

Roundtable

Equality in the Academy: Thoughts from Africa and South America A Q&A with Robert J. Wafula, Emma Condori Mamani, Esther Mombo, Oscar Lugusa Malande and David Niyonzima

Abstract

In the June 2022 editorial of *Quaker Studies*, the first published under a new editorial team, the editors conveyed our aim to disrupt the status quo. ‘We [hoped that] *Quaker Studies* [could] find ways to highlight thinking and activities from South American, African and Asian countries’¹ So far, so one-sided—much as things have been for centuries. So we wanted to hear from and be directed by scholars working in such nations. Robert J. Wafula, Emma Condori Mamafni, Esther Mombo, Oscar Lugusa Malande and David Niyonzima here offer their responses to a series of questions. Originally, the hope was for a virtual roundtable. However, in light of feedback given after the deadline for publication passed, it became clear that people worked in different ways. This outcome, and particularly the participants’ answers reveal a disconnect, especially in the tenor of conversations within the UK, and offer ways forward for the current unequal academy.

Keywords

Kenya, Burundi, Bolivia, higher education, decolonisation, suggestions for change

Please introduce yourself—who you are, where you’re based, what you work on and why you have chosen to be part of this round table.

RJW: My name is Robert J. Wafula (PhD) and I am the principal (president) of Friends Theological College (FTC), Kenya. FTC is a Quaker seminary that is managed by Friends United Meeting (FUM) headquartered in Richmond, Indiana, USA. We provide training in a variety of programmes: certificate

1 Wynter, R., ‘Editorial: changing times’, *Quaker Studies* 27 (2022), pp. 1–5, at p. 5.

in pastoral ministry, advanced certificate in chaplaincy; diploma in theology; advanced diploma in chaplaincy; Bachelor of theology and Bachelor of chaplaincy degrees. There are three types of learning modes: the residential mode (two semesters in a year); modular mode (three modules of four weeks in April, August and December); and online learning mode using MoodleCloud as our online learning platform.

I have two masters and a doctoral degree: MA in religious studies from Earlham School of Religion, USA (1998) and MA in international affairs from Ohio University, USA (2000). I earned my PhD in educational studies from Ohio University (2006). I taught at Columbus State College in Columbus Ohio for eight years before relocating back to Kenya to take the position I hold now at FTC, Kaimosi. My area of concentration was in cultural diversity, anthropology, sociology and comparative literature.

I have done a few publications, my most recent one was an article, 'Quakers in Africa: history of the Quaker movement in Africa' in *The Quaker World Book*, edited by C. W. Daniels and Rhiannon Grant (London and New York: Routledge, Taylor and Francis, 2023). I am currently working on the restructuring and rewiring of the Friends Church in Africa.

I have chosen to be a part of this roundtable conversation, first to get to know Friends and scholars from different parts of the world, and also to learn and share perspectives from scholars of similar mind.

ECM: I am Emma Condori Mamani. I am a linguist and Quaker writer. I have a MDiv degree from Earlham School of Religion. I work as a director at the Friends International Bilingual Center in La Paz, Bolivia. I decided to be part of this roundtable because I carried a concern regarding Bolivian indigenous people who have suffered discrimination. Most of the time they have been neglected and oppressed by European Bolivians.

EM: My name is Esther Mombo, currently working at St Paul's University in Limuru, Kenya. I teach in the Faculty of Theology's courses in world Christianity and theologies from a women's perspective. I come from a Quaker background and I have worked in university administration for many years. I have now gone back into teaching full time and want to engage in forums wherein I can participate in Quaker discussions and continue my research in that area.

OLM: My name is Oscar Lugusa Malande, a doctoral student at the University of Birmingham, currently teaching at Friends Theological College Kaimosi in Kenya. The topic of my research is 'Studies in African Christianity: the growth and development of African Quaker Christianity in the post missionary era'.

I have chosen to be part of this round table so that I can be part of this great discussion now that in one way or another I am part of the journey towards

overcoming oppression, and as an advocate of decolonisation. I bring the experience of being empowered from the global South in getting education which in its essence harnesses the process of decolonisation. I see being empowered especially by the global North in getting education as an embodiment of decolonisation.

DN: My Name is David Niyonzima. I come from the Burundi Yearly Meeting of Friends. I am working as the vice chancellor of the International Leadership University, Burundi. I chose to be part of this round table because I found that the topics being discussed are of great interest for me in my academic career.

How can scholars at predominantly white universities and based in Europe, North America and Australasia support scholars in Asia, Africa and South America, for example? We're thinking of raising profiles and embedding more diverse scholarship; so, what can funders do, what can university management do, and what can we each do on an individual level?

RWJ: I believe and cherish diversity. Scholars from these regions should share knowledge through a variety of ways:

1. Exchange programmes: scholars in universities in the West can exchange with scholars in universities in the South for one semester or module to expose their students to knowledge outside of their normal environment. Yes, funding can be an impediment but with proper arrangements, funds can be raised from among the scholars to support each other to fund travel expenses, accommodation and other out-of-country expenses.
2. Co-publishing: scholars in these regions can co-publish academic research and works in journals and books for the benefit of students and other readers worldwide. Africa is one of the regions that is far behind when it comes to technical innovation, scientific research, scholarly writing and publishing. This endeavour is also expensive for most scholars and institutions of higher learning. Support from fellow scholars from the West in terms of mentorship and raising of awareness about funding agencies can be a boost to scholarship.

ECM: I think scholars who work at white universities in developed countries should support scholars from Asia, Africa and South America by inviting them to their conferences, providing opportunities to exchange knowledge and experiences at academic level. Inviting scholars from developing countries as guest scholars to lead a class or lecture could help the guest scholars to grow as professionals.

EM: Scholars can partner and work collaboratively so that they can have access to both information and research funding. Access to research funding is competitive and sometimes requires Northern institutions and Southern institutions.

OLM: Develop more discussion forums that will help in understanding how best to support scholars to work on decolonisation.

Partner with institutions for instance, in Africa by having exchange programmes that will continue supporting research initiatives towards decolonisation.

Support projects that will help institutions be independent, and not dependent on the West, such as creating archives that will build memory of the Africans.

DN: My limited understanding of the universities based in Europe, North America and Australasia, that is, the so-called developed countries, is that their scholars find it easier to fund their research, maybe because of the culture that has been developed to support one another through the fundraising mentality, and the relatively easy access to financial resources. Scholars in Asia, Africa and South America, the so-called less developed countries, do not have easy access to such resources that would facilitate their work as much as they wish they could. Universities in developed countries, as much as they recognise the need for research to be done by scholars, should give equal attention to the necessity of funding scholars regardless of where they come from.

Funders have also been reluctant to support these scholarships on the ground that funds would not be used for what they have been asked for. Funders should decolonise their mind and forget generalisations—individuals from less developed countries are not dishonest and can do what is intended. Conditions for scholars from developed countries should be the same as those for those from less developed countries.

Sometimes the mountain seems insurmountable; what can those of us working do now to dismantle oppression in small and significant ways?

RJW: Scholars who are still working should be driven by self-sacrifice in support of the less fortunate communities, particularly in Africa and Asia. It is quite unfortunate that in the twenty-first century we still have communities where children have no access to basic education due to poverty. Poverty is a new form of oppression in certain global communities today. One scholar supporting one student from poverty stricken communities in Africa and Asia is like casting a light to the entire community. However little it may be, it makes a major impact. Such support can be channelled through non-governmental and religious organisations down to schools.

ECM: One small initiative to dismantle oppression is by talking about it in public spaces in our role as a parent, a Christian and as a professional.

EM: There is no one way to work on this but to accept multiple approaches from different sections as oppression is not one form. There is a need to accept that dominance has benefitted some people on the table as scholars meet. Scholars must own their participation in dominance and listen to each other's experiences. The round tables can contribute to white dominance, patriarchal and cultural dominance. These are reflected and experienced by scholars differently, especially economic access.

OLM: Being able to take time to study and understand the situation at ground level. Maybe what we hear, see and even feel may not reflect what the reality is.

Support initiatives that propagate the dismantling of colonisation.

Empower the oppressed for instance, by providing education.

DN: Do the lobbying and advocate for the scholars, find time to learn and if possible visit to exchange ideas with scholars from the less developed countries.

Is this round table asking the right questions? Are 'we' (scholars at predominantly white universities and based in Europe, North America and Australasia) asking the right questions? If yes, please expand; if no, please offer different questions.

RJW: --

ECM: I believe specific questions could have been more efficient than general questions.

Editor: Could you expand, Emma? What specific question would be/have been helpful, and how would you answer it?

ECM: For example, what have the scholars done so far regarding this issue?

I am an educator, so I often give support, by taking part in their work, to the individuals or groups of people who raise or work on this issue in public spaces in order to make a fair world to live in.

EM: The issue for me is not the asking of the questions but how the questions are framed. Northern scholars can create safe spaces to listen to the questions that are being asked from other parts of the world. Scholarship should be something that we struggle together to do rather than being told how to do.

OLM: Yes, these are good questions for breaking the ground in opening the round table discussions. These are introspective questions that examine how best history can be changed. The questions are helpful in correcting wrongs that

have happened in the past as well as owning mistakes done. There is that sense of remorsefulness in creating room for engagement and dialogue between the Southern and Northern to work on decolonisation.

DN: This round table is asking good questions because once research is completed it benefits everyone regardless of his/her geographical location. After all the world is now a small village. And research does not wear the colour or the tribe or the ethnic identity.

Gradually, decolonisation and anti-racism has been (is being) embedded in praxis in Europe, North America and Australasia. What should we be talking about? Where next?

RJW: Decolonisation and anti-racism should be embedded in the curricular in all institutions of learning, beginning from elementary to university. Children in elementary and high school should grow up learning to respect and value every human being, regardless of their ethnicity, race, gender, religious affiliation and sexual orientation. These tendencies germinate and grow in people at very young age.

ECM: Writings about what has been done regarding the anti-racism work in both developed and developing countries should be shared broadly in different languages.

EM: While it may be true that decoloniality has been imbedded in northern Europe, the issue is with those who were colonised and how they have continued to live in colonial frameworks and structures. The presence of the colonial master is not there but the seed that was planted continues to germinate. The need for the colonised to be decolonised is greater than the coloniser decolonising.

OLM: Maybe a question to ask is whether praxis is enough or does it only involve giving the fish and not helping one to learn how to fish? Are there signs of change for the better?

DN: Some colonialism and racism has been due to the lack of understanding and clarity. Therefore initiatives and efforts should be made to learn, seek knowledge, visit and experience the 'other' person, habitat and context.

In everything from presentation and vocabulary to discussions with our membership and publisher, what can *Quaker Studies* and its readers do?

RJW: Quaker scholars should be encouraged to read, write and publish more for the religious market. Many Quaker scholars, particularly those in Africa and Asia, have not been exposed to publishing agencies and journals.

ECM: I wonder who the potential *Quaker Studies* readers are.

Editor: Interesting response, Emma! Can you explain what you mean here, and what difference knowing that would make?

ECM: If Quaker scholars wrote taking into account the readers' reaction based on their cultural backgrounds, spiritual experiences, academic knowledge, etc, and adapted that to the message in their piece, the readers would get a deep understanding regarding the theme of the writing. To me, better communication between a writer and a reader is achieved when writers know their potential readers.

EM: They can create a safe space for dialogue perhaps on the old issues but the new questions, create space for partnership and collaborative research.

OLM: It is not just enough to read and write but it also good to act on what we write and read. It is needful for actions to speak louder than words in letting our life speak as Quakers.

DN: Address these issues with boldness and with assured accountability.

Have you any further thoughts?

RJW: --

ECM: None.

EM: none at the moment

OLM: More listening is needed to understand how best we can engage in the decolonisation process.

DN: No.

Closing Note

Together with Robert J. Wafula, Emma Condori Mamani, Esther Mombo, Oscar Lugusa Malande and David Niyonzima, *Quaker Studies* is exploring whether something further and more practical can come from this conversation.