Henry. 2015. "Institutionalization of Community Engagement at African Universities," *International Higher education:* 21-23.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Lakati, Alice Sipiyian, and Peninah Kinya Masibo. 2023. "A call for African universities to define their research priorities," *The Lancet Global health* (Elsavier) 11 (10): 1505-1506.

Conclusion and way forward

University education should be decolonized by removing outdated colonial interests engraved in the philosophy of university education systems in Africa. The philosophy of education in Africa should also aim at promoting the identity, culture and religious affiliations of the African people. In addition, African values of co-existence also known as Ubuntu should be imprinted in the core values of universities in Africa. Promoting the culture of community based activities such as solving societal problems in Africa for instance safe water, basic health education so that the students get an inclusive perspective about the world. Furthermore, African Universities should promote the spirit of research and innovation among the graduate and postgraduate students. Additionally, both research and innovation as well as community engagement can be integrated with vocational studies for further skilling and equipping of students in the institutions of higher learning. This will widen their spectrum of perception about the need to have interest in African affairs, focus on unity in diversity and co-existence among the African people. Universities should promote and focus on lingua-franca for instance Swahili and Hausa so as to enhance unity, facilitate dialogue and alleviate identity crisis while decolonizing university education in Africa. More emphasis is still needed on the use of modern information and communication technologies in the university education system of Africa especially in the instruction of religious studies.[15] Furthermore, the African universities should develop and promote astronomy, astrophysics, space science and exploration programs. This is because such studies are cross cutting in terms of tribes and religions and they may help to redefine our position and purpose from a cosmological perspective and scale rather than focusing ourselves on only an individual's faith, race and restrictions of local national borders. Finally, more empirical research is still needed in this area to further deeply interrogate the status quo with aim of improving and adjusting accordingly basing on the needs of time and space.

[15] Gyagenda, AbdulSwamad. 2021. "Integration of Modern ICTs as Modes of Instruction for Islamic Education in Higher Institutions of Learning," *Interdisciplinary Journal of Education*, 4, no.2: 133–145. https://doi.org/10.53449/ije.v4i2.62