Introduction: The University as an Agent of Change in Africa

Institutions of higher education in Africa are often viewed as the key to solving many of the challenges facing the continent, and in order to understand the context of IUA one must first make a short and brief reference to these African challenges.

Africa’s problems do not have a singular explanation, and differ considerably from country to country. But most observers attribute the downward trends of the past few decades to factors such as poor national economic policies, corrupt governments, frequent civil and regional conflicts, and the challenges posed by the environment. The last problem is particularly debilitating, as it leaves Africa vulnerable to infectious disease, and makes it more difficult to produce adequate food or to pursue trade within the global economy. The continent has faced human and natural disasters/calamities in the form of wars and disease. Tackling these issues through educating the African youth has been the mission of the International University of Africa.

Background of IUA: The Emergence of the African Islamic Center in Omdurman

Solidarity with and advocacy pertaining to the movement of the peoples of Africa grew strongly in Sudan in the 1960s. Following the crises in the Congo as well
as the assassination of Lumumba in the 1960s, large numbers of Congolese sought shelter in Sudan, including a number of Congolese Muslims. Simultaneously, immigrants were arriving from East Africa, particularly Ethiopia and Eritrea. As these new migrants began to attend the khalawi Qur’anic schools established throughout Sudan, solidarity and sympathy with the needs of these populations—especially their educational needs—grew. This sense of solidarity was crucial in the driving the desire to create an African Islamic Center (AIC) in Omdurman 1967 (Ousman 2009; Lo 2011). AIC would embrace the African Muslim immigrants’ yearning for knowledge, an initiative that was very popular among Sudanese.

However, resources for the center were limited, and its identity and role were not yet fully defined. Key questions remained, such as how the university would address student needs, the status of teachers, and its relations to the prevailing educational system in Sudan. Political turmoil in Sudan also helped deter early efforts to develop the center, and only three years after its founding, the center was terminated amidst the popular revolution and civil unrest of May 1969. The new government, led by General J’afar al Numairi (d. 2009), was highly suspicious of political Islam in the country, an attitude that impacted upon all Muslim institutions countrywide, including AIC. At this time, significant controversy arose among Muslim political parties and groups in Sudan regarding the label of “Islamic” and the extent to which educational institutions could actually be identified as “Islamic.” This struggle between General Numairi’s government and Sudan’s Islamists on the meaning and role of “Islamic” in society impacted the development of AIC, and led to its partial closure.

In spite of this interruption due to sociopolitical disturbances of the late 1960s, the AIC was revived shortly after those events under a newfound sense of urgency among the Sudanese elites. After several peace agreements and political settlements between Numairi and his political opponents, many intellectuals felt a new sense of responsibility and empowerment over their future, and some of these individuals sought government support to not only restore, but also expand AIC project. While exhibiting a greater awareness of regional and logistical concerns, proponents of the idea of promoting Islam through education envisioned the center as representing an official authority on Islam in the region. There were many aspects of positive growth following the first founding phase. The constitution of the center was established in 1972, and the first Board of Trustees meeting took place in November of that year. The center’s desire for state support of the project was fulfilled in the same year in the form of government-donated land. The center remains on this land today in Arkaweet, one of Khartoum’s largest neighborhoods and about 15 miles from Khartoum International Airport. The Office of the Sudanese Minister of Religious Affairs and Endowments became the hosting body of the first AIC Board of Trustees meeting. Libya, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait were represented at the first meetings of the board, and more Arab countries became involved soon after, including Morocco, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar. Donations from these countries totaled 50,000 Sudanese pounds (about $50,000) and 100,000 dinars (about $100,000) by 1977. These funds were crucial to financing the center’s construction. AIC began hiring more