

# Understanding diversity and seeking unity in the Kenyan educational context

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STRATHMORE UNIVERSITY ETHICS CONFERENCE 2011

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## **Abstract**

This paper originates in my experience as an Irish lecturer who, having taught in a multicultural environment in Europe, began teaching in Kenya in 2004. Through this change of context, I experienced a radical sense of my own diversity with regard to my students, along with a sense of the diversity of the students among themselves. I felt that this situation was making me less effective in my teaching practice, as student feedback indicated their lack of motivation and interest and poor mutual communication, which seemed to be affecting their levels of learning in the units I taught.

This piece of research aims at presenting the knowledge and understanding of the Kenyan educational, cultural and socio-economic context which I have developed through observation, reflection, study, and exchange of ideas with Kenyans themselves, in order to address this situation. I use this knowledge, which is constantly growing, as the background for my efforts to create a conducive learning environment and experience for my students, which focuses on fostering harmony and unity within our mutual diversities.

By presenting this work at the Strathmore Ethics Conference, I hope to test the accuracy of my understanding of our educational, cultural and socio-economic context in Kenya, and receive critical feedback which can help me to refine this knowledge. At the same time, by show-casing some practical ways of fostering unity in diversity within our educational context, I hope, to illustrate how education can contribute to effective nation building in Kenya. The theoretical roots of my research lie in a philosophical understanding of the dignity of the human person, human activity and human life in society.

**Key words:** *Kenya; educational context; socio-cultural context; teaching and learning; unity in diversity*

## Introduction

My academic background includes studies in English literature, Economics, Accountancy, Theology and Philosophy. I began my teaching career in Italy in 1994, at an international college offering postgraduate studies in Philosophy and Theology. Over a ten year period there, I taught people from a broad variety of academic, professional, social and cultural backgrounds. As a young and inexperienced lecturer, my teaching focus was largely on myself and how I managed to transmit course contents in a clear, interesting and practical manner to my students. Although I was aware of the variety of my students, I had never focused on this diversity as a reference point for assessing or adjusting my teaching practice.

## Educational and cultural context in Kenya

When I relocated to Kenya in 2004 to teach Philosophy at Strathmore University, I had my first dramatic experience of cultural diversity. The first course I taught was Principles of Ethics, to two groups of second year students who were studying Commerce; each group contained approximately 80 students. During the first few weeks of the semester I realized that most of my students were not particularly attentive in class and that somehow, we were not “bonding”. They possibly felt that they were simply at the receiving end of a traditional lecture, which was the method I was using to teach. One day I decided to start trying to interact with my students at a more personal level, so as to improve my relationship with them. During the ten minute break in a double lesson, as people moved around, I approached one of the girls seated in the front bench of the lecture room with a smile. I tried to get a conversation going by asking what seemed to me to be innocent questions such as her name, what she had done over the weekend. Although I tried a few topics, throughout the few minutes I stood beside her, the girl sat with her head down, in complete silence. I eventually realized that, no matter what I said, she was not going to respond because she did not want to; so I made some pleasant remark and returned to the lecturer’s desk to begin the second class.

## Fear

This experience was a big shock to me; I had never seen such a reaction before to what I perceived as a friendly attempt to reach out to a student. Although this may have been a somewhat extreme reaction, I have sometimes found similar reactions in other students over the years. Initially I realized that teaching in Kenya meant that I was being confronted with something very different to the classroom environment I was accustomed to. I had sensed that girl’s fear and wariness in her refusal to reply. When I asked Kenyan colleagues and friends about why the girl may have reacted in this way, I began to learn more about the education system in Kenya. I was told that she was probably afraid of me, as the teacher and that this was not uncommon in students because of the way they are often treated in school. I learnt that in many schools students are not allowed to ask questions in class or to address the teacher; that in some cases students were physically punished for asking questions or other similar “misdemeanors”. Students were often ridiculed by the teacher if they answered mistakenly when asked a question in class. Such practices seem to have contributed to inhibiting students almost completely in school and creating an atmosphere of fear and tension in the classroom. If this is the case, one can understand that, by approaching my student as I have just described, I was probably breaking the non

written rules of teacher-student communication which she was accustomed to, thereby disconcerting her greatly.

As I discovered these things, I began to sense wariness towards me in the first meetings with different groups of students, perhaps partially due to these experiences in school, which made them not know what to expect from the lecturer; perhaps partially due to the fact that I am European, although in many cases the mistreatment in schools in recent years in Kenya has not been at the hand of the Europeans, but of Kenyan teachers. For some students, however, depending on their educational background, I would be an unfamiliar figure. I am now accustomed to being “sized up” by my students in the first week or two of class, and that this manifests itself in the fact of silence and passive resistance to answering any questions I may ask them, even those with the most obvious of answers. In order to overcome these barriers, over the years I have learnt to focus on the students more than on myself when teaching, especially at the start of a new unit. I invest time in telling them a bit about myself, in showing through my gestures, way of moving around the classroom, tone of voice, etc. that I am open to them as they are and want to create a friendly atmosphere in the classroom where they can learn in a comfortable environment. I often have to explain explicitly that this is my intention and that I will not shout at them, nor ridicule them; I explain that I want them to feel able to open up and give their opinions, to encourage them to participate in class for their own sake, so that they can learn from each other and overcome possible fears, shyness, etc. I try to tease them a little, talk about what is happening on the football scene or the music scene, etc. in Nairobi or Kenya, or about things that are happening at the university<sup>1</sup>.

When I try to understand the root of the fear of and wariness towards the lecturer, I have also been told about the respect for the authority figure which is often engrained in children and young people as part of their cultural heritage. Traditionally this figure was the Father, Mother and other older relatives. Over time, the authority figure was also recognized in people who headed the local community because of their position there as chief, teacher, doctor, etc. This system probably had its advantages in a small, closely-knit community. However, “a system that lays all the emphasis on authority and fear of the ancestors may fail to develop the powers of the will and the use of personal freedom and responsibility in such a way that if the subjects thus educated are, for whatever reason, uprooted from the milieu of their culture, they become unable to carry over the values of their traditional education to the new set-up” (Gichure, 2009). The issue of discovering the power and responsibility of one’s freedom has become a central point in my understanding of education, and my teaching practice, precisely because I have seen how students coming from an up-country background, can cease to live values they may have developed in earlier life, when exposed to the lifestyle and habits of young people in Nairobi (Dean, 2009). Perhaps the lack of motivation and pro-activity in some students may also be due to the fact that they have not discovered that they are free and can make their own choices, but rather, have always

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<sup>1</sup> One student commented in feedback given in July 2008: “Ms Dean was ethical during the delivery of the lecture. She did not shout at people when they were seen murmuring or having diverted attention. A look from her would send a message without the need of yelling, which emphasizes ethics and effective communication” (MC). Another student from the same period said: “The lecturer always smiled even when things seemed disgusting. When students annoyed her she didn’t easily get agitated. She tried to hold her peace. This helped me even in other situations to remain calm” (KMC).

lived within a very set routine which they followed automatically, without questioning, in a somewhat robot-like fashion. This may have been due to the way the schools where they received their education were run, and family life-style among other factors.

For many years in Kenya the teacher in the village was one of the most important and venerated members of the community; they were greatly respected and well paid. Unfortunately, as the focus of attention moved from the village to the local town or to Nairobi and other careers and professions opened up to Kenyans after independence, little by little respect for the local teacher dropped, their salaries were reduced, these became frustrated and their way of exercising authority changed to become more despotic and even violent. This demoralization of teachers is considered to have contributed, at least in part, to what has been described as the collapse of the Kenyan education system, which came to a head in July-August 2008, with the wide-spread violent rebellion within more than 300 Kenyan high schools, which went on strike. The outcomes were huge losses in public and private property, injury of students and staff and the death of one student. It has been estimated that up to 90% of the young people involved in this violence, along with the post-electoral violence after the 2007 national elections, have been through formal education. This fact has raised many questions regarding the education which these young people have received, along with the responsibility of teachers and schools in influencing such events (Mbae, 2009). At the same time, this author points out that we cannot expect our youth to be unaffected when they are constantly exposed to diverse forms of corruption in all sectors of society, including the leaking of national examinations at primary and secondary level, which has ruined the lives of many of their fellow students.

### **Peer Pressure and “seeming the same”**

When telling colleagues about the case I described above, I was also informed that my student may have been afraid of what the other students would think of her, if she spoke with or gave the impression of being friendly with the lecturer. This may be partially understood in terms of the educational context which I have just described. At the same time, it highlighted another issue which I have become increasingly aware of over the years: the students’ fear of each other, a sense of peer pressure which prevents them from going beyond the norm so as not to stand out from the others or to be ridiculed by them after class. The majority lack the maturity and courage to answer questions in class, or to ask about what they have not understood, for this reason. My awareness of this challenge has also moved me in recent years to challenge my students early on in a new unit, to take the opportunity to develop the speaking and presentation skills in class which they will need in their future professional work. I encourage them to speak out, and to learn to listen to each other and to be ready to accept or at least respect other people’s opinions, viewpoint or way of expressing themselves. To facilitate this, at times I organize them into small work groups in class, to prevent them from always working with the people they know. However, more often than not, I encourage them to freely seek out other students who they do not know, so they learn to work with people whom they are not accustomed to, and freely accept the challenge of getting to know new people, new ways of working or looking at things, etc.

AMA expressed part of the problem I am describing in the feedback she gave in March 2010, after a semester long course in Principles of Ethics as follows: *At the start students would keep into groups of friends and rarely interact beyond those groups.* She then described the change that took place during

the semester: *But with time, they began interacting more through group work concerning Principles of Ethics and this helped as they also interacted outside the group.* W. Barasa, a student from the same class, responded to a question on the quality of the relationships between students in her class throughout the unit by saying it was *Excellent. This is one of the units where students were freely interacting and debating over issues in Ethics.* When asked to what extent she thought that the lecturer's attitude had influenced these relationships among the students she answered *To a very great extent. Since she was willing and always encouraging small group discussions before forwarding a final answer for class participation, it made it possible even for those who don't like participating in class to contribute and understand the unit more.*

Reflecting on the problem of internal peer pressure within the classroom, I have identified two issues. The first, which is probably common to teenagers and young adults around the world, is the desire to be "part of the crowd", the same as the others, not to "stand out" as different. This is partially a manifestation of immaturity and lack of self-esteem, and awareness of one's own personal and unique identity. It also seems to be a sign of how globalization especially in terms of music, fashion, movies, etc. has affected the Kenyans youths' sense of identity. As I observed, listened and asked around, I realized that my students, along with following local Kenyan modern music, are also influenced by and follow the trends set by young people around the world, including the black American ghetto culture. They listen to the same music, dress the same, watch the same movies, etc. In my opinion, this can lead to the loss of the sense of their own cultural identity as Kenyans and Africans, especially as there is a tendency to think that what comes from outside Kenya is better than what we can do or produce here. This attitude, at least in part, has historical roots, as immigration to the USA and the UK has been widespread since independence, where, it is thought, Kenyans can be more successful. At times, effectively, those who have gone abroad are actually supporting those at home particularly in financial terms. Although many have also returned with the news that life abroad is hard, this message does not seem to reach the youth and so they continue to look at other countries as their reference points and goal in life. They do not seem to have learnt the value, beauty and wealth of so much that is Kenyan.

My understanding of this issue was further clarified recently in a conversation with a Kenyan colleague about the issue of western influences on our young people, and the possible loss of their sense of cultural identity. She explained something which I had also observed in another context. It is the fact that Kenyans are very good at blending in and adapting to lifestyles wherever they go; however, when they return to their own country or environment, they immediately revert to being "Kenyan". She illustrated this by describing how, when in the formal setting of the classroom, her students (whom I also teach) speak in correct English, are dressed smartly (according to the Strathmore dress code among other reasons), etc. Yet, when class has ended and they come to discuss an issue with her, they relax into their own "natural" style of expression, by using *sheng*<sup>2</sup>, informal vocabulary and gestures, etc. I should add that this would be easier for them to do with her than with me because she is a local Kenyan who has lived in and knows their world. We found this very interesting as it shows the two "images" which our young people can portray, switching from one to the other without a thought. She also told

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<sup>2</sup> "Sheng" is a term used to refer to the mixture of English and Kiswahili which is spoken by many young people in Nairobi as well as on public transport and in the lyrics of local pop music.

me that her nephew had complained to her recently as his mother would not allow him to take up a scholarship at a prestigious American university because she felt that he was too young and would be easily influenced by the atmosphere there. My colleague's nephew explained to his aunt that his mother should not be worried because, when in the USA, he would live and act like his peers at university there, but on returning to Kenya he would switch back to being himself again. Perhaps a case of youthful naivety, but the interesting thing which had struck her attention, is the ease with which young people themselves have told her or shown her through their deeds that they can switch from one "image" or "type" of person, to another depending on the circumstances with the greatest ease, and being fully aware of what they are doing. According to my colleague, our young people, while imitating western culture and lifestyle, are still aware of the fact that they are Kenyans.

As we analyzed this phenomenon, we agreed that, there is still a problem of identity due to the current loss of specific cultural practices and traditions among the various ethnic groups, due to the move to Nairobi by large numbers of young people in the 1960's. Their children and their children's children, whom we are now teaching, hardly know where they originally come from in Kenya, they cannot speak their mother tongue (and so, cannot communicate with older relatives), and are not aware of many traditional practices which still form part of the life of their communities up-country, and which they cannot afford to disregard when it comes to important issues such as marriage, birth, death, etc. Many young people will tell you that they are "Kenyan", and that this matters, more than their ethnic diversity. This may well be a relevant point, however, it is still not very clear what it means to be "Kenyan". There is no Kenyan culture as such, in terms of common practices and traditions around important moments in a person's life, as is the case in ethnic culture. I think that most of us would agree that what we nowadays identify as typically Kenyan, and this is reflected in the print media, revolves around drinking Tuskers<sup>3</sup>, eating *nyama choma*<sup>4</sup>, watching foreign football and winning long distance races in international athletics competitions. I do not mean that these practices are bad, I just wonder if we can really consider them to be part of a Kenyan culture or tradition that distinguishes us as a nation, especially if we compare them to the wealth of cultural practices which may still be found in many of our ethnic communities. However, Nyairo (2005) discusses how the recuperation of traditional folk music by groups such as Them Mushrooms and Kayamba Afrika in new forms since the 1980s, aims at illustrating, among other things, how modern Kenyan culture is developing through the social, political and economic changes which the country has experienced since Independence, particularly with the move from a largely rural lifestyle to the reality of urban dwelling. She highlights how the work of these groups often aims at fostering a sense of unity within our ethnic diversity by using various local languages in the cover versions or remixes of older music.

The second issue which, on observation I think facilitates the sense of peer pressure in the classroom is that, although the students may want to think that they are all the same, and foster this through their interest in music from abroad, football, etc., in fact they are not all the same. I only need to look around any class I teach and I will see, along with African Kenyans, many Hindus, Muslims, Arabs, Swahilis, Somalis and sometimes children of intermarriages. Evidently, the Hindu community, the Muslim

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<sup>3</sup> Tuskers is the brand name of a local beer produced by East African Breweries.

<sup>4</sup> "Nyama choma" means roast meat in Kiswahili.

community, the Somalis, Swahilis and Arabs and the African communities all have different cultural backgrounds and traditions. Among the 42 tribes of Kenya we also find a diversity of culture and tradition, although many of those who have been born and bred in Nairobi are less aware of these traditions. Over and beyond these obvious differences, there are other differences among the students which they themselves identify and manifest in the cliques and groups they form among themselves. Such groupings seem to be based on factors which may also be found in other parts of the world such as whether a student grew up in the city or up-country; what part of the country a person comes from or where they live in the city of Nairobi; the schools they studied at; their perceptions of each others' wealth and social status (rich, middle class, poor), based on such things as whether or not one uses public transport, the type of car they drive, whether they are collected from university by a driver, etc.

The ethnic diversity is sometimes highlighted by events outside the university such as the post-electoral violence experienced in 2008, and in other moments after independence in 1963; political emphasis on tribal diversity; workplace conflicts based on intercultural diversity, etc. Such situations may contribute to younger people wishing to ignore this diversity, to prevent conflict. However, as much as the students may all want to seem the same, they know that they are different in fact. As I have become more aware of these issues I have tried to find ways in my teaching of helping students to know, understand and appreciate their own and other students' personal and cultural diversity. This can open up horizons for them as persons, helping them to discover their own diversity and uniqueness, as well as enriching their appreciation of other students' diversity and uniqueness. This is a first step in learning to live, work and interact with each other in a way which accepts and respects their diversity, while also fostering genuine unity, and harmony among themselves. As I will describe later, my students have carried out some projects to help them make these discoveries and learn that our diversity, if respected while fostering unity, is our true source of wealth and opportunity for personal growth and development, as well as the growth and development of our nation.

## **Punishment systems**

Students also seem to bring the fear of punishment with them to university, along with a fear of being victimized. This seems to be rooted in the systems of rules and regulations that exist in most schools and which have a corresponding system of punishment. I have been told by young people and teachers that these punishments can range from being beaten, to weeding the garden, to running around a pitch a certain number of times, to sitting under a tree for a period of time, to washing the floors, etc. I have often asked myself what is the source of these punishments. It may go back to the strict codes of morality which, if infringed, brought serious sanctions within the traditional community. When I ask myself, what is the point of these punishments, what do they achieve? I find it hard to discover an adequate answer. I would imagine that in the traditional system in the past, this was the only known way of applying justice and of helping a person to change their behavior. Yet, in today's world, there are many other ways of helping a young person to recognize their errors and strive to change themselves, although I may add that the mob justice which we still see in Kenya is a sign that the old forms of administering justice prior to modern systems such as policing, etc. are still strongly rooted in our culture.

If we look on a student as a free and unique individual, we can try to understand them, their background and circumstances to understand together why they act as they do. Today we often find that the student comes from a broken home, or that his parents are quarrelling or that, although from a wealthy family, he is always alone, not to mention the challenges of peer pressure, drug abuse, etc. In such instances rather than imposing a fairly meaningless punishment, it may be more effective to try to address the deeper issue with the student, open up new horizons to him and help him use his freedom to want to change himself and develop himself as a person. If a student arrives late for class with a genuine reason, I allow him or her to explain the reason to me and discuss with them if it serious enough to justify their delay and allow them to enter class or otherwise. At other times, I discuss with the whole class how long the grace period for entering class late should be, so that they have a voice and take ownership of the decision made together. In these ways I attempt to educate them through their errors rather than punish them for the sake of it.

### **Copying of assignments / cheating in exams / purchase of research assignments, thesis, etc.**

Another very common practice at university level is what my students call “dubbing” which means that they copy their assignments and homework from each other. They will also try to copy from one another during written tests such as continuous assessment tests, final examinations, etc. Again, this was quite a surprise to me as, in my country of origin, there was a very strong sense among the majority of students, that such practice was wrong. I was surprised to find it quite common in Kenya. In some cases, this may be due to the lack of will to make the effort to learn for oneself and the desire for easy success in the form of good grades. The students put a lot of emphasis on their grades. I have heard students tell me that they “passed” a subject, not meaning that they got the minimum grade or slightly above, but because they had gotten an “A”. Other students have come to argue with me about marks I had given them in some test, either because they were looking for one or two more marks, or because they wanted to convince me that what they had written was correct when in fact it was wrong. I understand these kind of reactions as a sign that students are more interested in the grades and the paper, or certificate they will take away with them from university, than the real learning they can acquire and develop through their courses. It is also known that in many universities students are “buying” their research assignments, Masters projects, etc., from other students or from companies which are in business to make quick money in this way.

I am aware that such practices also happen in other countries and yet I still ask myself why it happens here in Kenya. Is it, as some westerners may try to argue, that the sense of the “wrongness” of cheating, the sense of truth and untruth, is not part of the African culture and that it has been imposed on them by western Christianity? And so, cheating is simply a common, natural habit which has always been practiced in this culture? In this case, we should not be surprised at it. One may then ask, but why do African universities themselves want to prevent it? Why are they investing millions in software which can help in detecting plagiarism, etc? Why are the penalties for plagiarism so serious? Is it just the desire to meet the requirements of global standards in education? Or is not rather, a sign of the awareness that honesty, integrity and truthfulness in academia are essential to the credibility of the degrees conferred by an educational institution? Is it not a manifestation that Africans know as well as anyone



else, that cheating is wrong, unethical? When discussing this issue with my students, they show very quickly their awareness that “dubbing” is wrong. Discussing this with a colleague recently, she explained to me that in the traditional African context, people knew very well that cheating, lying, stealing, and other practices were wrong (Mbiti, 1990) and that usually it was never practiced to the detriment of someone from the same community. If it did occur within a community the person involved was sanctioned by the community itself (Nyairo, 2005). It may perhaps have been inflicted on other communities at times for the sake of the good of one’s own community. If a person, knowing well that cheating, lying or stealing was wrong, still engaged in such practices, it was because they considered it better for themselves, thus placing their own good above the good or welfare of another person or community.

The observation made by this colleague has been confirmed by some of the students whom I am currently teaching. At present, from July to October 2011, I teach Philosophical Anthropology to one group of 85 students, doing Business Science with specializations in Economics, Financial Economics and Actuarial sciences; I teach the same unit to a second group of 67 students, who are doing Business and Information Technology. The course content for Philosophical Anthropology includes a section on cultural issues. This semester I have asked my students to organize themselves into groups of three, based on their cultural or some other form of diversity. Each group is doing a term paper on specific cultural issues from their ethnic communities, carrying out a comparative analysis of the same practices across three communities, and also relating what they find to the dignity of the human person which is a core concept in the unit. They had to prepare an abstract of the Term Paper before starting their research, mainly because I have also encouraged them to participate in the 2011 Strathmore Ethics Conference if their term paper falls within the themes being discussed at the Conference. Some groups have responded to the challenge and will present their research findings here. In their abstracts, a number of groups explained that the practice of lying and theft was traditionally prohibited in their communities, involving serious sanctions for the person caught in these activities. This confirms the fact that many traditional ethnic communities in Kenya had a clear moral awareness that these practices were wrong.

We could argue that many other people too, from beyond Africa also engage in cheating, lying, theft and other forms of corruption. It would seem then, that such practices are not typical of the African or any other culture per se, but rather, a manifestation of a common weakness in human nature itself which occurs among human beings living in society all over the world. This weakness is the tendency to think of ourselves first, to put our own good before that of others; self-interest versus the good of others. Hence, we can argue that fostering a greater awareness of the contrast between truth and untruth, the wrongness involved in lying, theft, etc. whether carried out in Africa or elsewhere, is not about imposing Western or Christian standards on others, but rather, an important aspect of moral education around the world. In fact, recent studies carried out by Catholic thinkers in conjunction with non Catholic academics have shown that certain, universal moral principles exist across cultures and religions which share similar convictions regarding the goodness or badness of key human actions concerning life, death, truthfulness, honesty, integrity, justice, etc (International Theological Commission, 2008).

When I teach Principles of Ethics to my students, I try to help them understand why lying or cheating involves going against themselves, because it means going against their natural human inclination to know, love and communicate the truth. I do not think it can be said that this implies imposing western values on others, but rather, I am trying to help them know themselves and their value as persons, and learn to act in a way that respects their nature and helps them to grow and develop themselves as persons. I have in fact found that many of my students do have a fairly strong sense of right and wrong, so when they learn the reasons why such an act is right or wrong, it becomes easier for them to quickly and freely choose to act well and many begin struggling to overcome the habit of lying or cheating.

Henry studied Principles of Ethics with me from November 2009 to March 2010. He carried out a project throughout the semester with the aim of trying to develop the virtue of honesty and truthfulness. In the process he kept an electronic journal where he narrated and reflected on the success and failures in his efforts. In a final report on the effectiveness of the project as a learning tool, he explained how he had discovered the link between his free actions, attaining happiness and being honest. Quoting a journal entry from 15/12/2009 he wrote *I used my freedom well as I chose to tell my friend the time that the game was scheduled and I was a very happy person because of choosing to tell the truth rather than lying (he didn't want to tell his friend as they supported opposing teams). In my attempt to live my virtue this day I learnt that I should be courageous enough to face the consequences of telling the truth. Should realize that it is the simple dishonest things that we do every day that make us fail to lead an honest life.* On another occasion, his mother had asked him on the phone how much money he needed to enroll in a particular course so that she could send it to him; he told her an amount that exceeded what was required so that he could keep the extra money. *I reflected after I had finished talking to my mum and I realized that (I) had done something bad. It was then that I remembered that I was to be honest always and without hesitating I called her and told her that I had given the wrong amount. In fact, after I had done this I felt so relieved and I was amazed by the impact that being honest can have on you. I realized that I had done this out of love for my mother and this did not only improve me but it also (helped) my mother as she saved the extra expenses that she was to incur.* Henry is just one example among all the students who did that course, many of whom had similar learning experiences.

## Learning style

Perhaps partly due to the situation in schools which I have described, I have also discovered that the students are accustomed to rote learning and repetition in examinations of what they have learnt. This has also been identified as a problem in the Kenyan education system by Keriga & Bujra, in a report published in 2009. Using Bloom's Taxonomy, we could say that they seem to have stayed at the level of acquiring basic knowledge and some basic understanding (Forehand, 2005) of the concepts learnt. Most students have great difficulty in applying what they have learnt even in simple ways. Their capacity for more abstract thinking at the levels of analysis, synthesis and evaluation (Forehand, 2005) has not been developed. Their critical thinking skills are generally poor and they have difficulty in grasping abstract concepts. The study of philosophy would highlight such deficiencies precisely because it is more abstract in nature.

Various issues arise when seeking the roots of this learning style, which eventually hampers students' progress in learning when they reach third level education. One factor may be the role of proverbs,

sayings and storytelling in the traditional African education system. While proverbs were well thought out, brief and logical messages (Mwanahewa, 1992) which imparted the necessary wisdom to enable young people to know how to live and how to behave in various social circumstances and other activities (Gichure, 2009), they had to be memorized in order to be retained and transmitted from one generation to the next. Such a practice, which was necessary in the context of communities based on oral traditions and practicing informal education, while empowering peoples' memory, may have led to the lesser development of other types of intellectual skills. When education was gradually transferred to the formal setting, the practice of memorization may also have been directly transferred as the familiar and known form of transmitting knowledge.

Another factor which may explain the on-going tendency to rote learning in the Kenyan educational system could lie in what is commonly referred to as the 8-4-4 system: eight years in Primary school, four years in high school and four years at university. This system was introduced in 1985 with a clear and apparently sensible agenda. Due to the financial and economic situation of Kenya at the time, the idea was to educate young Kenyans by training them in practical skills which they could easily use, even after high school, to get a job or to start their own small enterprises. The aim was to create an educational system geared towards greater self-reliance in the face of harsh economic conditions (Njoroge, 2000). As a result, a large part of the curriculum has been dedicated to agriculture, carpentry, home economics, the sciences, Kiswahili and English as the national languages, etc. Although the original idea made sense, its implementation has revealed certain weaknesses, such as lack of interest in humanistic and other subjects which would help students develop their imagination, creativity, critical thinking skills, etc. The tendency to memorise and repeat is clear, particularly in exams and continuous assessment tests. As Eshiwani explains, in a society where memory is highly developed, where history and tradition is transmitted orally, and where sources of reference are not readily available, rote learning may have an important role to play in the education process. However, he also recognizes that this form of learning may become ineffective in a society where information is freely available for reference and good memory is not indispensable in daily life (1993). In my opinion, Kenya is developing quickly, to the extent that all kinds of information are easily accessible through technology, multimedia, the media, university libraries, etc. And so, although the development of memory is part of the overall development of the person, nowadays, learning needs to go beyond the level of memorization in order to become more meaningful and more applicable in solving diverse problems.

One of the signs of the lack of development of the imagination and other innovative faculties in our students, which may be partially due to the current education system, is seen clearly in the craft sector. As I have observed over my years in Kenya, when a person comes up with a new object which can be made from easily obtained materials, or a new design for jewelry, or innovative ways of using traditional materials such as lesos and kikois, everyone else in the same business copies the idea. And one finds masses of the same item for purchase in the same informal markets. I find this unfortunate, particularly as Kenyans have a great capacity for hard work and a strong entrepreneurial spirit.

I would add that the school curriculum in use before the 8-4-4 system, was drawn from the educational system in use for non-Africans in Kenya before Independence, although it suffered some changes and adjustments between 1963 and 1985 (Eshiwani, 1993). It focused largely on academic subjects and

teaching methodologies within history, literature, language, music, art, along with the sciences. I have noticed among my colleagues and friends that the quality of spoken English and general education is much higher among the generation of students who followed that curriculum, than among those who have passed through the 8-4-4 system. So why did we revert to a system which we had rejected at independence? A quick look at the history of education in Kenya may shed light on some of the issues under consideration.

### **The historical perspective on education in Kenya**

The Arabs were the first to introduce formal, non-indigenous training in Kenya from 700AD onward, through the Koranic schools attached to their mosques. There seem to have been certain similarities between Koranic education and informal African education in that both considered education to be a life-long process, both focused on fostering unity, cohesion, the sense of a common identity among learners and both used normative education systems (Bogonko, 1994).

According to some authors (Bogonko, 1994; Mugambi, 2008), the informal education imparted to children within the traditional African context, prepared them for life as they learnt the cultural values of their community through imitation of older people, some instruction, correction by the extended family, etc. They were taught their role in the community as young men or women as they passed through the various stages of learning linked to age groups. Traditional African education trained individuals to fit into their societies as useful members and provided skills, such as knowledge and values that were relevant to the society. It played the role of socializing individuals to fit and participate adequately in the development of society (Eshiwani, 1993). One's personal, natural impulses were "managed" by a strict code of morality, backed by strong sanctions and taboos, for the welfare of the whole community; conduct and discipline was engrained through rules and regulations. This view is upheld by Professor Gichure (2009), although she clarifies that within this traditional system of education, moral values were not based on rationality, but rather, on local custom or conventionality. I would add, that this can lead people to think that moral or ethical values depend on what society considers to be right or wrong, a view which I have often heard from my students or found written in their assessment tests or exams, even after having spent weeks explaining and illustrating in practical ways that good and evil is not a matter of the opinion of the majority, but rather, depends on how the particular action respects human dignity and human nature. Although I understand the appropriateness of such a system within the traditional context, I have the impression that this informal education system neglected the value and uniqueness of each individual person who formed a part of the community. In particular, the role of personal freedom and responsibility does not seem to be present and yet, ultimately, experience shows that the freer a person is in acting, the more they can grow and develop as a person through their actions, still for the benefit of the community.

At the same time, "with more exposure to other forms of education, youth are bound to start questioning certain traditions and customs and, as a result, the conventional morality that underpins those values is bound to get weaker in the absence of cogent reasons for doing certain things" (Gichure, 2009). Exposure to other value systems and cultures then becomes a challenge and young people can easily cease practicing the customs learnt at home, because they do not know the reasons behind such practices, and will often be challenged by their peers from other communities as to why they live as they

do. In fact, when I teach Principles of Ethics, I need to help the students discover for themselves what are the foundations for the universal moral principles so that they know, understand and can explain rationally the reasons why abortion is wrong or that caring for one's aged parents is a requirement of our human nature.

Bogonko summarizes the traditional African education system as an all-round, life long process, with a collective, social element as the whole community was involved (Bogonko, 1994; Gichure, 2009) Within the traditional context it is interesting that learning was largely of a practical nature, and involved what today we would call "learning by doing". As I have reflected on and adjusted my teaching practice over the years I have found that to help my students make the link between theory and action, they need to apply the knowledge acquired in a variety of practical manners. Only then does learning seem to take root and become effective.

Formal education following the Western model was introduced to Kenya by missionaries in the nineteenth century; the first mission school was established at Rabai, near Mombasa, in 1846 (Eshiwani, 1993). In these schools children could learn to read, write and do arithmetic, which was a great novelty at the time. From 1910 onwards, the colonial administration took over the educational system in Kenya. Effectively, with the coming of the Europeans, who set up schools for their children, the African interest in formal education grew stronger as they perceived that such an education would allow their own children to develop similar skills to those of the Europeans, and eventually, be able to get jobs which would bring more wealth to the family and the community (Eshiwani, 1993; Bogonko, 1994). Little by little, Africans pressed the government to open schools for them. The government schools which were eventually opened for Africans when Asian labour became more expensive, chose to focus on training children in technical skills, as well as the three "Rs", as, in their minds, the role of Africans was to carry out the menial tasks involving manual labour and clerical work, which Europeans would not do. From early 1900 on, government Education Commission Reports indicated that Africans were to receive industrial education and carry out manual labour, while the Europeans were to receive an academic education. When Africans perceived that the education system was not designed to benefit all races, they pushed for an academic education which could help them develop socially, economically and politically. They were against education which emphasized technical and vocational skills at the expense of academic learning (Eshiwani, 1993).

Africans struggled for many years to get the government to introduce more academic learning in their schools, to little avail. They had developed a thirst for academic education, over and above the acquisition of technical skills. They felt that this would put them on a similar footing as the Europeans, which is perhaps what these wanted to avoid. Eventually, Africans began opening their own schools, sometimes with help from the government through the local councils which had funds assigned to them in each area of the country for development purposes; however even in these schools, academic learning was not allowed (Bogonko, 1994). Some communities opened independent African schools, which did not rely on government funding, so as to be able to decide on the curriculum themselves. In some cases they were able to introduce academic subjects (Eshiwani, 1993). Within this context, the need for African teachers became evident to teach in all these schools. Little by little the government opened teacher training colleges, which initially were not of a very high standard, but which improved

over time. However, the training they received in these colleges was again aimed at teaching technical skills to young Africans. Only in the late 50's and early 60's were Africans in a position to access higher level education at Makerere University College (Uganda), or at the Royal Technical College (Nairobi). It should also be mentioned that within the African aspirations for education we find an awareness of the need for literacy and intellectual education to enable progress, protection from being imposed upon by communities with superior learning, emancipation from manual labour and the utility value of being able to get a better job and have a more comfortable lifestyle. It would also enable Africans to overcome the challenges of the changing social, economic and political conditions they lived in.

It is important to note that the development of formal education in Kenya before independence was also largely due to the efforts of various missionary groups, both Protestant and Catholic. Over 90% of secondary schools founded in Kenya before independence were started by missionaries, mainly Catholic. The hallmarks of such schools were "discipliner, organization and high quality instruction" (Njoroge, 2000). Their success lay in the zeal of the missionaries themselves, and the particular charisma of the religious order, congregation or society which inspired the individual missionary to build and develop their schools slowly and patiently, along with some financial help from abroad which these missionaries saved and put to good use (Njoroge, 2000).

Yet, after Independence, there was a crisis in the field of education, due to confusion and disagreement about the appropriate school curriculum and the fact that, through the 1968 Education Act, the Ministry of Education began to take over all non-governmental schools, including the missionary schools. Instead of being run and funded by the various missionary groups, these schools were to be sponsored by the local dioceses and run by local school leaders appointed by the State, but without the necessary financial support. It seems that the dioceses were also in financial difficulties and could not offer much assistance for the running of these schools, where the missionary groups no longer had a role. The result was a financial crisis in the education sector, along with the curriculum crisis (Njoroge, 2000).

With the coming of independence in 1963, the traditional elite (colonial governors with special powers) was replaced by the new elite made up of those Africans who had received an education in literacy up to certain levels. These also included those who had received some form of professional education as clerical workers, cashiers, and later, accountants, secretaries, etc. At this time, Tom Mboya was among the early African political leaders who began the "airlifts" which brought many young Kenyans to the USA in the early 1960s to receive a college and a university education, with the aim of returning to Kenya to contribute to developing literacy and education levels around the country. Professor Wangari Mathaai was among the first women who benefited from this programme and who progressed academically becoming one of the first Kenyan women to lecture at Nairobi University College (later, University of Nairobi) and to obtain a doctorate (Mathaai, 2007).

However, at Independence in 1963, Kenya was still suffering poverty, ignorance and disease. Skilled manpower to run the economy was necessary. The new government formed a commission to study and advise on national policies for education. The Ominde Commission Report (1964) recommended that education should provide manpower for national development and be adaptable at all levels; the education system should also serve all the people of Kenya without discrimination to foster national

unity; it should respect the religious traditions and cultural traditions of the peoples of Kenya; it should train people in social obligations and responsibility, so that personal goal be attuned to the needs of the country. From 1964 to 1975, educational structure, goals and objectives was based on the Ominde Report of 1964. It largely focused, in practice, on expanding opportunities in academic education and doing away with discrimination in education. The emphasis was on academic subjects, passing exams and getting a certificate which would lead school leavers to social and economic advancement by getting a good, well-paying job. By 1975, the government had realized that education was not actually meeting the goals and standards set by the Ominde Report and that it was too academically oriented. It has been accused of focusing on imparting knowledge for the sake of passing exams (Eshiwani, 1993). In 1976, the National Committee on Educational Objectives and Policies produced the Gachathi Report, which attempted to restructure the education system to meet the demands of the country and facilitate employment opportunities for school leavers. By 1980, the government had to change its policy on education as many school leavers were not being absorbed into employment. Under the guidance of the Mackay Commission Report (1981), the move was towards more practical and technical education to facilitate self-reliance. This gave rise to the current 8-4-4 system, designed in such a way that all students completing each educational cycle, would be able to utilize the skills and knowledge required to create self-employment, thus fostering in students the willingness to work and not just seek white collar jobs. "The new education system is designed to provide life-long education to make individuals self-sufficient and productive in agriculture, industries, commerce and in any other service. It is regarded as education with production because it involved all learning activities that result in producing goods and services to satisfy societal needs. It is offered as a means of rearing a necessary and healthy balance between practical and academic learning" (Eshiwani, 1993).

The change to the 8-4-4 system, although it appeared to make economic sense, seems like a step backwards in educational terms as it apparently reverts back to the education system sustained by the colonial government, which Africans had fought against; a largely technical and practical education system. As Eshiwani puts it: "It is ironic that two decades after Independence, most of the African states are stressing those aspects of education that they had rejected before Independence, namely, technical and vocational education" (1993). The outcomes of the 8-4-4 system as I have experienced through my students seem to be that it contributes to rote learning, low levels of understanding, little critical thinking, poor written and oral communication in English and Kiswahili. It seems like a negation of the long struggle for literacy and intellectual learning desired by Kenyans prior to Independence.

The other element which is clear when teaching Kenyan students today is the interest in getting good grades, passing the exam and getting their final degree certificates, independently of the pro-active learning required in the educative process. A typical question towards the end of any course one teaches will be, "what is on the exam"? or "what do we need to know for the exam?". It seems that this tendency has a long tradition going back to pre-Independence up to our day, and may partly be due to the on-going use of examinations to validate a student's progress to the next educational cycle. "Kenya, like many other Third World countries, suffers from a certificate syndrome which is a result of an adopted examination system whereby one paper certificate fails to secure an individual a vacancy in the next level" (Eshiwani, 1993).

The makeup of students reaching university today with the characteristics mentioned above (fear; poor thinking skills; desire for financial benefits attainable through education, etc.) which impede them from benefiting from their university education in a holistic manner may well have its roots in the contents of the current education system. This, in turn, seems to have been influenced by many historical, political, financial and other challenges faced by Kenya before and after Independence, along with the loss of appreciation for the figure and role of the teacher in society, the chaos in schools from the 1980s onwards and other factors, such as the challenges involved in introducing Universal Primary Education which was attempted in the 1970s and again from 2003 onwards (Sifuna, 2007)<sup>5</sup>.

## Socio-economic context

Eshiwani claims that socio-economic circumstances can have an impact on the quality of education. “In areas or homes where there is a demand for the child’s labour or where there are other employment detractors such as the *watalii* at the coast or unauthorized kiosk errands at the boarders (boarding schools), school quality in those areas may be adversely affected” (1993). I would like to take a brief look at the socio-economic context in Kenya and how it may influence the quality and impact of education on students.

The issue of socio-economic development in Kenya after Independence is greatly debated and is complex, due to factors such as local political interest, and international interventions. It is currently popular to compare Kenya with Korea and other countries which were its peers in the 1960s, in terms of their economic growth and development over the last 50 years. Korea, for example, has moved from being far less developed than Kenya to being much more developed both financially and in other contexts; while Kenya has moved from being in a better position than Korea in 1960, to being less developed than Korea today. This bench-marking has contributed to creating the awareness that Kenya should be able to improve its performance as other countries have done (Owino Otieno, R. & Ndungu, M.S., 2010).

Since Independence in 1963, economic growth has been uneven with high growth rates in the 1960s and early 1970s, followed by sluggish performance in the mid-1970s and 1980s. By the 1990s, the economy was contracting and gross domestic product (GDP) was declining; this situation prevailed up to 2002 (Owino Otieno, R. & Ndungu, N.S., 2010). Socio-economic indicators deteriorated greatly: estimated people living in poverty in 1990 was 48.8%, while at the end of 2002 it was 56%. Life expectancy declined from 57 years in 1986 to 47 years in 2000; infant mortality increased from 62% per 1,000 in 1993, to 78% per 1,000 in 2003. When I first came to the country in 2001, I had no pre-conceived notions about Kenya and I had no idea of what I would find here. However, both in 2001 and 2002, I did observe the poor infrastructure in Nairobi, the chaotic public transport system, the riots by high school students, instances of corruption and so on. I returned to Kenya in 2003 and stayed for 7 months; in

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<sup>5</sup> For further confirmation regarding the history of the Kenyan education system see: Keriga, L. & Bujra, A. (2009). *Social policy, development and governance in Kenya. An Evaluation and Profile of Education in Kenya. Research Report*. Nairobi. Development Policy Management Forum (DPMF). [Accessible at [http:// www.dpmf.org](http://www.dpmf.org).]



2004 I relocated to Kenya permanently. I can say that from 2003 onwards, I noticed ongoing improvements in Nairobi, in terms of cleanliness, infrastructure, models of car available, increased imports of foreign goods, etc. In fact, from 2003 to 2007, the government implemented the Economic Recovery Strategy for Wealth and Employment Creation (ERS), which brought about a great improvement in the Kenyan economy, which reached a growth of over 7% by 2007.

To further economic growth and development, *Vision 2030*, a long-term development blueprint for Kenya was formulated. It focuses on three pillars: economic, social and political governance, to transform Kenya into a newly industrialized, middle-income country providing a high quality of life to all its citizens, in a clean and secure environment, by 2030. Generally, the document is considered to be a good framework for growth, although unfortunately, it does not address the issue of risk assessment and management in the case of scenarios such as high oil and food prices, drought, deteriorating terms of trade and high levels of inflation. Currently our economy is battling with these issues and people are experiencing a constant rise in the cost of living, without any increase in salary. The impact of the post-electoral violence of 2008, the drought of 2008, the global financial and economic crisis were not taken into account in *Vision 2030* and so, Kenya's momentum for growth has been severely hit. It is yet to be seen how we will emerge from the current economic situation, which will largely depend on global recovery, the avoidance of drought and the implementation of key structural reforms foreseen in the document (Owino Otieno, R. & Ndungu, N.S., 2010).

Over the years, I have become aware, that part of the diversity in the groups of students whom I teach lies in the socio-economic backgrounds which they come from. I see some driving to school in expensive cars, others driving to school in middle range cars, some come by public transport, while others walk to school. Some of my students wear expensive new clothes, while others dress well by purchasing clothes in the second hand markets around the city; others are dressed in a simpler manner. Some students have English or American style accents when they speak, depending on where they went to school, or other influences they may have been exposed to, while others speak with the accents of their home areas, or the part of Nairobi which they come from. Some students live in expensive areas of the city, others live in middle class locations, some live in hostels and others live in slum areas. Some students can buy whatever they want for lunch as they have plenty of money; while other students have the exact money they need for lunch and bus fare that week; some students go to very cheap eating places outside the university as they cannot afford the subsidized rates at the cafeteria; there are probably a few who don't have lunch at all.

I sense that these differences are noticed by the students themselves and that it can affect their interaction. In some feedback I requested from students to whom I had taught Philosophical Anthropology from November 2007 to March 2008 (during the post-electoral violence in Kenya), I have found a few references to this. One student states *Many are the times I would look down upon a specific class in society, thinking they are worthless and do not deserve to be alive, especially during the past election violence...the lecture on human dignity transformed my thinking. I learnt and reflected on your words that 'every being has a value' (intrinsic value)*" (OLC). Another student wrote that, having studied Philosophical anthropology *I have become more sensitive to peoples' feelings and I have also learnt how to respect others, regardless of their social class, educational background, political affiliation and ethnic*

*background. I have also become less judgemental (RM). (KEL) explains that, thanks to Philosophical Anthropology I have been able to interact freely and confidently with people irrespective of age, tribe, race or financial status. Having learnt to respect people and their dignity through this subject, (MAO) comments Respect to me is automatic no matter whether the person is rich or poor because value cannot be measured with money....by doing this, people have also learnt to respect me back and I never ever discriminate... I used to think that certain areas are meant for a certain class of people and feared that maybe when I went through these areas, my dignity will be lowered. Now that I have learnt that dignity cannot be valued with money, I do not fear and I am quite comfortable going through these areas.* These few comments illustrate implicit attitudes which the students had towards each other, or others, before doing Philosophical Anthropology and how their attitudes have changed through doing this unit. They confirm the sense I had that their diversity was affecting their relations with each other in a not so positive manner.

In Nairobi city I have seen signs of very wealthy Kenyans in the cars they drive, the houses they own, the clothes they wear, the places they visit for entertainment, etc. At the same time, there is a growing middle class, both upper and lower, which again are identifiable by their homes, the areas where they live, schools they attend, etc. In Nairobi, the really poor are to be found in the slums where disease, filth, immorality, etc. is quite common, although not in everyone's case. Some also live on the streets. However, outside Nairobi, upcountry, real poverty is not a problem in most localities. This is because nearly everywhere in Kenya, food can be easily cultivated. Many people may not have a lot of cash, but they can survive and make a living; there is space, clean air, etc. although environmental degradation exists in some places, especially due to deforestation (Mathaai, 2007).

This is a scenario which, reflecting on it now, I probably did not expect to find when I came to teach in Kenya. As Kenya is usually considered to be a third world, developing country, implicitly I probably assumed that my students would live in more or less similar socio-economic contexts. However, as time passed, I learnt that many students have difficulty putting together the fees required by the university; some have to take academic leave of one year to gather the fees and recommence their studies. Others come from wealthy families who have no problems in paying fees. A number of students are benefiting from various scholarship programmes which we offer, and which we are trying to increase. Now it is also possible for students to get loans from the Higher Education Loans Board, up to a certain percentage of university fees. However, fees are probably still a challenge for the majority of our students, even when they are coming from middle class backgrounds, due to the financial and economic situation in our country. One may well ask how this economic diversity arose in a post-colonial republic?

Before independence, most Kenyans, within their ethnic communities, were in similar financial situations although some had more wealth than others in the form of goats, cows, and land (Mathaai, 2007). Large areas of land belonging to different ethnic communities were confiscated by the colonizers upon their arrival in Kenya; other portions which had become uninhabited due to famine and disease, was declared Crown land and sold or leased to the settlers who began to arrive in the 1900s (Eshiwani, 1993). Shortly before Independence, the government organized a programme in which local people could purchase land in certain areas, which was being sold to the government by European farmers planning to leave Kenya. At this time, various political interests influenced land purchase and

redistribution among Kenyans, which affected, at least partially, the degree to which the various ethnic communities were able to develop economically, and which continue to create problems today (Eshiwani, 1993).

As mentioned earlier, access to education and employment afterwards has also affected economic development around the country, along with the move by many people towards Nairobi, as the source of financial development for the individual, the family and the community up-country. Land is still considered to be an important and secure form of wealth, as has been the case traditionally, not just in Kenya or Africa, but around the world. However, other than land, currently wealth in Kenya seems to be focused in and around Nairobi in the form of property such as housing, cars and other goods. This is largely due to a highly centralized form of governance after Independence, which, while allowing Nairobi to develop, has hindered the economic development of other cities and towns around the country. It would seem that Kenya's continues to be a developing country, 50 years after Independence, largely due to its political system and governance structure which "seems to have promoted patronage rather than issue-focused and development-centered politics. The electoral and political processes are dominated by ethnic biases as opposed to consideration of issues being advanced by political parties, whereas the existing legal framework has also centered political authority and control of resources at the central government level" (Owino Otieno, R. & Ndungu, N.S., 2010).

This would seem to be the view of most ordinary Kenyans, as I have observed from my conversations with colleagues and friends. At the same time, I too witness the consequences of this political approach in the day to day decisions of our government. Currently we have a good example of what I am referring to. Kenya is on the verge of famine in August 2011 (*Daily Nation*, 24<sup>th</sup> August 2011), yet our government is buying GMO maize from Malawi to deal with the hunger (*Daily Nation*, 20<sup>th</sup> July 2011), when in other parts of the country (*Daily Nation*, 17<sup>th</sup> August, 2011), not too far from the famine struck areas, farmers have maize which they produced with a guarantee from the government that it would be bought at 3,000ks per bag. The government has since changed its mind and will only buy this maize at 1,800ks per bag, the cost price for the farmer who needs to make a living from these sales (*Daily Nation*, 31<sup>st</sup> August, 2011)! The maize is there gathering dust while we are importing GMO maize and someone is benefiting from kickbacks on the imports (*Daily Nation*, 20<sup>th</sup> July 2011). Thanks to the Kenyans for Kenya initiative we proved what we can do when we want to get together to help our people who are in need!

National teachers are on strike in early September 2011 when schools should open for the last term, because of the government's failure to keep its promises regarding teachers' salaries, the employment of more teachers to address the problem of lack of staffing in many schools (Bold, T., Sandefur, J., Kimenyi, M.S. & Mwabu, G., 2010), etc. The government claims there is no money and yet, the same newspapers report that the Contingency Fund will be used to pay the backlog on MPs taxes, which is now being required by the Kenya Revenue Authority, in application of the law, and supported by the Chief Justice (*Daily Nation*, 6<sup>th</sup> September 2011).

When I first came to Kenya and I became more aware that it was Kenyans themselves (politicians, etc.) who were stealing from their own people and keeping them in poverty due to corruption, greed, self-interest, and the desire for wealth, my sense of injustice was strongly aroused. I would not have been so

surprised if foreign powers were responsible for the injustice and the taking advantage of the average Kenyan, although this is still bad in my opinion, and does occur to a certain extent. However, that Kenyans do this knowingly to their own people is even worse. It produced a sense of frustration in me which lead me to ask: what can one do to overcome these and other forms of local injustice?

Practices like these, carried out by those in authority, simply make it easier for others with less responsibility for the nation to justify themselves in making some extra cash, in a variety of underhand ways, to the detriment of their fellow citizens, some of whom are living in poverty or misery. Such situations make me ask: where are the values contained in the traditional African *ubuntu* (Lutz, 2008; Charles, 2007) ideal, which philosophers and academics enjoy studying and writing about? It no longer seems to be alive at the higher levels of society and is being lost at the grass roots!

The problems of our political and governance system are meant to be addressed through the implementation of various strategies proposed in the new Constitution, which should facilitate competitive, issue-based politics, a politically engaged and open society, free from patronage, tribal and regional alliances, along with transparent, accountable, ethical and results-oriented government institutions. However, we will need more than a change in our laws, we need to bring about a change of attitude both among the governing and those being governed (Owino Otieno R. & Ndungu, N.S., 2010). As we saw recently when the head of the Integrity Centre, PLO Lumumba, tried to unmask a relatively low level form of corruption in which a government minister was involved (perhaps in a somewhat inappropriate manner), there was a public outcry by politicians and Lumumba was thrown out of office. Such events illustrate how deep the need for ethical awareness and accountability is in our leaders.

My own answer to the sense of frustration which these injustices arouse, is education. Let us invest in educating honest citizens who are capable of living and working for the good of the nation as a whole, overcoming the temptation to seek their own benefit and satisfy their self-interest. Some say it is impossible for people to function moved by these ideals in the “real” world. Some of my own students claim that it is impossible to be ethical in the workplace in our country, when we discuss these issues in class. However, others, through the study of Philosophical Anthropology and Principles of Ethics, along with their experience at Strathmore University, where they have had the chance to use their freedom to grow themselves, think otherwise.

## **Fostering unity in diversity within the educational context**

Having identified some of the challenges to effective teaching and learning such as fear of the teacher, peer pressure, systems of punishment, copying work, and learning style and their possible roots, we have seen that the traditional, cultural background, along with the educational system at primary and secondary level, historical and socio-economic factors all seem to have possible influences in my students. Some of these variables may be common to all my students, such as the educational system in Kenya, while others tend to emphasize the diversity that exists amongst them, such as their cultural or economic backgrounds. As I became more aware of these issues, I realized that I, as lecturer, had the responsibility of helping my students to accept and respect each others’ diversity, and foster a sense of unity within our diversities, in order to create a conducive learning environment in the classroom. I felt

that this was essential, so that each student would feel comfortable to ask, answer, and discuss the issues that come up in class in an atmosphere of freedom and mutual respect, and so, facilitate effective teaching and learning.

The post electoral violence which Kenya experienced during the first months of 2008 brought to light the fact that our diverse ethnicity may still be a cause of conflict, or can be used as such. At the time, I was teaching Philosophical Anthropology to two groups of first year Commerce students; one group was made up of 150 students while the other consisted of approximately 90 students. Our semester had started in November 2007, and by the time we were breaking for the Christmas holiday, I had already sensed that the students in both groups had divided themselves into cliques and that there was certain animosity amongst them. I noticed that the same students always sat together in the same places, and that while some students did participate in class, generally participation levels were low, possibly due to wariness of each other.

However, I tried to make the class environment as student friendly as I could which seems to have had some impact as one student commented in feedback gathered a few months after the unit had finished: *The lecturer's ability to establish an environment with some sort of 'ease' in class making students feel free to communicate questions and answers to her. She just establishes a friendly interaction with her class (which facilitated learning) (RKV).* Another commented: *I gained a lot from the lecturer's way/manner of delivery. The classes were always friendly and interactive which is conducive for learning (MYM).* *The lecturer's approach towards the students. She gave us a chance to fully express our thoughts and feelings during discussions in lectures (SA).*

After the violence had calmed down a little, Strathmore reopened, in the third week of January. I was concerned about the attitude that my students would have towards each other after the violence, especially given the fact that they had not seemed especially friendly towards each other before the event. I also realized that possibly many students would still not be able to come to class, either because of transport difficulties in returning to Nairobi or because of difficulties in moving around the city, depending on where they lived, as there were still road blocks manned by different ethnic groups which the students would need to get through without being harmed. I decided that I needed to hear from them about what they had experienced during the violence, in order to understand what their attitudes may be, and so be able to devise a way of dealing with the various situations and circumstances which my students may find themselves in at that time. On the first day of class, less than half the students returned to school, in both groups. During class I spoke a little about what had happened and I asked them to write what they had personally experienced during the post-electoral violence.

Depending on where they were living during that time, some were not directly affected at all by the violence; others experienced it indirectly and / or from a distance, while staying at home; others, were more directly affected by the violence, having to flee their homes, losing relatives in the tragedy, etc. One student wrote *During, or rather, before the post election violence, my family was threatened by some people. We took it lightly until 31<sup>st</sup> December 2007. We were chased away by a mob of people from our home. On 1<sup>st</sup> January 2008, this was the time, I slept under a tent for the first time. My friends, people I knew, were part of the mob. But although I was affected psychologically, mentally, emotionally*

*and physically, I learnt that they acted on an unknown issue, under pressure. So I have forgiven them and opted never to bring up the topic again. My reflection made me see that the politicians are mainly to blame not my friends, so we are back together (NMM).* When asked what he had learnt through Philosophical Anthropology, the student wrote *Forgiveness. (I) learnt to forgive those who did wrong to me, my family and my society. I have taken everyone as one equal body, despite what one had done to me before.* This has made the student happier because *I have reconciled with friends I had considered as enemies.*

In order to help all my students overcome the divisions caused by their experiences during the post-electoral violence, I discussed the issue of unity and diversity in class when we were covering the topic on human dignity and the equality of all human beings. I then assigned the last Continuous Assessment Test for the semester. Each student was to look for someone that is different to them for some reason, ethnic, racial, religious, etc.; they were to do something with this person in order to interact and experience something together. Afterwards, they had to write what they had done, and having reflected on it, explain what they had learnt through this experience of seeking harmony and unity with someone different. They were also to link their experience and discoveries to ideas which they had learnt in Philosophical Anthropology. Many students carried out very interesting initiatives which proved their capacity to bring about change and help improve relationships with and among other people. I chose ten of the most significant reports and, with the agreement of the students, they were published on the Strathmore University website, to illustrate what students could do, within the troubled context of the country at that time, to foster unity and harmony while respecting one another's' diversity.

### **Gladys and her neighbor**

Gladys describes how she lives in an area inhabited by people of all economic levels, poor, rich and middle class. Her nearest neighbor could be defined as poor as he earns under a dollar a day; he also has seven small children to feed and often depends on other peoples' generosity to be able to get a meal a day. When she was given the project described above, she decided to speak with this neighbor and ask how she could help him to solve his problems. However, he invited her to leave his house as he thought she was intimidating him; he come from a different ethnic group to hers. She tells how, the situation could have turned into a heated argument but that, having learnt in class to respect other peoples' feelings, she waited for ten minutes until his temper cooled.

They were then able to engage in a fruitful dialogue which lead them to a reasonable solution; she mentions that it was somewhat ironical as her neighbor is a nilote (who do not usually work the land), but they agreed to rehabilitate some waste land for cultivation. With the help of his children, she and her neighbour tended the land until it was ready for cultivation. Her parents helped them to purchase some seedlings, which they planted and watered every day. *Our seedlings are growing bigger and our background and cultural differences (are) sorted out. Unity in diversity is developing, she comments. I have come to learn that differences created by human beings can be solved by human beings. Human beings should value each other even though they might come from different social or cultural backgrounds. We should embrace the fact that our diversity is mutually enriching and a harmonious co-existence will give rise to development (Gladys, K.).*

## Nganga and his football team

Ng'ang'a explains that he had often longed to organize a football match between the two estates, Uptown and Downsouth, in the area where he lives. People there rarely interacted for various reasons. *Was it economic status that divided them? Or was it just people minding their own business? I said to myself that this gap must be bridged... especially as tribalism was a fast growing issue that led to violence.* A week later he put up a sign on the local notice board announcing that he was organizing a football match between the two estates. *People tried to discourage me (saying) that this would result in grudges. I listened to this advice and realized that it actually made sense. Therefore, I had to improve my idea. I decided that I would mix people from the different estates and form two teams. This would foster unity as everyone would be playing as a combined force (on their team) without holding back.*

He announced this idea and was surprised and delighted to see that, two days before the match, people from the two estates and from diverse cultures, were playing together on the common football field. *People had begun interacting way earlier than I had planned. To make things better, they formed two teams which constituted people even from outside the two estates.* When the day of the match arrived, everyone on the field was happy and excited and Ng'ang'a was happy to see that his idea had actually been brought to life. He commented afterwards *What I learned from this was, for something to actually change, it must start with oneself. It makes no sense to come up with an idea and not bring it to life. I also learned that it's our differences that make us special. This is because the two teams formed had a wide range of players with different talents, which formed synergy. Through Philosophical Anthropology I have learned the hard way that it is important to respect human diversity and appreciate it. When one tries to judge people according to their differences it could result in big problems e.g. violence. Instead, Philosophical Anthropology taught me to use diversity as a resource and wealth. We have to learn to value our diversity and conserve it by harmonizing our differences. We also have to create unity in diversity. I therefore learned to appreciate the differences amongst people. It also enabled me to learn to love people (as they are) since not everyone will be what you want them to become. (The unit) helped me to realize the value of the person. Human beings are of greater value than any other creature, thus need to be preserved. The killings had to stop. (Ng'ang'a, Alfred).*

These are just two examples, however, overall, I was greatly impressed by the capacity for initiative and pro-activity that I discovered in the students; I saw that they had found ways of using and building on our diversity in order to establish unity and harmony in very diverse settings. I think that they too had the opportunity to discover what they are capable of achieving if they want to.

From the time the students returned to class after the violence, to the end of the semester, I also encouraged a lot of discussion and dialogue amongst the students in class as we covered the course material. Through this method, many students learnt to listen to other peoples' views and respect their opinions, even if they do not agree on issues; many commented in the feedback which they gave 2-3 months later, that this was one of the most useful methods used during the course to facilitate their learning process. It also helped them to appreciate that they could still live and work harmoniously together, although they have different ideas, approaches to life, etc. As one student put it *(the lecturer) would ask questions to be answered openly by any willing party. This helped me to be able to express*

*myself and embrace some peoples' opinions (ANON). Perhaps more significantly for me, and particularly given the special context in which I taught that unit, some students were inspired to adjust their own behavior through what they observed in the lecturer: The fact that the lecturer adapted a friendly approach to teaching, showed passion in her work and always works with absolute regard for her students opinions and ideologies has made me want or actually apply the same mannerisms in life, where applicable (ANON).*

### **Another attempt...**

The most recent project which I have introduced to the students doing Business Studies and Business and Information Technology to whom I am currently teaching Philosophical Anthropology, is to carry out some research on cultural issues in groups of three people who come from different ethnic backgrounds. Some groups have opted for other forms of diversity in the makeup of their teams, but the important issue was to offer them the possibility of working with people who come from a different background, or with whom they do not ordinarily work. Again, the aim is to help them to discover that we can establish harmony within our diversity when working together in a common project, especially if there is good will. In fact, in the feedback which I received midway through this semester, some students indicated that this type of group work was one of the most helpful forms of teaching and learning which they were experiencing during the unit.

As mentioned above, some of these groups have had their research papers accepted by the 2011 Strathmore University Ethics Conference, and will present their findings now. Hopefully we can have an interesting youth panel with their presentations, and also discuss the effectiveness of this form of team work in enhancing unity and harmony while respecting our mutual diversity within the educational context. Their responses, along with those of other people in the audience, will provide me with further useful input for my research and hopefully help me to improve my search for understanding diversity and seeking unity in the Kenyan educational context.

### **Conclusion**

In this paper I have described my efforts to understand and to explain the various forms of diversity I can observe in the Kenyan educational context. I would like to emphasise here that this diversity is not necessarily a negative factor, it is simply a reality. If our diversity is misused for political or other reasons, it can cause havoc, as we have seen after the 2007 elections here in Kenya. However, if we learn to cherish our diversities in a mutually respectful manner, and build on them, they can become a source of enrichment within the context of national unity.

I have tried to show how, as a lecturer, I try to foster unity within the classroom while respecting the diversity that exists among my students. In my opinion, this is a key role of the teacher in Kenyan society today, which should be highlighted in their professional education at all levels. Every teacher has an important contribution to make in fostering national harmony, peace and effective nation-building, as the students who have assimilated the value of diversity in their education are better able to contribute to promoting unity and the common good in their workplace and society as a whole.



At the same time, we should keep in mind that professionals in every field are in constant contact with young people, be it as interns, pupils, apprentices, etc. in law firms, IT companies, businesses, and so forth, or with youth involved in political movements, local government, etc. The opportunities for interacting with young people are endless; I feel that it is also the responsibility of anyone who works with the youth to contribute to helping them appreciate the value of diversity in all its forms, encourage them to accept it, and challenge them to find ways of fostering unity among people in all contexts, while respecting our mutual diversity. With this in mind, all the professions can contribute to enhancing nation-building and harmony, by fostering unity in diversity among our young people, and so facilitate a better future for our country.

I look forward to receiving all forms of feedback on my thoughts in order to refine my understanding of our cultural heritage, socio-economic situation and educational context, so that I can make adjustments and improve the effectiveness of my work as a lecturer in Philosophy here at Strathmore University.

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