International Students, a National Asset or a Poisonous Alumni: An Empirical Investigation of the Experience of Sub-Saharan Students in Morocco

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Abstract

One of the major objectives of government-funded international educational exchange programs is to create a positive attitude among the students and future leaders and turn them into a vehicle through which the host country's culture, values, and ideas are promoted. Establishing and funding exchange programs alone does not guarantee that students will develop a positive attitude towards their host country. International students do not always become a valuable source. That is, if the host country's educational system is not structured in a way that provides a friendly environment for international students, they can turn into poisonous alumni that harm the image of the host country. The objective of this paper is to explore educational mobility from Sub-Saharan African countries towards Morocco. The policy faces some significant challenges related to discriminatory public attitudes. The paper explores the links of interaction by viewing the friendship ties that Sub-Saharan students build during their stay in Morocco. Consequently, the social exclusion and hostile societal attitude lead the students to develop negative attitude towards Morocco, which runs against the whole logic of student mobility. In brief, this paper argues that more attention should be devoted to the views which these students develop while staying in the country.

Keywords: International education, Sub-Saharan Students, Student mobility, Racism, Attitudes, Soft Power

Introduction

Since its independence, Morocco's relations with Africa went through continuous ebbs and flows. Starting from the post-independence zeal, and unity ideals which were interrupted by territorial disputes between States, and political disagreements between regimes. The withdrawal of Morocco from the Organization of African Unity, after discussions related to Morocco's territorial integrity, represented the extreme downfall in these relations. The relatively recent revival of Moroccan interest in Africa initiated a series of dynamics predicting a positive and promising future.

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Immigration has always represented a recurrent source of dispute in Moroccan-African relations. Starting from the 1990s Morocco began to become a final destination for thousands of Sub-Saharan immigrants. The treatment of these immigrants through law 02-03 have generated adverse reactions both at the African as well as the international level. Incidents like the Ceuta and Melilla event in 2005 when more than 600 migrants tried to climb the high fence surrounding the cities of Ceuta and Melilla in an attempt to cross to the Spanish border, and at least 6 of them were shot dead, and others were severely injured. This incident and many similar others have created a negative image with regards to Morocco's commitment to the protection of migrants.

In this dynamic of turbulence, there was a story of cooperation and collaboration. The story concerned the students' mobility through Moroccan government-funded scholarships to pursue higher education in Moroccan institutions. The experience of Sub-Saharan alumni in Morocco represents a mutual interest and desire to maintain cooperation, as much as it represents Morocco's desire to reduce tensions and win friends in Africa. Between 1995 and 2009 the number of Sub-Saharan students accessing Moroccan higher education institutions augmented from 1,040 to 5,623 alumni. Morocco is ranked first among North African countries as a primary destination for Sub-Saharan students (Berriane, 2012: 160). Sub-Saharan students benefit from free access to Moroccan public universities and higher education institutes, as well as a modest scholarship to finance living expenses, and also the possibility of benefiting from accommodation at public university campuses.

The continuously increasing numbers of Sub-Saharan students in Moroccan private and public higher education institutions represents both a fruit of Moroccan-Africa cooperation, as well as a result of the Moroccan State to expand its soft power, and influence in Africa. Since Morocco withdrew from the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in 1984, these students served as one of the few links to the continent and its institutions. Morocco sought to tone down the consequences of its withdrawal from the OAU, and the possibilities of being isolated and excluded from the affairs of the continent by establishing channels of bilateral cooperation in which education was at the forefront. The multilateral mechanisms of interaction formerly provided through the body of the OAU were substituted by links of agreements (Berriane, 2012).

The promotion of educational mobility between Morocco and the African States did not only reflect Morocco's desire to maintain links with its "strategic depth" (Murinson, 2006: 160) through bilateral relations but also signposted long-term objectives. Educational mobility is believed to have enabled Morocco to build a positive image on the continent. It was also part of the Moroccan strategy to internationalise its higher education, and "position itself as one of the principal international destinations for Sub-Saharan students" (Berriane, 2012; p. 156). A factor which will not only boost the increasingly growing and diversifying education industry in Morocco but will also lead to the formation of what Berriane (2012: 56) calls a "Moroccan-educated elite."

However, Morocco's experience in internationalising its higher education is still nascent and faces various challenges. Some of these challenges are related to infrastructure and language. Also, there are challenges related to negative social perception, which lead many students to develop negative perceptions about Morocco. The findings of this paper reveal that Sub-Saharan students are challenged with highly hostile and xenophobic attitudes in the public sphere, and therefore, they become what Wesley (2009) calls a "poisonous alumni" instead of being national asset and a source of soft power. The primary data is collected through fieldwork whose instruments are questionnaire distributed among Sub-Saharan students in Morocco, and the second source is instrument semi-structured interviews conducted with major shareholder in the field, namely, members of student collectives, officials at the ministry of higher education, and officials at the Moroccan Agency for International Cooperation.

International Student Mobility as a political tool

Soft power is an indirect way by which States shape the views and behaviour of other States. This practice is often done by making one's values, culture, political system, and domestic and foreign policies attractive to others to the extent that they seek to emulate them. Hence, the number of tourists, international students, publications, research in all academic fields are some of the indicators of soft power. If used properly, such distinct elements can improve the image of a country and make people sympathetic to its values and policies. In this regard, education represents the cornerstone of soft power. Alongside, with movies and tourism, education is one of the essential means by which a country's culture and values are spread worldwide, given strength and legitimacy. Many States

use knowledge to shape the views of other citizens and form an Elite receptive audience. Essential to this point is Nye's (2003) reference to international education as one of the sources of American soft power.

International scholarships are one of how education is integrated with soft power tools. International awards reflect a balance between a genuine altruistic desire to help people from other countries as well as well calculated self-interests. On the level of discourse, altruistic intentions are the backbone of all the internationally-famed training programs. However, shaping the views and attitudes of international students is also often a primary objective of almost all these programs, such as the American Fulbright, or the British Chevening. In an internal report on British government scholarship it has been stated that:

> "Several of our scholarships are intended to help Britain win friends and influence people abroad. Most of these schemes aim to attract people taking a leading part in the future in their field of study and in their own countries generally, or who seem likely to do so." (cited in Welson, 2014, p. 2)

Studying abroad can be an excellent experience for many scholars; for others it can even be a life-changing experience. The knowledge, the mindset, and the contacts which scholars gain abroad can play a crucial role in boosting their careers. Therefore, it is not strange that such individuals might develop a sense of loyalty towards their sponsors. Yet, such commitment and a need to give back is never direct in a blunt manner. Instead, an indirect and effective relationship is more practical empower understanding instead of hostility. One official at the French scholarship program Entente Cordial states:

> "We would not expect, for example, a French civil servant to explicitly push[..] British interest. I mean that is not what their job is about. But we would expect them to be sympathetic to those interests and we would expect them to have perhaps a deeper understanding of them." (cited in Welson, 2014, p. 41)

Other programs are less covert in their methods as well as their expectations. The US State Department has The International Visitor Leadership Program, which is more direct about attracting current and future international leaders. The program seeks to "cultivate lasting relationships between current and emerging professionals around the world and their American counterparts"

and "provide opportunities for foreign opinion-makers to gain firsthand knowledge about U.S. society, culture and politics" (Wilsom, 2014: 91). The function model of such program is grounded in the contact hypothesis, as well as the opinion-leader model. Interestingly, the program does not have an application process, but instead, American diplomats track down individuals who are expected to reach high positions in their countries and invite them to participate in the program. The program proves to be working quite well; hence, more than 330 past and present heads of States are members of the programs' alumni.

Other countries also realise the tremendous relevance of education to soft power. Hence, the Pew[30] research on global attitudes shows that education and scientific advances are the most appreciated aspect of Chinese Soft Power in Africa and Latin America (Holyk, 2013). Following the Tiananmen crises, and the crackdown on student protests, China recognised that the spread of Western values through media and education does not only threaten the rule Chinese Communist Party but also the unity of the Chinese nation. Consequently, the Chinese premier Ding launched the "spiritual civilisation" campaign against the bourgeois values. The new campaign prevailed at all cultural and educational levels, yet it was not until 2000s that China decided to promote education as a tool to face Western values worldwide (Ding, 2006).

Starting from 2000s, China began promoting education to establish a reliable network for communication with local communities, and improve its language and culture. China has branded its new initiative by the name of the 551 BC philosopher and thinker, Confucius. (Zaharna et al., 2014). It established its first Confucius Institute CI in 2004 in the capital of South Korea. Since then, the quantity of institutions have been increasing impressively. By now, there are more than 353 Confucius Institutions spreading in more than 100 countries (Ren, 2012). CI has partnerships with more than 2,500 universities across the globe, which offer Chinese language classes for more than 40 million students (Ren, 2012).

On a parallel path, China sought to internationalise its higher education. Since the 1990s China initiated a process of collaboration and cooperation between its universities and other universities abroad. By 2010 there were more

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[30] American think tank that focused on social issues and demographic trends around the world. (pewresearch.org)

than 1,000 accords between China and foreign universities. Satellite universities were also established, for example, the University of Nottingham established a branch in the Zhejian in mainland China. Yet, China seems to suffer some setbacks on this front. Yale University had to cancel a partnership agreement with the University of Beijing after allegations of low-quality courses and widespread tolerance of plagiarism (NYT, 2012).

International Students: The National Asset, or the Poisonous Alumni

International students can become a valuable source that adopts and spreads the host country's culture, values, and ideals. On the other hand, the host country's educational system and its society can be misinformed and structured in a way that fails to provide a friendly environment for international students. Therefore, the latter can turn into poisonous alumni that harm the image and reputation of the host country. In this regard, the experience of Indian students in Australia makes an exemplary case.

For decades, Australia established itself as a favourite destination for thousands of international students from the Pacific region. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS, 2019) higher education industry represents 18 billion dollars. Each year, Australia received an average of 600,000 international students. However, such reputation was put at risk because of the rise of unwelcoming societal attitudes, and the lax and lenient regularisation of the education sector. Hence, the 2019 ABC report entitled "Cash Cows" has documented the unscrupulous practices of some university agents who in their attempt to recruit as many international students as possible, they provide false information about their courses, prices, types of support and even help international students to defrauded their English Language tests (ABC, 2019). The unfriendly societal attitudes towards international, and more specifically Indian students affected the image of the country as hospitable education environment. While the lax regularisation of the educational sector led to a series of scams on international students which in turn made the country look like an unsafe destination for students (Byrne & Hall, 2011).

The year 2009 represented the peak of xenophobic and racist attacks against immigrants, and international students, uniquely Indian international students. Cities like Melbourne witnessed a series of violent attacks against Indian students. Initially, the Australian government tried to paint the attacks as

random and "opportunistic violence" incidents, covering any racist motivations which would eventually spoil the view of Australia as a racism-free country. Also, scams against students exacerbated the situation. False immigration agents provided fraudulent education documents through corrupt institutions. The scammers trapped their victims into enrolling in Australian educational institutions to support subsequent residency claims. Yet, before the Australian government could act to address the escalating situation, much damage was already done. The coverage of the international as well as Indian media of the violent attacks against immigrants and international students highlighted an image of Australia as an unwelcoming, and unfriendly society. The student visa application between 2006 and 2011, which is an excellent indicator for the interest in the country as a destination for study indicates a radical and historic drop in the number of Indian students interested in studying in Australia.
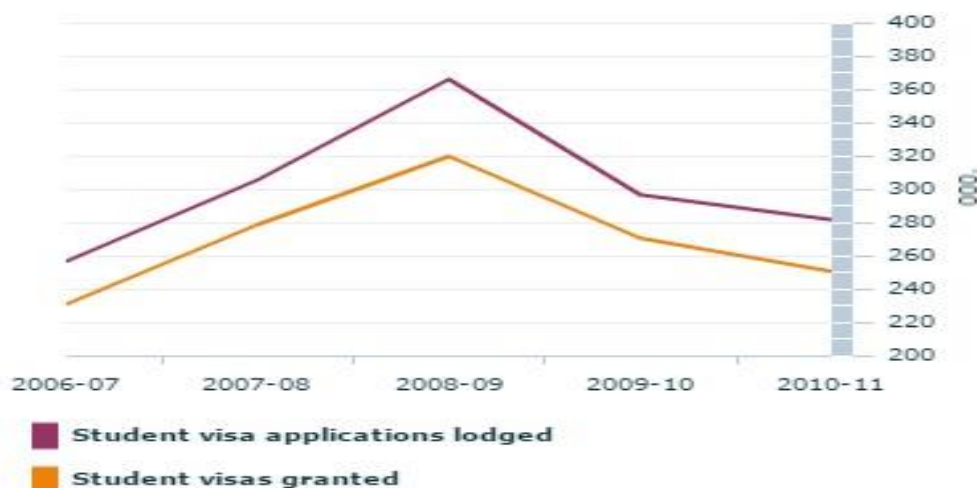

Figure 1: The rate of Indian student visa applications, lodged and granted (2006-2011)[31]

Starting in 2009, the number of inbound Indian students declined radically. The perception of Australia and Australian education was also affected. Hence, studies show that the Indian understanding of social equality in Australia fell from the 7th rank in 2008 to the 34th rank in 2010 (Cull, 2010). Similarly, in terms of popular perception, Australia was considered by Indians as one of the friendliest nations in the world in 2008. Yet, such ranking declined dramatically, by 2010 Australia was ranked as 46th in list of countries which contain only 50 State (Anholt, 2010).

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[31] Source: Department of Immigration and Citizenship, Student visa program trends, 2004–05 to 2010–11, accessed on 11 October 2011

The emerging negative image of Australia as a racist and unwelcoming society has had severe economic, social, and political effects. First, the image revived and reinforced the lingering image of Australia among its neighbouring states as a condescending and supremacist state. Australia has struggled throughout the 1990s to wash out the effect of "white Australia policy" and integrate itself friendly within its immediate geopolitical context (Elkin, 1945). Such negative image could have led to a decrease in the flow of foreign investments if it was not addressed urgently.

Concerning international students, the emerging negative perception of Australia did not only mean international students could no longer be an asset for Australia and its public diplomacy, but they could even turn into a liability and further disseminate the negative image of the country. As stated before, international students can be vehicles of the ideas and ideals of the host country. Yet, when their own experience is not favourable, their attitudes are adverse and such reactions can be equally disseminated.

Australia's experience of hosting international students provides highly essential lessons on the interlink between education, and foreign policy as well as other policies areas such as trade and economy. School is an excellent tool to foster socioeconomic development at the domestic level. It can also be integrated into foreign laws, as international education can be a great source of hard currency. It can improve the country's image and serve as a tool for manufacturing sympathy. However, if the general sociopolitical context is not considered carefully, international students can turn into a "poisonous alumni" or a device that generates apathy and hostility.

Sub-Saharan Students in Morocco: Challenging the Myth of Welcome

As far as geography is concerned, Morocco is located in the extreme North-West of Africa, just 14 kilometres away from Spain, it is bordering the North Atlantic Ocean, and the South shore of the Mediterranean Sea (CIA Factbook, 2019). However, on the imaginary level, the Moroccan territory is located somewhere between what Bernard Lewis qualifies as:

> "The Barbarians of the east and the south [who] were polytheists and idolaters offering no serious threat and no competition at all to Islam. In the north and the west, in contrast, Muslims from an early date recognised a genuine rival a competing world, a distinct civilisation." (Lewis, 1990: 2)

Though Lewis's statement is to be considered with high reserve, it strangely echoes the late King Hassan II's statement that "Morocco is a country whose roots are in Africa and its branches stretch towards Europe." (Lewis, 1990: 4) A statement which reflects tendency to fixate Morocco as a land in-between, not belonging wholly to Africa, and not Europe. Put differently, being geographically situated in Africa, yet, culturally in Europe. This attitude manifests a peculiar case of the intersection of geography and culture. The dilemma of space and its influence on identity and political culture.

Such issue is epitomized in Moroccan media discourse towards Sub-Saharan migrants, and more specifically slightly racist and infamous news article titles such as "*Black grasshoppers invade northern Morocco*", and Hebdo's article which refers to Sub-Saharans in the country as "Le Péril Noir.." or "The Black Danger". In other words, for an outside Western observer, Morocco is an African State, yet, in the Moroccan collective imagination, Morocco belongs somewhere between Europe, and Africa. Therefore, the lines of cultural identity are made with the Middle East, and not with Africa. The arrival of Sub-Saharan African migrants and refugees has always been labelled in the media using metaphors of invasion. However, the influx of Syrian refugees after the 2011 revolt, has never been qualified by the press as invasion. Instead it was often referred to as 'a journey of hope and suffering'. The notion of "Moroccan Hospitality" and "Islamic solidarity" are invoked in favour of Syrian immigrants and refugees but denied to other Sub-Saharan African refugees. The contradiction in the two cases indicates that the anxiety over the arrival of migrants is not motivated by concern over the security or welfare of country, but only by fear and intolerance of the appearance of the dangerous "Other"(Hall, 1996).

The extensive denial discourse adopted by many Moroccans, and Morocco's belonging to Africa does not in itself negate the alarming levels of racism and discrimination that immigrants and international students experience and which various human rights groups have documented. For instance, the country's leading anti-racism group, GADEM (2010a), has documented different discriminatory practices against Sub-Saharans in the country, especially when it comes to accessing essential services such as health and education. Similarly*, Médecins Sans Frontière* (2010) has documented

various types of physical abuses and mistreatment against transit Sub-Saharan migrants in the country.

In this respect, the attempt to explore whether or not Sub-Saharan students feel subjected to racism, and to what extent does this perception of racism affects their mobility experience and their attitude towards Morocco, the research reveals that contrary to the often-cited testimonies of tourists (white, Westerners) which often paint Morocco as a country of acceptance and hospitality, therefore creating "happy talk." Sub-Saharan students view the land differently. It is only 16.9 per cent out of the 64 out of 380 research participants that have stated that they strongly agree or tend to agree with the statement that "Moroccans are hospitable". On the opposite side, 35.5 per cent of participants said that they tend to disagree with the statement, while 14.2 per cent stated that they strongly disagree. In other words, 49.7 per cent of the participants have negative opinions about one of Morocco's cultural markers, that is 'hospitality'.
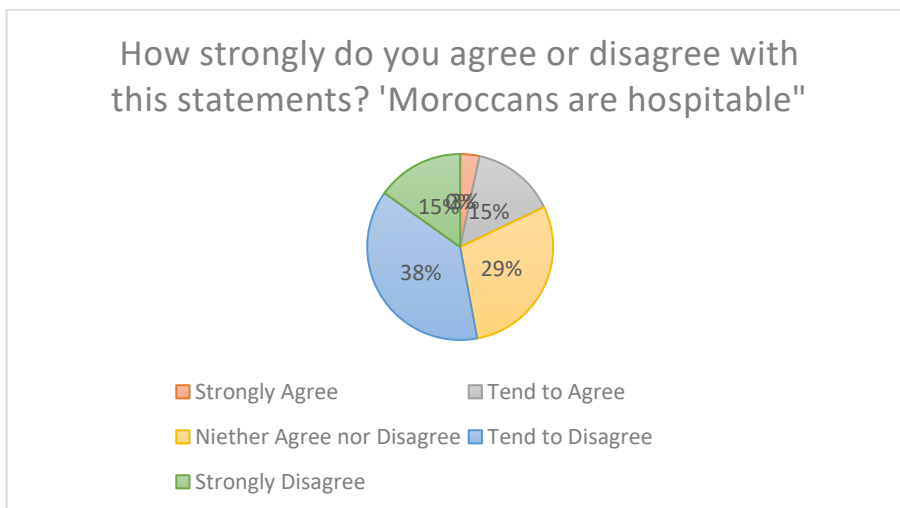

Figure 2: Students' perception of Moroccan 'Hospitality'.

The policy of Moroccan state in the body of the AMCI is producing the opposite of its intended objective and effects, which is having an African elite, which has studied in Morocco, knows Morocco, and therefore, friendly towards Morocco and its interest in Africa. Sub-Saharan students do not seem to hold positive views about the country, and the claim of its people as being "hospitable". Convictions about hospitality are equally linked to perception of racism. Hence, the figure below shows that the feeling of being discriminated against is a constant in the lives of students.
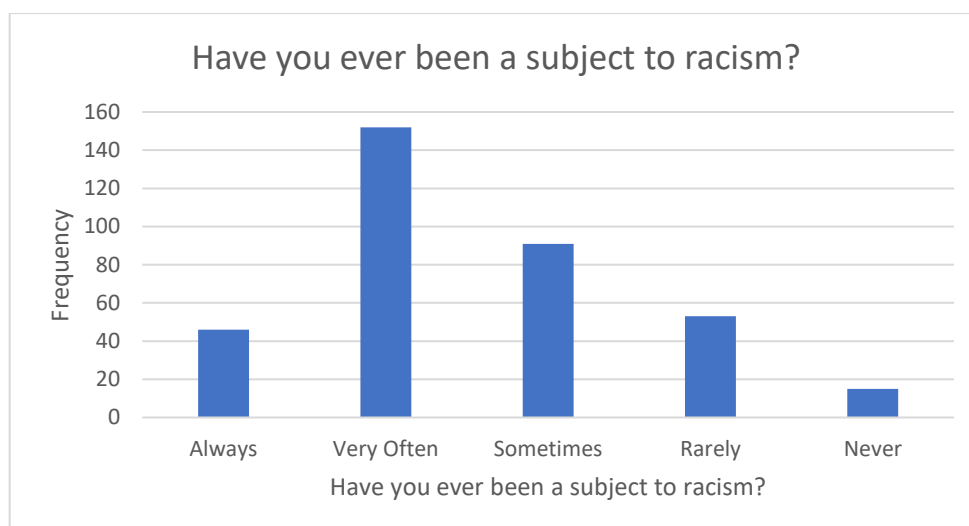
Figure 3: Students' perception of racism

Figure 3 shows that 76.0 per cent of students reported high levels of racism. More specifically, 12.1 of the participants, that is 46 out of 380 stated that they "always" experienced racism, and 40.0 per cent reported that they experience racism "very often." Such rates of racism are incredibly high for a country that claims to be tolerant, hospitable and whose foreign policy and diplomatic activities are centred on the discourse of South-South cooperation, and Pan-Africanism. Hence, the Royal speech on the occasion of the 43rd anniversary of the Green March, a 1975 peaceful rally against Spain's presence in Western Sahara, the King states that:

> "Our return to the African Union was dictated by the pride we take in belonging to Africa, as well as by our commitment to sharing in the development dynamic it is witnessing [...] I decided that Morocco's return to the African Union had also to be based on clarity and ambitious goals…. Morocco's return to its institutional family was not intended as a means to defend the question of the Moroccan Sahara, given that the position of most African nations is similar to ours." (MAP,2018)

However, the similarity that the King's high-minded discourse seems to highlight does not hold against the practices adopted against Sub-Saharans in Morocco. Various human rights reports have highlighted this issue. Hence, a study conducted by the Moroccan Association for Research on Migration revealed that 27 per cent think that the Moroccans consider Sub-Saharans as inferior, and 29 per cent of Moroccans perceive them as menace. (AMERM, 2008). Testimonies

collected by a leading NGO named GADEM also consolidates this point. A Sub-Saharan interviewee states:

> "It wasn't until I arrived in Morocco that I felt different. Yes, I felt that I had black skin, I felt that black is inferior. It is only here that I have felt that." (GADEM., 2010)

> "It is very hard with Moroccans; they are aggressive with us [...]. I was frequently assaulted with a knife sometimes for no reason due to racism. They treat us as Azzis ,black person go [...]." (GADEM, 2010)

GADEM stands for Anti-Racist Group for Accompaniment and Defense of Foreigners and Migrants. (Groupe Antiraciste d'Accompagnement et de Défense des Estrangers et Migrants). When the NGO filed to register as an association, the reaction of the local authorities was:

> "The word anti-racism should be deleted from the acronyms of the association, since racism doesn't exist in Morocco." (GADEM, 2010)

History has much to do with the experience of Sub-Saharan students as do current public policies, media discourse, and actions in the public sphere. In 1590 the Moroccan King Ahmad I al-Mansur also known as al-Mansur Dhabi 'The Golden' launched a military campaign against Songhai Empire in West Africa and whose goal was to expand Morocco's influence in Africa and strengthen the Moroccan economy by bringing gold and slaves. The campaign was relatively successful and met some of its objectives (Lanza, 2012). Local leaders in Sungai offered Morocco thousands of slaves to withdraw its army. The slaves brought from West Africa were mainly recruited in the military and worked to consolidate the power of the central government also known as the Mekhzen. These slaves were referred to as "Abīd al-Bukhārī" and they were given high ranks since their loyalty was to the King Moulay Ismail, (1672-1727) and not to their tribal chieftains (Meyers, 1983). Some of the slaves worked as domestic servants and referred to their masters as 'Azizi' which translates from Arabic as 'my dear' or 'my lord' and which developed later into 'Azzi'. In the present day, it is a racial slur used to refer to dark-skinned Africans (Johnson, 2007). In Amazigh language, the word 'Assoqi' is a term that refers to a person with dark skin. This term originates from the word 'souq', which is borrowed from Arabic and which means 'the market'. 'Assouqi' in Amazighi means something or

preferably someone that can be bought or sold in the market. In Amazigh culture, like in the Arabic, dark skin is closely associated with slavery; hence a dark-skinned individual represents only an object bought or sold in the market. The before mentioned words are consistently used to refer to both African migrants and students.

Given this historical context in which Morocco has invaded powerful African empires and enslaved its people, a general superiority complex towards black Africans emerged. However, Morocco was in turn colonised by Western powers such as France and Spain, so an inferiority complex is present in contrast to Westerners. Consequently, it is not strange that the links of contact, communication, and friendship between native Moroccans and Sub-Saharans are minimal. Sub-Saharan students face high levels of social exclusion and isolation, which does not only affect their attitude towards Morocco but also their academic performance and psychological well-being. Figure 4 below demonstrates the alarmingly limited social contact that Sub-Saharan students have with their Moroccan peers. The patterns of friendship were divided based onBochner, McLeod and Lin's (1977) model in which they categorised the friendship ties of international students into co-national, multi-national, and host-national.
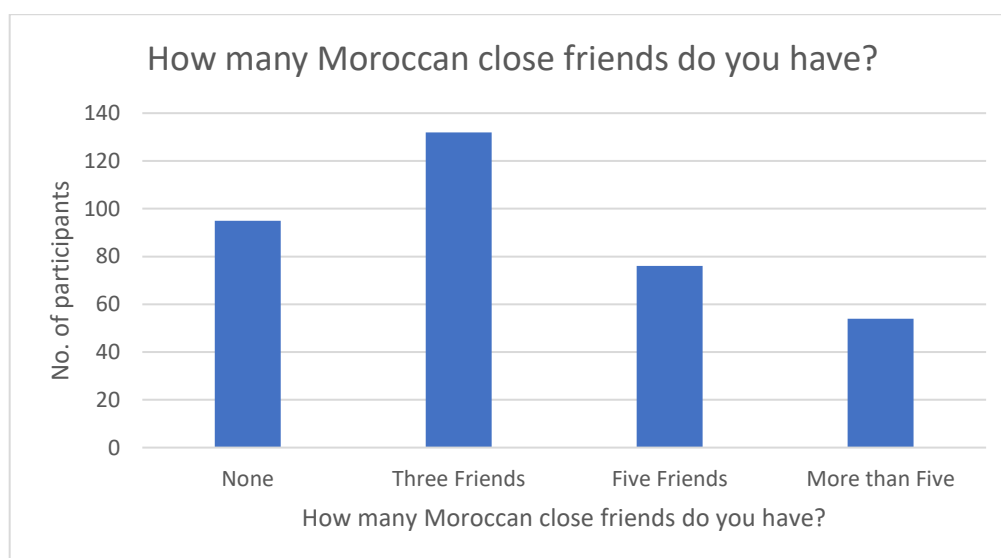

Figure 4: Sub-Saharan Students' Friendship Ties.

The figure shows that is 95 out of 380 participants (25 per cent) indicated having no close Moroccan friends. In contrast, 54 out of 380 participants (14.2 per cent) reported having more than five Moroccan friends. Friendship ties that can serve as networks, of emotional support, and also a tool to enhance

language skills. However, Sub-Saharan students are underperforming in this regard. In the same vein, Gomez et al.'s investigation of the experience 356 students at a U.S. mid-Atlantic university has indicated that building relationships with host-nationals is the most significant indicator of social adjustment (Gomez, Urzua & Glass, 2014). Various researches have also made similar arguments (Bochner et al., 1977; Gallagher, 2012; Montgomery & McDowell, 2009). However, Sub-Saharan students in Morocco have a minimal level of social relationship with host-nationals. This issue demonstrates high levels of social isolation and low levels of language and communication skills.

In brief, although the scholarships granted to Sub-Saharan students by the Moroccan government seeks to develop a positive attitude towards the country among these students, and consequently their home countries. Given the high levels of discrimination against Africans in the country, Sub-Saharan students are not nurturing such positive attitude. Instead, they perceive themselves as subjects of racism. Moreover, the lack of communication and socialising with host-nationals is highly likely to increase feeling of isolation and discrimination, and eventually lead the students to develop negative attitudes about their host country.

Conclusion

Education is a highly valuable tool to promote cooperation and understanding between States and nations. Governments grant scholarships to international students and encourage student mobility for a complex array of reasons. Enhancing the country's image and expanding its soft power resources are among the reasons. International students are often sympathetic to the countries where they studied. They can serve as agents of changes and bring their host and home countries closer. However, as has been shown in the case of Morocco, international students cannot only be a resource, they can also be a significant liability.

International students can develop either positive or negative views and attitudes towards their host country. If students are not well-received by the host community or State institutions, negative attitudes will emerge. However, if convenient programs are developed to address the problems and concerns of students, positive views will surely grow. The experience of international students and the attitudes they develop during their study should be considered

with great care. Students can return to their home countries with negative experiences, either in regard to the living conditions, quality of education and students life. Therefore, social reception is more likely to envision them as poisonous alumni instead of being national assets and a source of soft power.

Contrary to the official discourse which highlights themes of cooperation, tolerance, and collaboration, the experience of Sub-Saharan students in Morocco brings into attention the issue of racism and discrimination against Africans. Many Moroccans appear to tiptoe around and take a defence in discourse about the country's close links with its African neighbours. Consequently, Sub-Saharan students are developing negative attitudes towards the country, instead of developing approaches of sympathy, understanding, and support, an issue that must be given further attention by experienced scholars and international lawmakers.

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