

# Varsities or ethnic bastions?

For some time in post-independence Kenya, the university exhibited a semblance of sobriety as intellectuals aspired to a better nation. Most scholars had been schooled overseas and so had internalised or merely imbibed the university's transformational power in socio-cultural, socio-political, socioeconomic and technological spheres.

Indeed, the University of Nairobi, Moi University, Kenyatta University, Maseno University, Egerton University and Jomo Kenyatta University of Science and Technology are not only the earliest but also the most prestigious spaces of intellectual confluence, wells of knowledge where Kenyans trooped and left only after they had quenched their thirst.

It would be naive to suggest the absence of ethnicity in these spaces. But they had a national face in that the staff and student populations were drawn from all corners of Kenya. Pundits of ethnic exceptionalism offered their tribal beatitudes in secret.

This has since changed with the emergence of ethnic centres of knowledge — the county universities introduced by then-President Mwai Kibaki. Though greatly addressing the ever-expanding need for knowledge, they presented new challenges.

A survey of these universities would reveal the home-turf mantra that dictates appointments to the offices of the vice-chancellor, the deputy VCs, registrars, deans and chairpersons of departments. People who could not get

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professorship in universities with stringent academic cultures 'retreat home' and are bribed with appointment to the coveted league.

These universities have become bastions of ethnicity. Here, the highest competence is one's ethnicity. The home-turf chairpersons of departments stifle research by victimising the most productive dons, invoking ethnic networks to fight their diabolic battles.

Even as the Ministry of Education wallows in self-denial of tribalism in universities, perhaps the desired change in higher education should be rooted in the naming of our institutions. For instance, universities in one region would be named after ethnic heroes in different parts of the country.

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