

# **THE MEANING, IDEA AND HISTORY OF UNIVERSITY/HIGHER EDUCATION IN AFRICA: A BRIEF LITERATURE REVIEW**

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this paper is to trigger scholarly debates over the meaning, idea, and history of the university or HEIs. It is also to manifest the prevalence of multiple forms of HEIs and to question why the narrative of one form of HEIs/university meaning, idea and history predominate the discourse. In spite of historical evidences that confirm the existence of higher learning institutions elsewhere, some scholars argue that it was only in Western Europe that higher learning originally and “indisputably” emerged and survived since the medieval period. History, however, attests that there were other forms of universities or higher learning institutions, for instance, in Asia, Africa, and the Arab world. This unfair conclusion is the product of the “coloniality of power” and requires deconstruction. This is not well addressed in the literature. This discussion is qualitatively developed on the basis of related literature review.

**Keywords:** Meaning, History, Idea, University/HEI, Coloniality, Deconstruction

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## **The Meaning of Higher Education/University**

In consideration of goals and national and institutional diversifications, it is not an easy task to define both modern higher education and a university. Higher education covers a wider range of higher learning institutions including the university. These higher learning institutions could be organized in different ways, commonly within a university and in a separate institution as university and other tertiary learning institutions. For instance, a university, from the British perspective, is an institution with its power to award its own degree and is preeminent in the field of research (Allen, 1988). Generally, higher education is a set that constitutes the university, which is a subset of higher education. However, in some contexts, higher education and university are used interchangeably (Assié-Lumumba, 2005). Nevertheless, they do not cover the same reality. Higher education

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denotes a more holistic resonance as it encompasses all post-secondary or tertiary institutions. A university is part of higher learning institution that may reward a degree or some sort of credential.

Modern higher education is defined as an organized tertiary learning and training activities and institutions that include conventional universities such as arts, humanities, and science faculties and more specialized university institutions in agriculture, engineering, science, and technology. The concept of higher education also includes such post-secondary institutions like polytechnics, colleges of education, and “*grandes école*.” Under the umbrella of higher education come all forms of professional institutions. Even this wide spectrum does not exhaust the possibilities of forms of higher education (Assié-Lumumba, 2005).

A university, on the other hand, represents both a higher learning institution and a community of scholars or persons. A university is a higher learning institution that brings men and women to a high level of intellectual development in the arts and science, and in the traditional professional disciplines, and promotes high-level research. It also signifies a community of persons engaged in study and research. A university is a source of universal knowledge and highly skilled human power for the professions. Other higher education institutions are also engaged in the training of middle class technical and vocational professional personnel. Universities and other institutions of higher education differ in their mission, goal, functions, the requisite qualification of the faculty, the criteria for admission of students, the duration of programs they offer, and the type of certification they award (Assié-Lumumba, 2005). All these depend on the needs and priorities of different societies.

*Universitas*, a name applied to diversified corporate bodies of the Middle Ages in Europe, also include the organization of teachers and students. Through time, the name had more particularly attached to the teacher-student corporate organization as *universitas litterarum*, from which, particularly since the 18th century, the name University was derived. Thence, cultivation of the intellectual power and the methodological studies of academic disciplines have become the major purpose of the university (Ruegg, 1992). According to Verger (1992a), the modern term university has been derived from the classical Latin word, *universitas*, which means “the totality” or the “whole.” In the medieval times, *universitas* had been a general term used to denote all kinds of community or corporate such as guild, a trade, a brotherhood, and so on. Gradually, *universitas magistrorum et scholarium* (“the university of masters and students”) stands for organized communities of individuals, who were responsible for higher learning and study.

Moreover, medieval university was a higher learning and teaching institution for a community of scholars with a certain degree of freedom or independence and internal unity. Some form of teaching and learning had antedated the emergence of a university in the world. The relative advancement of civilization had necessitated for higher learning and paved the way for the emergence of a university (Perkin, 2007). A university has stronger power of attraction of students and teachers or academic staff than the other higher education forms. Universities derive great prestige from their history where they secured some sort of administrative autonomy. Universities, in the medieval period, were one of the most privileged and prestigious institutions for the advancement of scholastic and academic thought and culture. Because universities constitute, in the same place, diversified scholars, they were and still are agents for the growth of knowledge that has the power to change the world. At the same time, universities also preserve heritage of the past. A university in the era of Newman was a public space where many academic people make academic contribution.

It is a place where inquiry is pushed forward, and discoveries verified and perfected, and rashness rendered innocuous, and error exposed, by the collision of mind with mind, and knowledge with knowledge. It is the place where the professor becomes eloquent, and is a missionary and a preacher, displaying his science in its most complete and winning form, pouring it forth with the zeal of enthusiasm, and lighting up his own love of it in the breasts of his hearers (Newman, 1910, no page).

Taking note of the above brief account, the meaning of a university/higher education is generally understood as a higher learning institution and academic environment, where a community of scholars engage in study (teaching and learning), research, and community services. It is also a center for professional training to serve society's socio-economic, political and cultural needs. Such institutions emerged and developed in the different parts of the world as discussed in the history section of this paper.

### **The Idea of a University/Higher Education**

It is not easy to define the idea of a university because it is differentiated in many ways. Hence, it will be good to understand higher education or a university in terms of its purpose and/or functions. The purpose of higher education is a broad and ambiguous issue as well (Clark, 1981). It is very difficult to establish and state a comprehensive purpose of a university. What is relatively possible to do is to explain the common tasks of higher education and a university. Higher learning institutions and universities have something to do with education and scholarship through teaching, research, and public services. Altbach (2006, p. 104) also confirms that "defining a university is not an easy task, especially in this era of differentiation in higher education, with new and diverse institutions emerging everywhere" without explaining the common functions, purposes and values.

The invisible product of a university, knowledge, may be the most common powerful element in the culture of a society. It may affect "the rise and fall of professions and even of social classes, of regions and even of nations" (Kerr, 1995, p. xiv). Medieval universities were teaching and training students in the service of the Church in the area of law, medicine, Church administration and others. They were largely vocational schools that enable students be able to gain employment within the established socio-economic order, not universities (Clark, 1981).

A brief look to the philosophy and goals of education and particularly the philosophy and goal of higher education will help us to understand the current idea of a university. The purpose of education, during the era of Aristotle had been to satisfy the material need of society through the production of learned citizens (Frijhoff, 1997). Philosophically, education consists of two important questions: what is education? What is education for? Education, according to Jarvis (1995, p.105), is an "organized and sustained instruction designed to communicate a combination of knowledge, skills, and understanding valuable for all the activities of life." For the Chinese philosopher, Confucius, "education is a process of integrating individuals into society and that knowledge should be acquired for the sake of harmony in society" (quoted in Jarvis, 1995, p.105). Allen (1988) has defined education as "the cultivation of the individual and learning is for the sake of understanding." One of the places where such education is provided with high level is higher education/university, whose idea has been shifting through time. A university is part of the general socio-economic and political fabric of a given society and era. It is an expression of its time and

features both present and future. Higher education/university has a major feature of transforming itself in conformity with changing situations (Kerr, 1995).

The idea of a university, for Jawaharlal Nehru, as Tilak (2015, p.56) quoted it, “stands for humanism, for tolerance, for progress, for the adventure of ideas and the search for truth. It stands for the onward march of humans towards ever-higher objectives. If universities discharge their duties adequately, then all is well with the nation and the people.” Throughout history, universities have played three interlocking roles, but differently at different times and in different places. These roles are teaching new generations; preserving and discovering knowledge; and contributing talent, ideas, advice, and challenge to the wider society. In an era of “non-lieux” (Non-places), universities are best placed to fulfill those roles today by resisting the pressures to uniformity and contributing to an intergenerational dialogue that requires diversity and disputation (Toohey, 2014).

In the Western world, Plato has perceived the purpose of higher education as “the cultivation of the individual for the sake of the ideal society; the individual was to be helped to achieve inner happiness, which would allow the state to benefit from the harmony of satisfied citizens fulfilling their proper roles” (Allen, 1988, p.89). The goal of higher education and the university was the pursuit of truth in learning, and dedication to the advancement of knowledge and the training of scholars for its own sake and the betterment of the life of the individual and the society. This includes the cultivation/training of the mind and the teaching of vocational and technical skills. Generally, university education should aim at initiating critical thinking through both teaching and research. This critical thinking is imperative to use resources better and to improve the human condition, with intelligence and for good judgment, to cope up with any eventuality. Therefore, education is to improve life, develop good judgment, and understand our environment. Learning is not a rivalry or a contest, but “it is a conversation” and the virtue of a university (as a place of many studies) is to exhibit it in this character” (Oakeshott, 2004, p. 23).

However, Newman (1996) did not accept the view of utility and the essentiality of research as the idea/purpose or function of a university. Newman considers only a liberal education in a university and proposes the establishment of a separate institution for research. For him, teaching and research require different abilities and are separate gifts and do not exist equally in the same person. He had the belief that a university is for the diffusion of knowledge, not for its advancement. The word University for Newman implies the pursuit of universal knowledge, because for him all knowledge forms one whole (Newman, 1910; Fuller, 2003). The whole idea of Newman's university is different from instruction for a vocation or a profession. “The purpose of a university education is the achievement of a particular expansion of outlook, turn of mind, habit of thought, and capacity for social and civic interaction” (Newman, 1996, p. xv). “Liberal education” is the principal purpose of a university for Newman (Ker, 2011; Fuller, 2003).

Jaspers (1965), on the other hand, argues that the university is a place for the search of truth. Truth requires systematic method of research, which is the foremost concern of a university. The second purpose of a university is teaching, because researched truth must be transmitted through teaching. A university has a third function that is culture (Jaspers, 1965). The unfinished struggle to create an “African University”, for instance, based its argument of the idea of the university on the philosophy that “every human being is born into a valid and legitimate knowledge system” that could be enriched and improved by higher education. For Africa, a university or higher education is supposed to be “developmental”: functioning as center for knowledge (Pursuit, promotion and

dissemination), research, the provision of intellectual leadership, manpower development, promotion of social and economic modernization, and intercontinental unity and international understanding (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2017).

The different approaches presented above indicate that universities and the higher education institutions must not have common and certain prescribed goals and purposes. The idea of a university depends on the socio-economic and political advancement of a society. In the Medieval period, the purpose of universities, with constant changes of emphasis, had been learning, virtue, and utility. It was to produce learned men, to educate in virtue, or to satisfy the material need of society. In other words, its purpose was to “advance knowledge, preparation the advancement of the observance of a code of social, moral, and religious conduct, and training for the high office or the professions” (Frijhoff, 1997). During the early medieval period, university studies had two purposes namely, training in humanism and training for a profession (de Ridder-Symoens, 1997). Any modification or/and change in emphasis to these purposes will transform universities. The modifications, priorities, and emphasis of the purposes are subject to the changes of the socio-economic, cultural, and political advancements, which are also the products of the overall activities of universities and diversification and proliferating academic disciplines (Kerr, 1995). Changes and shifts in emphasis in the purposes and priorities have caused the changing physiognomy of higher education (Frijhoff (1997). Hence, the idea of university must be to achieve the required educational purposes of a certain society at a certain time.

The traditional idea of a university never fades out but transforms and actualizes itself into new situations. A university perhaps no longer functions in the same way as it did before. Different people have different reflection about the contemporary university. Some think that the university entered a new phase, transformed; and others consider that a university has altogether diminished or the age of the university has ended. Simons et al. (2011) assume that contemporary university include such activities as experiments and inventions, the projects, initiatives and reflections, research, teaching, community services. The contemporary public role of a university “do neither look backwards to embrace old ideas of the university, nor just engage in abstract, normative or principled discussion” (Simons et al., 2011, pp. 7-8).

### **Higher Education/University Transformation**

The patterns of higher education/university transformation vary from country to country and from region to region as well. This transformation is not equally evident everywhere. Nonetheless, there are some common patterns worldwide. Through time, partly due to the pursuit of learning, universities have transformed and expanded their function and mission from a simple transfer of bookish knowledge to searching, generating, and applying knowledge. The medieval mission of the university - transmission and training - has been coupled with knowledge production. University search, production, and dissemination of knowledge have become universal. The idea of the traditional university, as an institution that was promoting liberal education has been challenged by the transformation of the university into a more research centered, professionalized and specialized modern university (Fuller, 2003). According to Kerr (2001), by the 20th century, the medieval university that was instated by a single community of masters and students has become a large institution of diversified function, personnel, and activities that are held together by a common name and related purposes. Diversified departments, libraries, institutes, laboratories, researchers, scientists emerged and developed in a university. Modern science replaced moral philosophy and research emasculated the status of teaching.

Technology facilitated mobility, interaction, and collaboration. The whole process gave birth to the “Idea of a Modern University” that functions inside the general socio-economic, cultural, and political fabrics of society.” “This great transformation is regretted by some, accepted by many, gloried in, as yet, by few. But it should be understood by all” (Kerr, 2001, p. 2). For some scholars, higher education institutions/universities have become “secondary schools, vocational schools, teacher-training schools, research centers, uplift agencies, businesses, ...cheapened, vulgarized and mechanized themselves” and “worst of all, they become service stations for the general public” (Kerr, 2001, p. 4). At present, because of the change dynamics and the resultant transformation, higher education institutions, particularly universities “enshrine both hope and nostalgia” (Assié-Lumumba, 2005, p. 19).

In the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century, several developing higher education/university systems and institutions were increasingly serving the elite and a national culture as part of territorial consolidation. The result was that universities have become ivory towers and enjoyed high status because they were considered as educating the best social and intellectual sections of the nation (King, 2004a). However, the Enlightenment and the application of rationalist methods in Europe reinforced the notion of the university as the center of science. The rise of the Humboldtian Research University in Germany in the nineteenth century added the significant function of knowledge creation to that of teaching and professional training. This development had synergistically connected teaching and research (King, 2004b). Subsequently, higher education institutions have linked their functions with a wider range of social interests and developed a wider sense of responsibility to the wider society than simply standing for self-orientation or serving a small fraction of intellectual inquiry alone.

In the twentieth century, it has been massified in student enrollment, staffing, institutions, infrastructure, and disciplines. The third mission, community services, of higher education/university was initiated (King, 2004b). Massification<sup>2</sup> of higher education has become a global phenomenon during the second half of the 20th century (Trow, 1973). Around the globe, the number of higher education students is estimated to be more than 262 million by 2025. The major student population growth takes place in developing region like Africa and the big emerging countries like China and India (Maslen, 2012).

Higher education/university transformation continues dynamically. Since the 20<sup>th</sup> century, higher education/university has become “an institution consciously devoted to the pursuit of knowledge, the solution of problems, the critical appreciation of achievement, and the training of men at a really high level. No longer could a single individual master any subject – Newman’s universal liberal man was gone forever” (Kerr, 2001, p. 3). It also extended its inter-institutional staff and student mobility and interaction into a more international and global dimension through different rationales, objectives, and diversified actors. Moreover, society developed new expectations from higher education/university. In the words of Clark Kerr (2001), the University has become “multiversity” that has multiple purposes, performs multiple functions, constitute multiple people from inside and from outside the academia. Higher education or a university has been considered by many as a private good and industry. Education in a university is “commodified.” Table 2 below indicates some of the new conceptions and related features about higher education.

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<sup>2</sup> According to Martin Trow (1973), there are three higher education enrollment typologies, namely elite, mass, and universal. Elite represents the gross enrolment ratio up to 15%, mass up to 50% and universal above 50% of the cohort age.

Table 1. Changing Features of Higher Education

Traditional features	New conceptions
Higher education, public good	Industry, corporate, private good
Higher education services	commodities
Students	Consumers/customers
Educators	Service providers
Cooperation/aid for capacity building	Competitive alliance
Quality improvements	Revenue generation
Academic partnership and soft diplomacy	Strategic partnerships for national economic competitiveness
Diversity of perspectives	Shared prestige and global ranking

Source: Adopted from Inan et al (2014).

Moreover, for reasons of global developments that took place particularly after the end of the Second World War (higher education massification), many “governments lack the fiscal resources to respond to rising domestic demand for a higher education with more state supply” (King, 2004a, p. 23). This development has paved the way for the emergence of private higher education institutions in many parts of the world and the drafting of strategies to get additional sources of funding. In sub-Saharan Africa private higher education institutions have got legitimacy since the 1990s. The private higher education institutions grew from an estimated 30 in 1990 to more than 85 in 1999, and by 2003, there were more than 176 private higher education institutions in nine sub-Saharan countries of Africa (Varghese, 2006). Moreover, according to World Bank (2009) report, the number of private universities and colleges, including for-profit and not-for-profit institutions, mushroomed to an estimated 468 by 2009.

Real public expenditure on education had dropped by 25.8 percent between 1995 and the end of 2000 (King, 2004b). Methods of increasing additional fund include corporatization (marketization of the various activities of higher education) and internationalization, which has increased fee-paying global student mobility and marketization of the products of higher education. Higher education institutions/universities “are less distinctive organizations than in the past. They must succeed as “quasi-corporate entities producing a wide range of goods and services” (Gumport 2000, p. 71), competing nationally, regionally and internationally for resources and reputation. This development requires new structures and new system of governance that gave rise to new relationships and distributions of power in the higher education institutions and between state and higher education (Henkel, 2007; Shattock 2005). Ashby (1966) suggests that higher education/university must be “sufficiently stable to sustain the

ideal which gave it birth and sufficiently responsive to remain relevant to the society which supports it" (Ashby 1966, p. 3).

The university/higher education rather transforms and readjusts itself according to the existing socio-economic, cultural and political scenarios. It is moving in a process of change and continuity but predominantly in the Global North fashion. The initial sources of the above transformational trends and features were mainly originated from the Global North and the Global South imports them in different ways; either through imposition, persuasion or colonialism. The historical background of modern world higher education institutions/universities attests this fact.

### **The History of a University**

Even though the intention of this paper is not to argue and discuss in detail the historical development of a university, it is to show the need to be fair and qualify the narratives and discussion of the history of the university with a global dimension and in its diversified form. It is also to initiate a scholarly debate for further discussion and research. The history of the origin of the university is becoming controversial. However, European scholars consider the medieval Bologna University and the Universities in Paris as the first models of modern universities in Europe and the world. Others claim other higher education institutions in the other part of the world. It is, however, obvious that there were different higher learning institutions in the different parts of the world in ancient and medieval times that had mutual interactions and relations to one another that had given birth to the European Medieval University model that had become eventually a model for universities in the modern world through different ways, including colonialism.

Despite the historical evidence that confirms the existence of higher learning institutions elsewhere prior to the University of Bologna, Perkin (2007), Verger (1992a), and Rugg (1992) argue that it was only in Western Europe that higher learning indisputably emerges and survives since the medieval period. Perkin (2007), for example, argues that, even though all advanced civilizations had higher education, it is only in medieval Europe that a recognizable higher institution emerged. His argument reads partly as follows:

All advanced civilizations have needed higher education to train their ruling, priestly, military, and other service elites, but only in medieval Europe did an institution recognizable as a university arise: a school of higher learning combining teaching and scholarship and characterized by its corporate autonomy and academic freedom. The Confucian schools for the mandarin bureaucracy of imperial China, the Hindu gurukulas and Buddhist vihares for the priests and monks of medieval India, the madrasa for the mullahs and Quranic judges of Islam, the Aztec and Inca temple schools for the priestly astronomers of pre-Columbian America, the Tokugawa Han schools for Japanese samurai - all taught the high culture, received doctrine, literary and/or mathematical skills of their political or religious masters, with little room for questioning or analysis. Only in Europe from the 12th century onwards, did an autonomous, permanent, corporate institution of higher learning emerge and survive, in varying forms, down to the present day (Perkin, 2007, p. 159).



In Europe, the understanding about universities is closely attached to the Middle Ages when universities appeared for the first time between the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The university allegedly built in 1088 and located in the Italian city of Bologna has often been regarded as the oldest university in the West. Verger (1992) also confirms that West European University is “indisputably an original institution” and “regarded as the sole source of the model which gradually spread through the whole of Europe and then to whole world.” He goes on saying that “it is no doubt true that other civilizations ... were familiar with the forms of higher education which a number of historians, for the sake of convenience, have sometimes described as universities” (Verger, 1992, p. 35). Ruegg (1992) asserts that “The University is a European institution; indeed, it is the European institution par excellence. ... No other European institution has spread over the entire world in the way in which the traditional form of the European university has done” (Ruegg, 1992, p. xix).

These assertions would be correct, if and only if we consider a European form of a university.

Medieval European universities are products of the interactions of global higher learning institutions. European institutions, systems, ideas and interpretations have developed through usurpation and interaction; and spread all over the world at the expense of many other non-European civilizations through colonialism. Most of non-European regional and national civilizations were destroyed and aborted in favor of European “par excellence.” Many parts of the world, including Europe, had developed some form, in some cases peculiar forms to the contemporary socio-economic and political scenario.

The issue of the history of the university leads people to raise many questions than answers. These may include such questions as: What is the meaning of a university? Who has given the meaning? Why like that? When did the term (University) develop? Why some higher education institutions are called universities “for the sake of convenience”? Why European universities are “recognizable” and others are not? Why some higher learning institutions in the Arab world, Asia, and Africa are not universities in the “real sense of the word”? Whose right is to define the meaning of a university?

It is obvious that institutions for higher learning have a long history in the other parts of the world as well. There were different forms of universities, long before Bologna, for instance, in India, China, Africa, and the Middle East (Kotecha, 2012). There were universities that reflect peculiar socio-economic, political, and cultural developments in the rest of the world. These higher learning institutions may not be called “universities” in the European sense of the term due to probably language differences. However, they had served their society as higher learning institutions. There were higher learning institutions that were international in their academic and operational systems as far back as the 5th century Before Common Era (BCE) in India (Thakshila) (Welikala, 2011).

Some higher learning centers in South East Asia, Egypt and Turkey have played significant role in preparing their young for the civil services of their society. For instance, the Temple of Literature, established in 1076, was in effect Vietnam’s first university, was created to honor Confucius and to educate the sons of mandarins. The Temple of Literature was eventually opened to talented commoners in the 13th Century. These students used their higher learning to advance their careers in the civil service.<sup>3</sup> In the 15th century, the practice of writing the names of the new doctors into stone stele was introduced. Today, some 82 steles depict the names of around 1306 doctorates awarded for successful

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<sup>3</sup>The Origin of universities: <http://www.cwrl.utexas.edu/~bump/OriginUniversities.html>

completion of demanding examinations.<sup>4</sup> The figure below (Figure 1) shows the different side views of the Temple of Literature University of Vietnam.



Figure 1. The Gate of the University, The Temple of Literature<sup>5</sup> (Origins of Universities, 2014).



Figure 2. Medieval University of Bologna (Origins of Universities, 2014)

The table below (Table 2) presents the different higher education institutions in the different parts of the world with their date of foundation. This table clearly shows that there were different higher education institutions prior to the establishment of Bologna University.

There were famous ancient seats of higher learning in Africa before colonialism. Africa had pre-colonial indigenous experiences of the idea and realities of higher education/university. Countries have developed higher learning institutions and awarded different certificates to their graduates subscribed in their own languages. They may not call it degree. Indeed, history tells us that Africa had ancient, deep rooted and long experience of institutionalized higher learning. These higher learning institutions cover varying population and degree of systematization according to some regional, sub-regional, and national socio-economic, political, cultural, and historical specificities. These higher learning institutions had produced and transferred new knowledge pertinent to the contemporaneous society to understand the world, nature, society, religion, the promotion of agriculture, health, literature, and philosophy (Ajayi, et. al., 1996).

<sup>4</sup> The Origin of universities: <http://www.cwrl.utexas.edu/~bump/OriginUniversities.html>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.google.si/search?q=Temple+Literature,+Vietnam&client>

Table 2. Higher Learning Institutions, c. 2257 BCE-1303 AD (Origin of Universities, 2014; Lulat, 2005; Welikala, 2011; Perkin, 2007; Arbaoui, 2012; and Adams et al., 2010.)

Higher Learning Institutions	Location	Date of Foundation
Shanghai “higher school”	China	2257-2208 BCE
Imperial Central School	China	1046-249 BCE
Takshashila University, Taxila	Pakistan	7th century BCE
Nalanda University, Bihar	India	5th century BCE
Plato’s Academy/Athens	Greece	387 BCE
Nanjing University	China	258 AD
Ethiopian Higher Church Education	Ethiopia	Since 4 <sup>th</sup> century
Ez-Zitouna University	Tunisia	732 AD
University of Salerno	Italy	9th Century AD
University of Magnaura	Constantinople	848 AD
University of Qarawīyīn (or al-Karaouine)	Morocco (Fez)	859
Al-Azhar University	Cairo	970 AD
Temple of Literature	Hanoi, Vietnam	1076
University of Bologna	Italy	1088
University of Paris	France	1150
University of Oxford	England	1167
Sankore University	Timbuktu	12 <sup>th</sup> century
University of Cambridge	England	1209
University of Salamanca	Spain	1218
University of Montpellier	France	1220
University of Padua	Italy	1222
University of Naples	Italy	1224
University of Toulouse	France	1229
University of Coimbra	Portugal	1290
Universidad Complutense de Madrid	Spain	1293
University of Lleida	Spain	1300
University of Rome La Sapienza	Italy	1303

The ‘university in Africa’ has passed through three genealogies or ‘triple heritages’ (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2017). These are the indigenous precolonial higher education, the opening of the ‘university in Africa’ as branch campuses of the colonial higher education institutions, and the struggle for ‘African university’ (rooted in African cultural and intellectual soil and climate). In Africa, the university as a community of scholars, with an international outlook and with cultural responsibilities had been traced back to different institutions that developed in the continent in the last two or three centuries BCE and A. D.

The Alexandria Museum and Library was an important model with monastic system and sophisticated knowledge production in the third century BCE (Zezeza, 2006).

In Tunisia, there was the Ez-Zitouna University, founded in 732. The University of Qarawīyīn (or al-Karaouine) in Fez, Morocco, which had been established as a madrasa in 859, is the oldest degree awarding higher learning institution in the world (Arbaoui, 2012; Adams et al., 2010). Fez had been among the many early centers of knowledge that had exerted influence in establishing the ground for later universities, served as beacons of modern education and knowledge and intellectual traditions. A young migrant female princess from Qairawan (Tunisia), Fatima Al-Fihri had established the al-Qarawiyyin Mosque University. The university attracted students and scholars from Spain to West Africa (Arbaoui, 2012). Sankore University in Timbuktu is registered in the 12th century (Assié-Lumumba, 2005; Zezeza, 2006).

Many Islamic higher learning institutions emerged following the introduction of Islam in North and West Africa. The most famous and oldest university that operated continuously in the world includes the Al-Azhar Islamic University established in Cairo (Egypt) in 970. For decades, students from Africa and Southeast Asia have flocked to Al-Azhar in Egypt to learn Arabic and attend Islamic studies and non-religious courses offered by the institution (Sawahel, 2015). The development of higher learning institutions in Egypt could be analyzed in the broader context of the Nile Valley Civilization that had been started in the Upper Nile regions that includes Ethiopia. In Ethiopia, following the introduction of Christianity in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, Church education had developed with contemporaneous scholastic hierarchies in the perspectives of the need and requirements of the society. It requires more than 20 years to complete and to become a clergy graduate (Chaillot, 2009). Students run away not only from the religious and state authorities but also from their families to learn with autonomous freedom in well-known religious higher learning institutions or schools.

Church Schools (*Qes Temhert Bet*), most of the time, reside in monasteries where the hands of the state are completely absent, and the Church is lenient. They learn law, literature, theology, medicine, Church administration, and poetry (Chaillot, 2009). Similarly, medieval European universities were subdivided into faculties of arts (Liberal arts, theology, law, medicine and grammar), which is very similar to the Ethiopian religious higher learning that preceded European medieval university. According to Zezeza (2006) and Lulat (2005), under the “Zagwe dynasty,” in the twelfth century, monastic education included higher education in Ethiopia. There was “the Qine Bet (School of Hymns), followed by the Zema Bet (School of Poetry), and at the pinnacle was an institution called Metsahift Bet (School of the Holy Books) that provides a broader and more specialized education in religious studies, philosophy, history, and the computation of time and calendar, among various subjects.

These accounts and the refined interpretation of higher education would lead to the conclusion that although Africans, the Arab world, Asians and Europeans for that matter did not establish higher learning academic spaces like European universities, they had systems and institutions that fulfill societal missions that were not essentially different. Lulat (2005) addresses this conclusive remark as follows:

To be sure, the Egyptians may not have had exact replica of the modern university or college, but it is certainly true that they did possess an institution that form their perspective, fulfilled some of the roles of higher education institutions. One such institution dating from around c. 2000 BCE

was the Per-ankh (or the House of Life). It was located within the Egyptian temples, which usually took the form of huge campuses, with many buildings, and thousands of employees (Lulat, 2005, p. 44).



Figure 3. Al-Azhar University, Cairo, Egypt, 988 (Origins of Universities, 2014)

The modern ‘university in Africa’ during and after political colonialism was imperfect clone of universities in Europe. Mohamedbhai, (2008) has clearly described the nature and features of university in Africa as follows:

The history of the modern African University, as it is now known, can be traced back to the period between 1930 and 1960, when the few African western-educated elite, who saw European education as a strong tool to fight against colonialism, demanded the creation of European systems of education in Africa firmly believing that anything that was good for the Europeans was also good for the Africans. Most of the countries in Sub-Saharan Africa eventually had universities created but, in the majority of cases, it was after they had attained independence from their colonial masters. Most of these African universities were, however, modeled on specific institutions of the colonial powers and during the period spanning the beginning of the 20th century and the 1950s, all higher education programs in Africa reflected the major trends in philosophical discourse and policy debate among the major western powers i.e. the colonial powers and the USA (Mohamedbhai, 2008:2).

African institutions of higher education during the colonial period were considered as specific campuses of a certain university in the colonial country. For instance, the strong influence of the University of London has been manifested in such higher education institutions as Fourah Bay College in Sierra Leone, (which was a College of the University of Durham), University of Ibadan, University of Ghana and Salisbury (the modern Harare University), and College of Rhodesia (now College of Zimbabwe). French Universities also have ‘African campuses’ such as University of Dakar, Yaoundé, Abidjan and Brazzaville (Mohamedbhai, 2008).

The political independence of many African states in the 1960s, “was accompanied by intensified struggles to transform/Africanise/decolonise the university in Africa into an African university. At its deepest level, this struggle entailed formulating a new philosophy

of higher education informed by African histories, cultures, ideas and aspirations as well as a fundamental redefinition of the role of the university” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2017:61) The ultimate effect of this demand and struggle had been the deemphasis of the higher education in Africa as a result of ‘policy advice’ by the World Bank. The World Bank advised African governments to deemphasize higher education institutions, and instead to emphasize on basic education and use the knowledge produced in the Global North (Woodhall, 2007)

From the above historical narratives, it is obvious that higher learning institutions have prevailed in different forms and for specific purposes of different societies. The European university is one of these forms. So, why did the discourse of the university focus on one kind of higher learning institution? Why did other forms of higher learning fall out of the vision of ‘critical’ thinkers about universities? Why one form of higher learning was defined as a ‘real’ university, while others were not?

To Walter Mignolo (2007), the answer to the above questions revolves around the idea of the “colonial matrix of power” or “coloniality of power” that sustains the superiority of the Global North and ensuring the perpetual subalternity of the Global South. According to Maldonado-Torres (2007, 240-270) “Coloniality is an invisible power structure that sustains colonial relations of exploitation and domination long after the end of direct colonialism” The idea of colonialism and coloniality is not only about physical political rule; it is also the process of usurping, misinterpreting and imposing ideas and histories. It had abusively utilized human and natural resources of others as well. The transatlantic enslavement and colonization had disrupted, destructed, and interrupted the dynamics of African internal socio-economic, cultural, and academic evolution.

The logical dynamics of historical processes and knowledge productions have changed their paths and focus of their energy. Because of this, modern higher education in Africa exhibits the absence of socio-historical continuity and social connection between the higher education institutions and the overall social surrounding (Assie-Lumumba, 2005). Seen from this perspective, African universities could be regarded as the direct replica of the Western models. In the following extract, Ashby (1964) has shown the dilemma between embracing the Western tradition and preserving indigenous culture. "We cannot embrace the technological and reject the cultural implications of Western civilization. We must involve ourselves in both. But in this process we are in danger of losing altogether ... all sympathy with the basic culture of our society" (Ashby, 1966, p. 43). Partly due to colonialism, and post-colonial influences, it is undeniable that the existing modern universities in the world, including the Europeans, stem from the medieval European model (Altbach, 2006).

Medieval University had been the conglomeration of diversified ancient global higher learning institutions. This interaction is evident from internationalization of higher learning environment of the 7th and 8th centuries in which students from Japan were travelling to China to study. Medieval European universities and Arab higher learning institutions welcomed scholars from various areas including from Africa irrespective of nationality (Welikala, 2011). Ancient and medieval period students and scholars of higher learning institutions travel with all the academic culture they had developed at home and interact with their counterparts.

As discussed above, the meaning, idea, history and transformational trends, features and discussions about higher learning institutions and the university still focuses on and emerges from the Global North and bring the Global South under epistemic coloniality through the colonial matrix of power. Mind imperialism, which is dangerous than physical

political domination, should be deconstructed and decolonized by further scholastic dialogues.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The universality of the term “university,” which is a derivation from a Latin word “universitas,” does not have the power to lead us to the conclusion that the origin of higher learning institution is medieval Europe. Neither does the idea, history, purpose, nor does the function of a university, as defined and interpreted by Europeans, explain the originality of Bologna. Scholars should be fair in understanding and presenting the history and idea or meaning of the university. This is because higher learning has been developing in different places in different forms. From these perspectives, it will be fair to explore and acknowledge the existence of various forms of higher learning institutions in the different corners of the world. Not only this! It is also better to acknowledge their contribution to modern higher education institutions.

The interaction of the various higher learning institutions, their students and scholars is evident from the internationalization of the 7th and 8th centuries. At this time, students and scholars/teachers from Japan were travelling to China to study. Medieval European universities and Arab higher learning institutions welcomed scholars from various areas including from Africa irrespective of nationality. Ancient and medieval students and scholars of higher learning institutions have traveled with all the academic culture they developed at home and interacted with their counterparts. Hence, in an environment where there were diversified ancient higher learning institutions at different corners of the world, it is difficult and unfair to consider European medieval universities as the only original and indisputable higher learning institutions of the world. It is obvious, however, that through the process of colonialism, neo-colonialism/coloniality, and globalization, European higher education institutions and universities have highly shaped, influenced and impacted higher education institutions and universities in the world in terms of system, structural organization, curriculum, instructional languages, research methodology, institutional pedagogy and so on. This must be changed through rigorous scholastic studies and dialogues.

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