Swimming Against the Tides: Lived Experiences and Challenges of Sub-Saharan African Graduate Students Studying in the U.S.

Sherif A. Alao

This study examines the real-life experiences of Sub-Saharan African students pursuing graduate degrees in the United States, investigating the difficulties, successes, and challenges they face as they navigate the complexities of cross-cultural transitions, academic pursuits, and identity development, considering the global increase of student mobility. Findings demonstrate a dynamic process of self-discovery and adaptation as Sub-Saharan African students struggle with the ebb and flow of social mores, educational systems, and personal development. This study highlights the importance of institutional resources, peer support networks, and mentoring in enabling these students to successfully navigate transitions and enhance their overall academic and emotional well-being.

This research contributes to international education scholarship by offering insights for higher education institutions and policymakers to support better the diverse needs of international students from the Sub-Saharan region and similar contexts. Ultimately, this paper invites readers to engage with the unique stories of Sub-Saharan African students as they embark on their educational journeys in the United States.

Keywords: international student, sub-saharan Africa, adaptation, immigration, acculturation, well-being, support networks, campus climate, mental health, institutional support

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Sherif Ayodeji Alao is an international second-year student pursuing a degree in Higher Education and Student Affairs Administration at the University of Vermont. With an academic background in history and international relations, Sherif provides a critical perspective on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) issues, international student advocacy, and higher education policy. As a co-content editor for the Vermont Connection, he is dedicated to fostering scholarly discourse that challenges systemic barriers and amplifies the voices of marginalized communities.

His research interests focus on the experiences of international graduate students, institutional commitment to DEI, and the intersection of race, policy, and leadership in higher education. Additionally, Sherif has served as an assistant resident director in the Department of Residential Life and as a practicum student at the Career Center, where he worked on bridging internship accessibility gaps for marginalized students at the University of Vermont through the popular Equity in Internship Project.

Sherif aspires to make meaningful contributions to higher education through research, policy reform, and advocacy, ensuring that institutions uphold their commitments to equity and justice.

Introduction

Globalization has led to an extraordinary movement of individuals and goods worldwide, erasing national borders. (Altbach, 2004) According to the World Bank (2022), migration is a significant part of global integration. For various reasons, students from Sub-Saharan Africa have chosen to pursue their studies in the United States. The challenging economic conditions in their countries of origin prompt many individuals to seek better prospects elsewhere. According to the World Bank, the sub-Saharan region is particularly affected by conflict, climate change, inflation, and food insecurity. These issues stem from decades of colonial antecedents, bad leadership, corruption, and political violence, leading to increasing poverty levels and unemployment for the youth (World Bank, 2022; Mulinge & Lesetedi, 1998) This makes pursuing graduate education in the U.S. an attractive and promising endeavor for recent graduates and early-career professionals whose growing aspirations for a better life at home fuel their decision to pursue graduate studies in the U.S.

Sub-Saharan African graduate students eagerly pursue the opportunity to study in the United States, recognizing it as a chance for academic and professional growth. In turn, colleges and universities in the United States benefit significantly from these students, who are immediately integrated into the workforce, making instant contributions to research, teaching, and administrative responsibilities across colleges and schools within the university campus (George et al., 2018). In other words, these students, alongside other international students from around the world, become a valuable source of talent to their university community, serving in various capacities, including teaching assistant (TA), research assistant (RA), and other administrative assistant positions.

Dispositions Toward Studying Abroad

Sub-Saharan African students are determined and resilient enough to overcome perceived challenges when pursuing opportunities to study abroad. The prospect of studying in the United States presents an opportunity for life-changing academic, personal, and professional growth. For international students, especially graduate students from Sub-Saharan Africa, the benefits far outweigh the challenges that may arise. (Lee & Rice, 2007) Their resolve is strengthened by their acknowledgement of the socio-economic circumstances in their countries of origin that hinder their progress. This determination can be measured by their struggle to gather funds for school applications and visa processing. Applicants from Sub-Saharan Africa face financial hurdles, including application fees, visa, and SEVIS fees. In addition to these financial challenges, Sub-Saharan African students face significant hurdles in obtaining a visa, as visa officers often perceive them as potential immigrants who are unlikely to return home upon completing their program (World Bank, 2022; Knox, 2023; President's Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration, 2023).

Overview of Sub-Saharan Graduate Students Studying in the U.S.

The number of students from sub-Saharan Africa attending graduate school in the US has steadily increased. According to the Journal of Blacks in Higher Education (2022), 42,518 students from Sub-Saharan Africa were enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities during the 2021-22 academic year (*The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, 2022*). Kumi-Yeboah (2010) argues that the Unites

States remains the top destination for international students. At this point, it is important to conceptualize Sub-Saharan Africa to give a clear understanding and appropriate context. This area encompasses the African countries south of the Sahara Desert, many of which were European colonies in the 17th and 18th centuries. The World Bank identifies the following countries as belonging to the sub-Saharan African sub-region: Angola, Benin, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cape Verde, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Comoros, Democratic Republic of Congo, Republic of Congo, Cote d'Ivoire, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Eswatini (formerly Swaziland), Ethiopia, Gabon, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Kenya, Lesotho, Liberia, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mauritania, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Niger, Nigeria, Rwanda, Sao Tome and Principe, Senegal, Seychelles, Sierra Leone, Somalia, South Africa, South Sudan, Sudan, Tanzania, Togo, Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe.

In his study, Kumi-Yeboah (2010) examined the historical antecedents of African countries, arguing that the Sub-Saharan region has experienced various stages of exploitation, colonial rule, and significant socio-economic and cultural transformations over the years. These conditions have given rise to several challenges, including political instability, low literacy rates, inadequate infrastructure, insufficient educational resources, and significant health issues. Unfortunately, many students cannot secure admission due to the limited number of universities in Sub-Saharan Africa. Similarly, the necessity for qualified and competent faculty and staff, as well as adequate infrastructure facilities and other educational resources, significantly motivated the US to support this student population.

The United States' favorable socioeconomic conditions have made it a highly desired destination for graduate students from Sub-Saharan Africa (Changamire et al., 2022; Hua, 2015; Marlow, 2023). These emerging scholars view studying in the US as a gateway to abundant educational resources, including state-of-the-art technology and financial aid opportunities. The ease of transportation and communication further simplifies the pursuit of their academic ambitions. Ultimately, they aspire to fulfil the "American dream" often depicted in popular media. Research on the driving forces behind Sub-Saharan African graduate students' choice to pursue their studies in the United States revealed that funding opportunities play a crucial role (Osikomaiya, 2014). He identified that comprehensive tuition coverage, fees, and health insurance, often provided as a fully funded award, offer life-changing opportunities for students from Sub-Saharan Africa.

Kumi-Yeboa (2010) contends that a U.S. degree and certificate are highly valued in Africa. This is due, in part, to the profound numbers of foreign-trained personnel taking charge of the continent's political and economic landscape. The United States is renowned for its advanced technology, reflected in the rigorous and impactful curriculum offered in science, education, engineering, and business programs. Sub-Saharan African students often study in the United States to expand their knowledge, gain new skills, and support their personal and professional development. Additionally, they aim to contribute to the development of their homeland while undergoing personal transformation and growth through international exposure.

Additionally, the United States is often regarded as a pathway to wealth and economic success, which encourages students from Sub-Saharan Africa to pursue higher education in the country. The

motivation was further corroborated by Beoku-Betts (2004), who asserted that the structural adjustment programs implemented in various African nations and economic declines led to decreased overall educational funding in Africa, particularly in the Sub-Saharan region.

Challenges Facing Sub-Saharan Graduate Students in the USA

Like other international students, graduate students from Sub-Saharan Africa encounter numerous challenges. Osikomaiya (2014) identifies homesickness, language barriers, perceived discrimination, and difficulties in academic and cultural adjustment. These factors contribute to stressors that trigger mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, and maladjustment in international graduate students. Coupled with racial discrimination and social isolation from their host communities, students from Sub-Saharan Africa confront a significant number of stressors.

Poyrazli and Lopez (2007) identified English language proficiency as another significant stressor contributing to international students' difficulty in transitioning and adjusting to a new environment. Meanwhile, graduate students from Sub-Saharan Africa bring a rich tapestry of cultural diversity, including language, cuisine, music preferences, and social norms. Their accents, often influenced by their native tongues, range from French and Portuguese to Arabic and English. Many are multilingual, proficient in both English and French as well as Arabic and French, or English and Arabic, in addition to their mother tongues, such as Hausa, Ewe, Zulu, Yoruba, Akan, Igbo, Somali, Mende, Swahili, and others. Thanks to their well-rounded education and impressive grasp of global affairs, they reported that younger international students with limited English proficiency experienced higher homesickness and perceived discrimination.

In their study, Khawaja and Stallman (2011) found that international students experienced more discrimination than domestic students. The researchers concluded that this perceived discrimination, along with communication challenges due to accents, could hinder the students' adjustment and acculturation in their new environment, negatively impacting their mental health. Lee and Rice (2007) argued that a perceived sense of discrimination negatively impacts international students' ability to navigate the demands of graduate school. In other words, the struggle against perceived bias, the rigorous nature of graduate school, and the need to acclimatize to a new environment affect their academic performance, self-worth, and self-assurance. Thus, stressors arising from these experiences lead to frustration that invariably impedes their academic performance. As a result, graduate students from Sub-Saharan Africa often require assistance in participating in classroom discussions. They may even avoid asking questions, fearing being perceived unintelligent (Brown, 2007).

Transitioning to a new academic and social setting can be a demanding experience that often leads to stress for international students. While college students generally face stress during this phase, students from Sub-Saharan Africa may experience even greater stress due to culture shock and various sociocultural factors arising during their adaptation process. (Dona & Berry, 1994) It is common for international students to face language barriers, immigration issues, cultural differences, challenges in social integration, and homesickness. During this adjustment period, they may feel disconnected and socially isolated (Zhang & Goodson, 2011).

International students may encounter obstacles before pursuing their studies in the United States. Strict immigration laws and interviews have discouraged some students from Sub-Saharan Africa from applying to American universities (Altbach, 2004). Since 9/11, the costs and delays associated with visa interviews for those who persist in applying have increased, making it more difficult to secure a visa even after being admitted to their university. These experiences are quickly shared among aspiring international students who compare the application process and expenses to those in countries with less stringent laws, such as Australia or Canada.

Examining security clearance and visa regulations presents significant challenges for international students who leave the United States temporarily. For instance, many international scholars encounter restrictions that prevent them from participating in academic and exchange programs at overseas conferences and meetings. Furthermore, when visiting family during holidays or attending weddings and funerals, international students, including those from Sub-Saharan Africa, must carefully navigate immigration requirements to ensure their re-entry into the United States (Starobin, 2006).

Understanding the experiences of international students is crucial for developing and implementing programs that offer academic and personal support. Furthermore, it is essential to raise awareness about the challenges faced by international students and to seek their perspectives on how to support their struggles with adjustment and adaptation. According to Lee and Rice (2007), international students from Africa attending predominantly white institutions often encounter racial discrimination. They may feel inferior due to negative media portrayals or direct insults related to their home country or culture, as well as hostility stemming from their lack of fluency in English.

Adjustment and Adaptation Challenges

International students from collectivist societies often find it challenging to navigate the individualistic culture of the United States. Research has shown that many students struggle to adjust to a new environment when transitioning from their home countries. Consequently, Osikomaiya (2014) posited that this struggle creates unforeseen problems, leading to isolation and loneliness among many international students. For instance, Khawaja and Stallman (2011) noted that international students studying in English-speaking regions face difficulties adapting to the individualistic society from a communal and collectivist background. Furthermore, they identified simple tasks, such as finding transportation and renting an apartment, as well as a general unfamiliarity with daily life activities, to be particularly challenging (Khawaja & Stallman, 2011).

Poyrazli and Grahame (2007) found that the challenges faced by international students may be influenced by their location and environment. Their ecological assessment of 15 international students examined their experiences during their initial transition and the academic, social, and psychological aspects of well-being. The study focused on social science students who lived off-campus in a small town with limited campus residential life and a total enrollment of only 3,400 students. In this setting, international students had access to minimal support systems, including limited public transportation and few opportunities to interact with domestic students within the residential environment (Sümer et al., 2008). Furthermore, it was confirmed that international students face many challenges when

engaging with individuals in the host community, particularly domestic students and those residing in the immediate vicinity outside of campus. These students have expressed various concerns regarding their ability to adapt to their new environment, including difficulties socializing with peers and professors, navigating transportation, securing suitable accommodations, completing academic work, and encountering pervasive communication and language barriers.

Msengi's (2007) study examined the experiences of 220 international students at a Midwestern university and identified various stressors. These included simple tasks such as cross-cultural interactions, food, housing, transportation, and language proficiency. Msengi's findings align with previous research on the adjustment and adaptation challenges international students face, particularly those from African countries.

English Language Proficiency Debacle

Research has identified English language proficiency as a significant challenge the international student community faces. Many students who perceive themselves as lacking proficiency in English report experiencing learner anxiety and a culture of silence. Frequently, international students attribute their struggles to their accents, which can lead to feeling misunderstood and, subsequently, a lack of participation in class discussions or being overlooked when trying to engage in conversation.

For international students, fluency in English can pose a significant challenge. This may lead to academic difficulties, increased stress levels, feelings of depression, and a struggle to connect with the local community. Such circumstances can evoke feelings of anxiety, shame, and inferiority. As noted by Khawaja and Stallman (2011), adapting to unfamiliar accents can be a formidable task. Insufficient proficiency can considerably slow speech and diminish confidence, affecting comprehension and academic performance.

Culture Shock and Homesickness

The phrase "culture shock" was originally coined by Oberg in 1960 to describe the unease experienced by individuals attempting to adapt to a new cultural environment (Boafo-Arthur, 2014, p. 116). This sensation can arise when individuals find themselves in an environment they perceive as unfamiliar. Homesickness in college students is often discussed in relation to culture shock. Research has shown how particularly severe this can be for African international students, who may experience feelings of alienation, anxiety, depression, homesickness, rejection, loss, hopelessness, and low self-esteem (Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007). For instance, in his phenomenological account, Shaheen (2019) recounted his struggles to preserve his Syrian identity within a predominantly American culture. He expressed frustration with the racism, stereotypes, and biases he faced, highlighting how his experience in the U.S. profoundly impacted his relationship with his home country (Shaheen, 2019).

Similarly, sub-Saharan African students in the U.S. often struggle with American society's social and cultural aspects. According to Khawaja and Stallman (2011), culture shock can be a significant source of stress for many international students. Social and cultural differences can hinder communication between international students and their host country, resulting in difficulties with integration. Some international students have even expressed difficulties preserving their cultural

identity while studying in the U.S. Research has shown that students often feel confused about their roles and identities and experience alienation, rejection, and discrimination from the dominant culture. Furthermore, they may lose social support and become anxious about fitting into their new environment. (Oberg, 1960). Additionally, Pantelidou and Craig (2006) discovered that students' experiences with culture shock depend on their gender, the size and quality of their social network, and the support they receive from it. (Pantelidou & Craig, 2006).

Identity Struggle and Development of Sub-Saharan African Students

Many international students studying in the United States need assistance adapting to a new culture. This can result in various challenges, including confusion, feelings of isolation, discrimination, and language barriers. According to Berry et al. (1989), experiencing prejudice and discrimination based on race can hurt an individual's ability to adapt. Studies reveal that when immigrants encounter prejudice or discrimination from members of their new culture, they may perceive cultural assimilation as rejection, impeding their ability to adjust to unfamiliar surroundings (Berry et al., 1989).

As a minority group in the U.S. college campuses, graduate students hailing from Sub-Saharan Africa face perceived discrimination upon arrival in the U.S. For example, Lee and Opio (2011) affirmed that the nature of discrimination perceived by international black African students far outweighs African Americans. Even though they agreed in their finding that both African American and International Black African students could be discriminated against based on race, Sub-Saharan African students face more and numerous discriminations in areas such as cultural differences, accents, and negative stereotypes about their countries of origin. They further asserted that these experiences collectively place students at risk for acculturative stress, which can ultimately lead to mental health challenges. Kumi-Yeboah (2010) corroborated this notion by highlighting the struggles faced by international students from Sub-Saharan Africa, noting that such experiences can negatively impact their academic performance and, in some instances, may even result in their withdrawal from their programs of study. (Kumi-Yeboah, 2010). As a result, this group of students undergoes what Cranton (2002) describes as significant transformations in their lives, navigating the tumultuous waters of their current circumstances (Cranton, n.d.). They embark on a journey of self-reflection, seeking to understand why they have lost their standing and are experiencing a shift in their worldview. Kumi-Yeboah affirmed that through this introspection, African Sub-Saharan students find their voice, which becomes a conduit for their self-awareness, sense of self, and feelings of belonging. He further asserted that the ability of international African students to express their voices by acknowledging and validating their struggles could lead to the integration of self-evaluation and empowerment as a vital tool for transformative learning.

Importance of Understanding the Experiences of Sub-Saharan African Students

Extensive research has revealed the challenges that international students face while studying in the U.S. It is essential to acknowledge and validate the unique experiences and struggles of students from Sub-Saharan Africa. Before choosing to pursue their graduate education in the United States, these students faced numerous obstacles in their home country. Furthermore, they continue to face various challenges as they strive to adjust and adapt to their new environment, including prejudice and

discrimination, social isolation, separation from loved ones, and financial concerns (Constantine et al., 2005). As a result, this group of students continues to face numerous challenges, even as they strive to navigate the academic demands and rigors of graduate education in the United States. The significance of recognizing the challenges faced by international students from Sub-Saharan Africa cannot be overstated. This paper sheds light on this minority group on college and university campuses, equipping education leaders, staff, faculty, and administrators with the essential knowledge needed to support them. Furthermore, by acknowledging international graduate students' difficult transition experiences and struggles, higher education leaders, faculty, and staff can effectively provide resources and support systems that ease their transition. Similarly, it helps the host country understand the challenges faced by students from Sub-Saharan Africa and how best to support them in experiencing meaningful and enriching educational opportunities in the U.S.

Coping Mechanisms and Response by Sub-Saharan African Students

Research indicates that international African students often face challenges when starting their studies in the US. Nevertheless, these students demonstrate remarkable resilience by employing diverse coping mechanisms to surmount these obstacles. Studies reveal that many students in the US turn to their social networks for assistance, while others derive comfort from their African student community on campus. (Constantine et al., 2005). Findings suggest that African international students seek solace in their loved ones, family, and friends back home. They continue these support networks as they navigate their new surroundings.

A Call for Support Systems for International Students

Despite recognizing their valuable contributions to academia, which provide unique perspectives, Sub-Saharan African students often receive inadequate resources and support from their host universities. Research has uncovered instances where some institutions view international students solely as a source of revenue, failing to prioritize creating a diverse and inclusive environment that fosters their success. Lee and Rice (2007) lament social and community factors that significantly impact the experiences of international students and their ability to persist. (Lee & Rice, 2007). Additionally, studies have identified disparities in social acceptance based on students' country of origin and cultural background. For instance, Cole and Ahmadi (2003) noted in their work that even before 9/11, women who wore veils and saris suffered unpleasant experiences due to difficulties in integrating with campus environments. (Cole & Ahmadi, 2010).

Studies have shown that international students greatly benefit from social support as they adjust to their new environment while studying in the US. Huang and Horiuchi (2020) emphasized the importance of international students' social networks, including their family, neighbors, and friends back home. Research has shown that individuals with inadequate support networks are more likely to experience stressful situations, so international students may need to assess their support system to overcome any obstacles they may encounter in the US. Essentially, students who have a stronger social support system tend to adjust better and experience less depression and acculturative stress. The results suggest that social support can serve as a buffer, providing effective coping mechanisms for students facing challenges.

Hence, higher education institutions must offer international students the necessary resources and support systems to ensure a smooth transition and adjustment to life in the United States. As an example, a social support group that provides counseling services could function as a protective shield against depression and anxiety. The individuals within this group could be educated in stress-management techniques to mitigate their stress and anxiety levels. Moreover, counseling centers could appoint bilingual or international counselors to assist students who face difficulties due to their English proficiency.

Institutions need to prioritize cultural sensitivity training for their faculty and staff. Encouraging culturally affirming practices that incorporate the unique experiences of international students into the curriculum design is also crucial. Additionally, universities should increase awareness of resources and support systems available to international students and foster peer mentoring and community building to facilitate sharing experiences and challenges. Finally, personalized support and advising should be implemented to aid international students in their transition.

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