"Overrepresentation of Kenyan Students in Colleges and Universities in the United States: An Un-scientific Examination,"

Amadu Jacky Kaba, Seton Hall University

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Overrepresentation of Kenyan Students in Colleges and Universities in the United States: An Unscientific Examination

By:
Amadu Jacky Kaba, Ph.D

Amadu Jacky Kaba is an Assistant Professor at the Graduate Department of Public and Healthcare Administration, Seton Hall University, USA.

Introduction

Compared to the other 52 independent African nations, Kenya appears to have a special relationship with the United States. One clear example of this special relationship between Kenya and the United States is the unusually high proportion of Kenyan students enrolled in colleges and universities in the United States. For example, of the 37,724 African students enrolled in colleges and universities in the United States in 2001/2002, Kenyan students comprised 7,097 (18.8%). Of the 15,331 East African students from 19 countries enrolled during that same period, Kenya's 7,097 students accounted for almost half (47%) of that total.[1] What makes this unusual is that Kenya does not have the largest population in the continent. It in fact accounts for only 32 million out of 874 million Africans in July 2004 on the Continent. Nigeria as of July 2004 had the largest population of 137 million, followed by Egypt with 76 million, Ethiopia 68 million and the Democratic Republic of Congo, 56 million.

Nor do Kenyans contribute the highest proportion of African immigrants in the United States. According to Okoth (2003), as of 2001, there were 47,000 Kenyans in the United States.[2] According to the United States Census Bureau, as of the year 2000, there were an estimated 881,300 African immigrants in the United States. The 134,940 Nigerian immigrants in the United States in 2000 equaled 15.3% of all African immigrants, the highest number of all African countries. During that same year, the total population of Egyptian immigrants in the United States was 113,396; Ethiopians were 69,531, and Ghanaians 65,572.[3]

Nor is Kenya the richest country in terms of natural resources or financial wealth. According to the 2005 CIA World Factbook, the countries with the three highest per capita GDP in Africa as of 2004 are Mauritius ($12,800), South Africa ($11,100) and Botswana ($9,200). Kenya's GDP per capita during
Bureaucratic (42,600). Kenya’s GDP per capita during that same year was $1,100.

African scholars and students in the U.S. have been debating this topic. Why are Kenyan students overrepresented in colleges and universities in the United States? To answer that question, I have come up with the following speculations: (1) Religion, mainly Christianity (2) Language, English (3) Demography (4) Major International Hub for Western Media (5) Shift from British to American education system (6) Relative political stability compared to Congo, D.R. or Liberia (7) Early adoption of Capitalism or American and British brands of it (8) Human’s Evolutionary history (9) Kenya, like the U.S. as a victim of international terrorism. (10) Kenya’s great collection of beautiful and powerful exotic animals. Let us briefly examine each of these factors

(1) **Religion (mainly Christianity)**

The United States and Kenya are very religious countries and that might have contributed to what appears to be a special relationship between them. Not only are the two countries religious, but the majority of people in each country are Christians. As of 2005, in both the United States and Kenya, 4 out of every 5 people (78% in Kenya) are Christians. One example of America’s Christian influence in Kenya is the establishment of U.S. affiliated private Christian colleges and universities. For example, on January 12, 2001, the East African Standard published a list of 14 private colleges and universities in Kenya that were under different categories of accreditation. Of those 14 private colleges and universities, 13 (93%) were Christian based, with most of them affiliated with Christian institutions in the United States. The one university that was not Christian based, was still an American institution, the United States International University (USIU). This might contribute to the high number of Kenyan students in the U.S., when compared to other African countries, because those institutions in Kenya may have less difficulty finding visas for their former or current students who want to further their studies in the United States.

(2) **Language (English)**

Language might be another contributor to the relatively high number of Kenyan students in U.S. colleges and Universities. Kenya, like 18 other African countries were once partly or fully colonized by the United Kingdom and English is an official language in Kenya. Because students are taught English in primary and secondary schools and colleges and universities in Kenya, it increases their chances of being accepted to colleges and universities in the United States, where English is the language of instruction.

(3) **Demography**

Scholars studying population trends have been pointing to the decline in the average number of
pointing to the decline in the average number of children born to a Kenyan woman. They argue that this brings some economic benefits, which in turn will result in a higher number of educated Kenyans, who might travel to the U.S. for further education. As of 2004, while the average number of children born to an African woman (fertility rate) was 4.36 (5.25 in Middle Africa and 5.21 in West Africa), it was 3.31 for Kenya.[4] The average for the world in 2005 is 2.6 children born per woman.

According to demographers, when the average family starts having fewer children, it means that more resources will be spent on a fewer number of children, which in turn might result in an improved standard of living. This means that parents and family members might even have enough money to send their young adults abroad to further their education. One could not directly say that this is happening with Kenyan students in the U.S., but there is the possibility that parents having fewer children in Kenya might begin to have the types of savings needed to send their children to colleges and universities in the United States.

(4) **Major international Hub for Western Media**

For decades now Kenya has served as an international hub for Western media in East Africa or sub-Saharan Africa. This means that Kenyan youth might have access to journalists from the West, including the United States, who might tend to advocate for more Kenyans to be allowed to attend college in the U.S. or provide them with pertinent information as to how to get scholarships or other awards at U.S. colleges and universities.

(5) **Shift from British to American Education System**

Towards the end of the 1980s, the Kenyan government began the process of shifting its education system from the British to an American system. This might have made it easier for Kenyan students to transfer their college course credits since their institutions were similar to those in the United States and tend to have similar academic calendars. Therefore, the entire process might be less difficult compared to other African countries with different educational systems.

(6) **Relative Political Stability in Kenya since Independence in 1963**

Although there have been numerous political turmoil in Kenya, including massive strikes by college students and subsequent temporary closings of higher education institutions, Kenya like Ghana, have had the fortune to experience a continuous trend of school and college attendance. Kenya has not experienced the type of civil wars that we have seen in African countries such as Liberia and the Democratic Republic of Congo. This has resulted in a consistent graduation of students, who in turn may find ways to further their education in the United States.
(7) Early Adoption of American/British variants of Capitalism

Immediately after independence in most African countries, a number of African countries, including Kenya's neighbor Tanzania, experimented with socialist type economic systems. Kenya on the other hand, took a different route and established a capitalist (American and British style) economic system. This might have caused Kenyan students and members of the public in that country to know how the American system works. As a result, the two countries might have had a mutual admiration for each other. This admiration might have resulted in higher number of Kenyan youth seeking enrollment in U.S. colleges and universities.

(8) Human's Evolutionary History

Scientists have attempted to present evidence that shows that humans originated from sub-Saharan Africa. Some have even been more specific by claiming that our ancestors, who left Africa, did so from Eastern Africa, and Kenya has been one of those countries mentioned as to where the first humans who left the continent originated from. In the United States, most people have the privilege to watch documentaries on public television, including those about human evolution which cites Kenya as where some of our oldest ancestors originated from. This might cause curiosity among the American public and the country's colleges and universities to allow more Kenyan students to enroll in their institutions.

(9) Kenya, Like the U.S. has been a Victim of International Terrorism

The United States' special relationship with Kenya might have grown stronger or closer after the 1998 terrorist bombings of the U.S. embassies in Kenya and in Tanzania, with most of the over 200 casualties being Kenyan citizens. As a result, the U.S. might have used this unfortunate incident as a way to reward Kenya by granting an increased number of visas to young Kenyans seeking to further their education in U.S. colleges and universities.


Westerners have been known to be fond of traveling to Kenya for its powerful, beautiful and exotic animals such as the Lion, Elephant, Cheetah and Giraffe. A substantial number of people in Western nations, including Americans, make traveling to Kenya for a Safari as one of their life goals. Indeed, it has been pointed out that when the father of the current Queen of England, Elizabeth II, died, she was in a tree house in Kenya when she heard the news of her father's death. What does this have to do with the relative high number of Kenyan students in the U.S?
Many of the examples above are just speculations as to why Kenyan students are overrepresented in U.S. colleges and universities. However, if this trend continues, a social science research may be necessary to get a better understanding as to why a country that is not even among the top seven most populous countries in Africa, has almost 1 out of every 5 African students enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities in the 2001/2002 academic year. Among African students in U.S. colleges and universities, Kenyans are overrepresented just as they are overrepresented among the winners of professional long distance runners in the U.S. and the world.

References


[4] Using the classification of the five regions in Africa (East, West, Middle, North and Southern Africa) by the United Nations Population Division, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, this author compiled and calculated data in the 2004 CIA World Factbook. It is useful to point out that the fertility rate was 3.00 for North Africa, 3.45 for Southern Africa and 4.88 for Eastern Africa.