# Umunthu as an Undergirding Philosophy of Education for Malawi: Lessons from Confucianism

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**Abstract**

This paper is a comparative analysis of an African indigenous philosophy of Umunthu and China's Confucianism to propagate for the setting of Umunthu as an undergirding philosophy of Education in Malawi. The study is placed within the Reconstructionist Theory. This theory propagates for integrating traditional culture with demands of modernisation, thereby demonstrating the relevance of indigenous knowledge in the modern Malawian society. The study employs a historical narrative approach to capture the context of colonial education and its influence on the philosophy of education in post-independence Africa. The study also utilises a comparative and evaluative design of the philosophy of education in contemporary Malawi and relates it to the existence of Confucianism in Chinese and other East Asian education systems for millennia. This demonstrates the potential of a South-South engagement in indigenous knowledge production between China and Malawi.

## Introduction

At independence, some Africans viewed the success of the independence struggles as a clear path towards restoring the continent's lost values, cultures and indigenous knowledge systems. This led to calls for Africanization in various aspects of the socio-political system, with the people's trust in the new system arising from an understanding that the state was now in their own hands. Consequently, education became one of the sectors that required radical transformation because

the colonial model's purpose was to subdue Africans with adaptations that only served to perpetuate colonial domination (Uchendu, 1979). The advent of post-independence education ushered in the call for an educational philosophy with "a focus on Africa and its cultures, identities and values, and the new imperatives for education in a postcolonial era with debates focusing on a re-visioned, typically African philosophy of education" (Ndofirepi, 2017). In the quest for an Africanised education system, debates among various sections ensued, with others propagating for an Africanized education for self-reliance. The reforms had to touch even on the language policy to reflect African originality. As Horsthemke (2017, p.691) posits, "the substratum for the decolonisation of the African mind and for creating an educational vision capable of serving the legitimate interests of Africa in the contemporary world is for Africans to (learn to) think and philosophise in their language".

Despite vibrant debates and insights from Pan-Africanists across the continent, the efforts at Africanization never fully materialised. The education system remained primarily modelled on the colonial form with the vacuum created by the departure of colonial administrators now filled by post-independence leaders. Most of them perceived themselves as potential heirs to European political systems and models of culture (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2007). Woolman (2001) noted that the inherited colonial systems were expanded and modified to serve new economic and social needs identified by the African governments. Maintaining such systems meant that even Africa's Education evaded reforms to ensure decolonisation. Thus, colonial culture was still highly promoted in the curriculum, which worsened with a language policy in most Africa skewed towards promoting a colonial heritage. For example, in Malawi, when ministers in the first post-independence government complained about the slow Africanization of the heavily British civil service, its first post-independence president Hastings Kamuzu Banda reminded them of the chaos in other countries and refused to budge (Battiata, 1988).

The inheritance of a colonial education system on the continent meant the maintenance of anti-African philosophies of education that have lasted decades after independence. The reforms that have been occurring from the mid – 1990s till present have had as their focus the transitioning of Malawi from a one-party political system to a democratic dispensation with a fusion of aspects of modernisation and globalisation (Tlou & Kabwila, 2000; Namphande, 2017; Namphande, Clarke, Farren, & McCully, 2017). This means the philosophy of Education in Malawi has mainly remained influenced by Western practices. Consequently, Malawi's philosophy of education can be understood as the ensemble of educational thought and practice underpinning the country's education system today, which the paper argues is a mere adaptation of the old colonial system. This position arises from the understanding that Malawi still does not have an identified philosophy (Sangala, 2016).

## Reconstruction Theory

The study deploys the Reconstructionist Theory, which propagates for integrating traditional culture with demands of modernisation. The theory regards contemporary education as most effective when it incorporates the values and strengths of traditional culture with the knowledge and skills required by new conditions of modern life (Woolman, 2001, pp.28-29). Woolman posits that "the spirit of nationalism embodied in the rediscovery of the roots of African identity in the pre-colonial past is also reflected in this thought". This is very important as with the current education setup in Malawi, modernisation and globalisation are often confused with westernisation, resulting in denigrating perceptions of indigenous knowledge production and a continuous search for solutions to Malawi's education problems (mis)guided by Western philosophies. As Woolman (2001) notes, nation-building in modern Africa faces integrating multicultural traditions. Reform of the inherited educational systems that essentially functioned to maintain the colonial order of dependency and elitism has been an essential part of nation-building. The Reconstructionist Theory "is focused on four areas: evaluation of colonial education, critique of postcolonial education, a re-examination of traditional

African education, and exploration of educational alternatives for liberation and achievement of an authentic African national identity" (Woolman, 2001, p.29). Therefore, the existence of the theory and its use to support the proposed reform with Umunthu at the centre is crucial to this study. Thus, the present paper's examination of the timeline of education and its philosophy in Africa and Malawi, in particular, is subtly set within the Reconstructionist Theory.

## Colonial Education in Africa

Some scholars divide colonial Education in Africa into three models that spanned from missionary through to colonial days. The first is the white conservative missionary model, which peaked with its philosophy of Education in Congo under Belgian occupation/settlerism and had its objective to dismantle African belief systems and replace them with Western ones (Mahoso, 2013). This model recognised that Africans already knew God and did not need white missionaries to know God and acquire knowledge and wisdom (Mutekwe, 2015, p.1295). Instead, t purpose of its education was to manipulate the Bible and the African's understanding of God to suppress African potential (Chivaura, 2014).

The second is liberal white missionary education which viewed education as drawing out and leading forth, "literally to mean helping the African flee from Umunthu and become a third rate European" (Mufuka, 2014 cited in Mutekwe, 2015, p.1295). This purpose of education was as clear as the first. The main difference is that the latter recognised an indigenous pattern of life – Umunthu – an adversary and wanted to be dismantled. This had the sole purpose of destroying African identity and replacing it with Western ideals. Such ideals would fix the Africans in an identity crisis – neither African nor European. Mutekwe (2015) considers this linear, crusading approach to African Education as an escape or retreat from Africanness perpetrated by the philosophy of liberal missionary education. Similarly, Mahoso (2013) argues that paradoxically, the white missionaries who started the Western-oriented type of schools in Africa did not follow the philosophy of education implied in the Bible but the dictates of imperialism and settlerism, which meant that the native African had to be constituted as an escapee,

like a run-away from their own Umunthu. Thus, a de-Africanization of the native was the motive of the colonial empire's philosophy of education at the second evangelisation (missionary) stage.

The third educational philosophy was embedded in the colonial/apartheid model. This model saw colonial governments instituting discriminatory policies in the education offered to Africans. Several scholars have highlighted this philosophy in which education targeted raising a subservient populace to help the colonial administration govern efficiently (Tlou & Kabwila, 2000; Wyse, 2008; Majoni & Chinyanganya, 2014; Mutekwe, 2015). As a result, primary education was mainly the only recommended for the native Africans, just enough to help them serve in simple clerical jobs. For example, Chivaura (2014) notes that the apartheid and Rhodesian states' idea of Bantu education was a secular system for training Africans to be productive labourers and clerks at the lowest levels of the industry while recognising their separate, indigenous African origins only for purposes of segregation.

## Education in Post-independence Africa

In post-coloniality, Africa maintained most of the colonial systems, education inclusive. With minor modifications to suit the needs of the new government system, educational thought was tailored towards raising a majority populace that was, again, obedient and subservient to the new political elites. This was evident in countries like Malawi, where the political establishment was intolerant of any education facilitating independent thinking (Manthalu, 2018, p.205). Consequently, the philosophy of education saw curricular content remaining predominantly western, the language of instruction in almost all of Africa remained colonial, and the teaching and research methods remained western. In the case of Malawi, "there was a glaring failure on the part of Malawian leadership to make meaningful attempts towards educational decolonisation, free of undue Eurocentrism" (Manthalu, 2018, p.208). For example, 85% of what was taught in History was European history (Tlou & Kabwila, 2000). Similarly, the language of instruction in the country was and has remained English.

In his critique of Western Education (in Africa), Okpalike (2014, p.178) considers it as "a colonial scheme that seeks to perpetuate a western understanding and interpretation of Africa and African life, breeds African elites under the same framework and consequently fosters western interests within a seeming African struggle". Okpalike's perspective is shared by Chinweizu (1978), who considers Western Education as miseducation, noting the alienation of such an education causes a 'disconnect' between the educated African and the society. The introduction of Western Education to Africa came on the false pretext that there never existed Education in Africa before. Consequently, as Majoni and Chinyanganya (2014, p.64) note, education on the continent has been lopsided, tending to down-grade endogenous methodologies of disseminating knowledge to the young in favour of western knowledge systems using the westernised methods right from the beginning, throughout the colonial as well as the postcolonial periods. From the racist and superior perspectives on which colonialism was built, Education in Africa was inferior and replaced by Western Education, which the colonialists considered outstanding. With time, colonialism intentionally "nudged endogenous/communal ways of educating the young out of the way and Africans were left with the Western paradigms whose modus operandi they were not quite used to" (Majoni & Chinyanganya, 2014). Since independence, Majoni and Chinyanganya argue, educational practice on the African continent remains mired (to different degrees) in the Western tradition, sometimes causing conflict.

### Philosophy of Education in Malawi: a Timeline

Being a British Protectorate from 1891-1964, eight missions were working to provide education in the country by 1902 (Kayambazinthu, 1998). And until 1929, the whole formal Education in Malawi was in the hands of the various missionary groups. This situation prevailed throughout the colonial period as missionary institutions absorbed more students than government schools (Kretzer & Kumwenda, 2016). Kretzer and Kumwenda (2016, p.25) further note that it was only in 1926 that the colonial government established a Department of Education, demonstrating the lack of interest to improve education in the colony

as Malawi was short on natural resources and therefore less relevant to the colonial administration. Namphande et al. (2017) argue that the education system focused on primary than secondary education in the colonial era. Mafela and Mgadila (2000) noted that separate schools existed for White and Malawian children, and Malawians rarely advanced beyond primary education in keeping with their subservient role in society.

The colonial model in Malawi's Education also comes out clearly through the language of instruction. Since independence, English has remained the instructional media in the country. The main objective of the language policy in education during the colonial period was to use language that would help cultivate a local populace that would read, write, and do simple arithmetic (Kayambazinthu, 1998). At independence, the postcolonial government opted to maintain this philosophy behind the medium of instruction, with the same modifications as before, which allowed vernaculars in earlier stages of Education (Kayambazinthu, 1998). The instructional medium remains English, although it is only used in major cities, often as a second language (Lewis, Simons, & Fennig, 2013).

In addition to the Eurocentric curriculum and the colonial language of instruction that still dominate Malawian Education, pedagogy/teaching methodologies are also informed by western perspectives. Tlou and Kabwila (2000) note that curricular reforms in the post-independence have often been accompanied by a change in teaching methods, with a new emphasis on participatory methods drawn from Western knowledge sources. In her criticism of implementation in curricular reforms, Wyse (2008, p.42) attributes this failure to Western' floods': Western incursion through elements of participatory democracy as applied to the classroom situation in constant conflict with contextual context factors that shape the Malawian society. This is corroborated by Namphande et al. (2017), who argue that this has resulted in the creation of hybrid cultures in schools as, in some instances, traditional practices give in to the demands of democracy.

Thus, the timeline of education models in Malawi deeply reflects Western philosophies of education as manifested in the white conservative, white liberal,

and colonial education models. It is against this background that Okpalike (2014) proposes what he terms a *re-education* of the educated and *re-interpretation* of the understood, all of which require a new philosophy, objective and method in education. This is where the role of indigenous philosophies arises, owing to their embedment in the Malawian society, and therefore ideal in addressing problems that are existent in the same community.

## Looking East: Alternative Sources of Philosophy of Education

In dismantling the coloniality of African Education through indigenisation, it is only reasonable that we look elsewhere to explore how other indigenous philosophies work in advancing educational goals in their nation-building and development agenda in the contemporary world. This is on the pretext that there has not been much exposure to philosophies of education from other regions such as the East, which interestingly share colonial experiences with Africa. Nevertheless, such an exercise is essential in soul searching as we advance the case for an indigenous African philosophy to undergird Education in Malawi.

A quick review of available literature on educational thought in the East leads to the predominance of one popular philosophy at the centre of Education: Confucianism. Its presence is marked by hybridisation with other foreign philosophies when modification is necessary; a factor owed to Confucianism's openness to blending with different perspectives. For example, although one of its philosophies focuses on the acquisition of English, Ubong (2011) notes that Confucianism is another philosophy central to the Singaporean education system. To realise the aims of education, the country's curriculum is designed to develop the character, mind and body of students (Ministry of Education - Singapore, 2018). Thus, it nurtures students' values and builds their knowledge, skills, and dispositions. The Ministry of Education further states that the Singaporean curriculum provides learning experiences to interact actively and bond with others. "In doing so, they become aware that they are part of society. Through this, they learn to embrace diversity and collaborate with people from different backgrounds" (Ministry of Education - Singapore, 2018). The central concept in the Confucian

philosophy which underlies this curriculum is *ren* (*jen*), which to Confucius meant "the good life is an endless aspiration for ethical perfection" (Ubong, 2011). Morality is thus a crucial part of the Singaporean education system. Thus, in his article, Ubong (2011, p.864) argues that this emphasis on moral education in the national education policy accounts for the reason Singapore is one of the most developed countries in the world while among other issues remaining the least corrupt globally.

Similarly, Vietnam also registers a strong influence of Confucian philosophy as undergirding its Education (Mai & Kang, 2013). Khang (2014) argues that its impact on education dates back to antiquity resulting from ancient contact between Vietnam and China. Historically, Vietnam's feudal dynasties accepted Confucianism soon after gaining independence in the 10th century. The Confucian educational philosophy was gradually incorporated into Vietnamese Education from that time. The main objective of Confucianism was to nurture a true gentleman according to the Confucian template of "three moral bonds and five constant virtues", men who knew how to "cultivate themselves, manage their home, rule the country, and pacify the world" (Trung, 2016). Part of the underlying philosophy of Vietnam's curriculum, which underwent reforms in the early 2000s, stated that it "should focus on children, based on their positive activities to help them create the demands of studies and learn how to teach themselves, seek and acquire new knowledge by themselves" (McAleavy & Elwick, 2016, p.117).

In Japan, the philosophy of education bears all marks of Confucianism in its various periods of development. As early as 1881, moral education as a school subject peaked and accounted for 17% of total school hours in the country's primary school curriculum (Jacoby, 2006, p.43). Jacoby further notes that consequently, an editorial board established by the Department of Education quickly published *Moral Education for Elementary Education*, a manual mainly based on "famous adages from traditional Eastern classics illustrative of various virtues central to Confucian thought. Writing on Japanese education in 1951, Kerlinger saw Japan's educational system as being based on the philosophy of *shushin* (Ubong, 2011,

p.865). This philosophy represented a collective of morals, ethics, moral science, moral training and morality. However, *Shushin* as a principal subject was dropped in the aftermath of World War 2, opting for a new educational law with the central philosophy of confirming equal rights to education and democratising the country with more equal systems, including co-educational secondary schools (Rapplyele & Kariya, 2011). With the new law, *Shushin a*s a Japanese education philosophy was replaced with an alternative "realm," called Dohtoku. The latter borrowed the basic philosophy of "self-sacrifice for the good of others" or "conformity over individuality", which was derived from Confucianism (Sakurai, 2016). In essence, morality was still the central philosophy of Japanese education, demonstrating the overarching Confucian influence (Ubong, 2011).

In the Republic of Korea, the very same virtues of Confucianism have formed the core of the country's philosophy of education. The country's Ministry of Education propagates humanitarianism as the Korean educational philosophy to educate students who will contribute positively to the welfare of humanity (Ministry of Education - Republic of Korea, 2013). The ministry further observes that education is considered relevant in the country because of Confucian philosophy, which stresses the importance of learning, scholarship and the particular national desire for more significant achievements. Chang (2008, pp.2-3) corroborates this assertion by observing that Confucian philosophy has also made Korean people highly conscious of social status, judged almost solely by one's educational background. As Lee (2006) notes, Confucianism traditionally provided a proper way of training gentlemen, involving constant self-cultivation through education right from the start. With an education system undergirded partly by Confucianism, Korea has experienced an economic boom due to the successful execution of the national economic development plans and their zeal for education.

The overarching influence of Confucianism in the philosophies of Education of the East points to the philosophy's adaptability to social systems in countries that boast its heritage. This calls for a deeper understanding of what

Confucianism entails as a body of knowledge – not the bits we have explored in the Eastern philosophies of education – by examining its presence in the source culture. This presence is to be in at least two ways: a brief history, teaching and the virtues that make up Confucianism and; the philosophy's influence in Education in China.

## Confucianism as a Philosophy of Education in China

Historically, educational development in China has been influenced by classic philosophical texts that have laid the foundations of teaching and learning. The most notable of these classic texts belong to Confucianism and its resulting influence on Chinese society for millennia. For example, the importance of early childhood education is emphasised in the 'Book of Changes', one of the country's earliest philosophic classics. This classic stresses the purpose of early childhood education to nurture children's virtue and moral character. It also promotes the need for children to be taught through their daily life experiences to acquire survival and integration/adaptation skills in society (Huang, 2014).

Education in China is widely perceived as integrating the cultivation of 'human souls' with the provision of knowledge to students. Therefore, the cultural knowledge imbued in the Chinese cultural schema of education greatly influences teachers, students, and parents as essential stakeholders in education. Hui (2005) observes that the Chinese cultural schema of education is the abstract knowledge of the nature of education distributed among Chinese cultural members. Zhu (1992, p.4) views the cultural knowledge as emerging from thousands of years of interaction among the Chinese social need for developing harmony in a collective and stratified society, the Confucian philosophy of education and the political utilitarianism of education. Hui (2005) further introduces the Chinese concept of jiao shu yu ren – teaching books and cultivating people, an education schema which he regards as influencing contemporary Chinese Education to the point of transforming the virtues and morals as contained in Confucian Education into political-moral education that is relevant for the modern Chinese society. This political-moral education has primarily remained a significant concern of

contemporary Chinese Education since the foundation of the People's Republic of China in 1949 (Price, 1992).

However, with globalisation and the constant contact between civilisations in the contemporary world, evading the loss of political-moral education has become one practical interventionist approach implemented by the Chinese government in recent times. Therefore, remedial measures are being put in place in schools and society to preserve Confucian moral virtues and inculcate Chinese socialistic morals in students. In an article on the Chinese cultural schema of Education, Hui (2005, p.24) observes that "the teaching of morals and virtues is embedded in subject materials, and by reading the materials which are subtly loaded with either Confucian moral virtues or socialistic morals, students are influenced imperceptibly" (Hui, 2005). Hui further notes that inculcation of the Confucian virtues and values also occurs beyond the classroom, citing the existence of several extracurricular activities whose purpose is the same.

As noted, China still re-emphasises Confucianism as part of its educational philosophy both subtly and explicitly. In 2014, the Chinese Ministry of Education issued a circular which called on schools to 'deeply excavate and elucidate China's excellent traditional values by articulating benevolence, valuing the citizens, abiding in integrity, upholding uprightness, treasuring harmony, and seeking common ground' (Ministry of Education - China, 2014). When closely examined, the underlying message is the inculcation of Confucian traditional values and virtues in Chinese society – a practice that has existed for millennia. Tan (2017, p.13) argues that there is a resurgence of Confucianism in China which has, to a greater extent, resulting in a wide application and dissemination of the educational philosophy and practices of Confucianism. For example, she notes that "the renewed interest in Confucianism has led to significant attention and resources being directed to learning Confucian teachings through various avenues". Such avenues include the *guoxue* (National Chinese Cultural Course), which became famous through classes offered in elite universities across China and a primetime programme on 'Analects' (Yu, 2008). Tan (2017, p.13) also notes that schools have often relied on Confucian

pedagogies such as the enlightening approach for their curriculum reform and introduced Confucian classics and rites to their students as part of their school-based curriculum.

In recognition of Confucianism's influence in modern Education, Wang (2016) observes that Confucian learning from all perspectives matches contemporary education researchers' views of learning from others, collaborative learning, learning from experience and the use of various resources such as the internet. Chinese learners have a greater propensity to integrate contradictory processes in China itself. Lee (cited in Chan & Rao, 2009) explains the phenomena as originating from ancient Confucian philosophy through notions of Doctrine of the Mean. Through this notion, Lee argues that Chinese people are more likely to find a middle way among different approaches and ways of living in search of harmony (Chan & Rao, 2009, p.334). This explains why adapting the philosophy to trending needs in educational thought in China has been equally achievable as elsewhere in East Asia.

The scholarly treatment of Confucianism as a philosophy of Education in China gives us insights into the relevance and practicalities of implementing indigenous knowledge systems into an education system. As observed, Confucianism as a philosophy of education has been considered appealing to various aspects of education.

## Towards an Indigenous African Philosophy of Education

Confucianism teaches us from the Asian context that indigenous philosophies can bring enormous progressive change when correctly integrated into the formal education systems of the concerned societies. As Bewaji (2017, p.732) argues concerning the African context, setting an African philosophy of education is necessary for the transcendence of received (Western) versions of education inherited from the formal systems of skills training, which have "failed to make of Africans better human beings within the context of their societies". Indigenising the philosophy of education would render contemporary education

effective. It will involve the integration of *Umunthu* values and strengths of tradition with the knowledge and skills acquired from our encounters with the modern world and its concepts of globalisation and internationalisation. This aligns well with Woolman (2001) 's Reconstructionist perspectives which inform this paper's position on indigenisation.

In his propagation for an African philosophy of Education, Horsthemke (2017, p.683) begins by attempting to respond to the question of whether there is a (set of) perspective(s), a body of thought, and a particular way of "doing" philosophy of education that can be called "African". She then argues that the possibility and plausibility of the African philosophy of education ought to be established in terms of its priorities. Horsthemke further posits that the different historical, geographical, cultural, and social contexts and political circumstances of Africans and Education in Africa would determine the continent's varying philosophical priorities.

Higgs (2003, p.1617) posits that the African philosophy of education should empower communities to participate in their educational development. This, he argues, arises from the understanding that African philosophy of education "respects diversity, acknowledges lived experience and challenges the hegemony of Western Eurocentric forms of universal knowledge". As Connell (2007) posits, such a reformist approach to Malawi's education system reflects the existence of alternative bodies of indigenous knowledge that can effectively replace knowledge from the Global North. Concerning education, in particular, Waghid (2014, p.1) advances the notion of "an African philosophy of education guided by communitarian, reasonable and culture-dependent action" by drawing on a communitarian understanding of the notion of *Umunthu*. He considers *Umunthu* as offering a medium not only for the enactment of African philosophy of education but also for its contribution "towards achieving democratic justice on the African continent" (Waghid, 2014, p.1).

Waghid (2004, p.5) also cites Hountondji as positing that African philosophy of education ought to be concerned with the quest to achieve reasonableness so

that the predicament of the African experience regarding ignorance and poverty can be resolved. Concerning this, Wiredu (2004) argues that an individual who has not achieved a sense of morality, responsibility and empathy towards others has not achieved personhood or the status of an educated person. This implies that the African philosophy of education must focus on cultivating honesty, sincerity, responsibility and empathy towards others (Wiredu, 2004). Higgs (2003, p.13) also argues that the understanding of an African philosophy of *Umunthu* as a form of humanism which could engender "communal embeddedness and connectedness of a person to other persons" could orientate an African philosophy of education towards the cultivation of "virtues such as kindness, generosity, compassion, benevolence, courtesy and respect and concern for others".

Still, much as several Africanist scholars agree to the existence of a body of knowledge that can be reconstructed into an indigenous African philosophy, the success of any such proposed philosophy has to comparatively engage with the current philosophies of education and single out aspects that can be capitalised on to avoid creating a vacuum upon initiation of the reforms. However, this is not much of a problem as according to Horsthemke (2017, p.696), it appears that "African philosophy of education shares a range of concerns with the philosophy of education elsewhere' in addition to the 'distinctive set of concerns arising from particular (African) historical and sociopolitical circumstances". This implements the African philosophy of education as a reform easily executable at all levels with careful planning and a widened engagement of relevant stakeholders.

## Umunthu Epistemology in African Philosophy of Education

The discourse on the possibility and plausibility of an African philosophy of education generates thoughts on the popular indigenous African philosophy of *Umunthu*. For example, both Waghid (2004) and Higgs (2003) propose *Umunthu a*s an ideal indigenous African philosophy of education and advocate its introduction. Likewise, Manthalu (2018, pp.273-275) argues for education to be informed by *Umunthu* to achieve harmony and humanness, noting that such principles are crucial for the modern global economy.

Similarly, Letseka (2000, p.179) proposes the notion of educating Umunthu for interpersonal and cooperative skills and human well-being or human flourishing as the supposed significant concerns of an African philosophy of education. He formulates his viewpoint to understand that *Umunthu* is identified as "pervasive and fundamental to African socio-ethical thought, as illuminating the communal rootedness and interdependence of persons, and highlighting the importance of human relationships". Similar views were echoed by Kenya's first president, Jomo Kenyatta, who observed that "according to Gikuyu (one of the biggest ethnicities in Kenya) ways of thinking, nobody is an isolated individual. Or rather, a person's uniqueness is a secondary fact about them; first and foremost, they are several people's relative and several people's contemporary" (Kenyatta, 1965, p.297). This is what is entailed in *Umunthu* as a philosophy, and the Africanist scholars who argue for its engagement in education understand its deep roots in African societies.

In *Umunthu,* Menkiti (1984, p.158) notices an essential distinguishing aspect between the African view of man and the view of man in Western thought. "In the African view, the community defines the person as a person; not some isolated static quality of rationality, will or memory". An individual is a biological relative of a broad family; is linked to a vast network of other people through marriage; associates with others through community roles, duties, obligations and responsibilities; and is several other people's contemporary or neighbour (Letseka, 2000, p.182). The preceding illustrates well the philosophy of *Umunthu,* which is the core of the argument as a form of an African philosophy on which African Education in Malawi must be based, with the Confucian epistemology serving as a model philosophy of education. Confucianism is a perfect model in implementing *Umunthu* as a philosophy of education because of the two philosophies' shared commonalities. These include: (1) communitarianism/conformity over individuality, thereby leading to embracing of diversity and collaboration; (2) morality and ethical perfection; (3) virtues of loyalty, respect for one's elders, and filial piety; (4) humanitarianism; and (5) benevolence, integrity, uprightness, and harmony.

## Learning from Confucianism - Building a Case for an Umunthu Epistemology

It is imperative to consider the outcomes of Education in Africa's postcolonial systems where Western education models, including its philosophies, have been domineering. As argued by different scholars, Western Education has not successfully transformed African countries in both the colonial and post-independence eras (Okpalike, 2014; Waghid, 2014; Bewaji, 2017; Horsthemke, 2017).

The problems as reinforced by Africa's continued adoption of Western/colonial education models can be rectified by adopting systems that speak more to the African – indigenous while drawing important lessons of indigenisation from other knowledge systems worldwide. The knowledge systems that can inspire our shift to an indigenous body of knowledge as an undergirding philosophy of education must be those that share some common elements with our systems – as demonstrated by Confucianism. Such a decolonisation trail can only start with reforms that target the very basis of education: philosophy.

Hence, it is essential that the Malawian education system shifts from its overreliance on western philosophies of education to indigenous philosophies. This is where *Umunthu* comes in. However, since *Umunthu* is not known as an epistemological concept in Malawi's formal education, it requires knowledge of implementation in education from other similar indigenous philosophies that have guided education elsewhere in the Global South. As such, Confucianism in this paper comparatively serves as a model to draw lessons for Malawi and its (Malawi's) implementation of an Umunthu philosophy of education. This is because of Confucianism's history and place in education in China and other countries of East Asia. Its focus on altruism and humanness as well as virtues and morality (Hui, 2005; Lee, 2006; Chang, 2008; Chan & Rao, 2009; Corcoran, 2014) brings it closer to U*munthu*, which among other aspects, is also rooted in the perception of a human being as belonging to the society (Letseka, 2000; Higgs, 2003; Waghid, 2014; Horsthemke, 2017). The concepts of "self-sacrifice for the good of others"

or "conformity over individuality" in Confucianism (Sakurai, 2016) resonate with the emphasis on community over the individual, which is at the centre of *Umunthu*. The case of Korea's humanitarianism as a basic tenet of Confucianism also offers an opportunity from which the practicalities of setting *Umunthu* as a Malawian philosophy of education can be drawn. This is evident in the concept itself, which is also the whole idea behind *Umunthu*. It points to the fact that Umunthu can easily act as an excellent educational philosophy targeting the possible nurturing of students for a positive contribution towards development and nation-building. Thus, the emphasis of Confucianism on loyalty, respect for elders, and filial piety bring the philosophy closer to U*munthu.*

Consequently, Confucianism's existence creates positive perspectives and encouragement towards the deployment of *Umunthu* as an indigenous African philosophy to undergird Education in Malawi. For example, from Confucianism's shared commonalities with Umunthu, it is possible to embark on collaborative learning, learning from experience, and introducing classics and virtues that reinforce the basic tenets of *Umunthu*. It would also permit adapting to new knowledge forms through *Umunthu's c*onformity with backgrounds in the society.

The existence of Confucianism not just as a body of knowledge that shares commonalities with *Umunthu b*ut its role as a philosophy of Education in China and other East Asian countries at various periods until present means it has been applied to multiple angles of education. Thus, with a focus on a favourable indigenous philosophy of education, the specific areas of the target must include the curriculum, teaching methods/pedagogy, and language of instruction, all of which in the current situation are the underbelly of colonialism refusing leave. Confucianism is thus known even in its applicability to these relevant aspects as a long-time philosophy of Education in China. Hence, its choice as a model philosophy from which to learn after a comprehensive epistemological comparison with *Umunthu* is informed on such a basis. This also generally unveils the potential for a successful South-South engagement in indigenous knowledge production between China and Malawi.

In building the case for *Umunthu, t*herefore, the processes involved aligning with the focus in the Reconstructionist Theory. As noted earlier, the theory evaluates colonial education, provides a critique of postcolonial education, re-examines traditional African Education, and explores educational alternatives for liberation and achievement of an authentic African national identity (Woolman, 2001, p.29). Thus, setting *Umunthu* as an undergirding philosophy of education becomes a real possibility, especially as evidenced through the Reconstructionist Theory's basic tenets.

## Conclusion

The concept of an education system undergirded by an indigenous African philosophy has been presented as emanating from campaigns on decolonisation of African Education since independence. This study adds perspective to the discourse by introducing a comparative framework in which an African philosophy of *Umunthu* has been advanced as ideal in guiding education with lessons from an East Asian philosophy of Confucianism. Through the two philosophies' shared commonalities, the present paper has presented a case through which Malawi's Education can undergo reforms to migrate from the recurring colonial/western models that are anti-African by various studies. As an example of how *Umunthu* can learn from Confucianism, the paper has singled out some critical areas in education, such as the learning methods and learners' ability to adapt to new knowledge, which are essential aspects of learning informed by the basic tenets of the two philosophies. The stages undertaken in the study subtly reflect the four critical areas in the Reconstructionist Theory: evaluation of colonial education, critique of postcolonial education, a re-examination of traditional African education, and exploration of educational alternatives for liberation and achievement of an authentic African national identity.

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