TRIBUTE

Omer Beleil: The Ethical Leader to Admire and Inspire (1938–1991)

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Omer Beleil was the first Sudanese organ transplant patient to successfully receive a kidney from his brother while training to be a brain surgeon in London in 1968. After enduring a challenging eight months of kidney failure and unsuccessful attempts at cadaveric kidney donations, his life took a positive turn (Beleil, 1973).

Mr. Beleil, later known as Professor Beleil, joined the Faculty of Medicine as a senior lecturer and, within a few years, was promoted to Professor. During this period, he managed his first kidney transplant at Khartoum University Hospital (Soba Teaching Hospital) for a Saudi patient (Lee, 1978).

His childhood was unique; he was the fourth child in a middle-class family. Initially, he lived with his grandmother in a village in North Sudan, far from his parents and siblings, who resided in the middle region south of the capital, Khartoum, in a city called Wad Madani (the second largest in Sudan), approximately 750 miles from his aunt's home in Tangasi village. Both Wad Madani and Tangasi are located by the Nile, as are most known cities and villages in Sudan (Beleil, 1973).

In 1946, the Nile River flood was tremendous; many farmers in the villages beside the great river lost their farms and homes, which had been made of mud bricks and roofed by palm trees. His grandmother took him back to Wad Madani, where his family lived. There he began to show his talents, and at school he was the leader in academia and school activities. His grades always topped the class, and he went to the best higher secondary school. At that time, exams in Sudan were equivalent to Cambridge exams. He then went to Khartoum University, which was built as a memorial to Marshal Sir Gordon, the governor of Sudan for the British Empire on which the sun never set.

There, he studied his first year in the Faculty of Science and was then selected for Medicine, a college named for Sir Kitchener, one of the famous British leaders. He graduated top of his class in Medicine, holding the Kitchener Prize in his graduation year. Khartoum University was, and remains, a hub of pioneers and leaders of Sudan in politics, business, law, and all aspects of public life. All the students boarded at the student accommodation, which was full of activity (Beleil, 1973).

I was inspired, like many others, during my university years in Khartoum in the late seventies and eighties, where Professor Beleil was my teacher at the medical school and my clinical coach during my training as a student and graduate. During my time as a student, we all admired his leadership as head of the Surgery Department, Director of the University Hospital, and President of Khartoum University.

As Chancellor of the University, student union leaders actively engaged in politics, spearheading the student movement across the country and challenging the non-elected government led by the military. Students often viewed the administration, which was usually supported by the government, as their adversary. However, Professor Beleil, through his charisma, wisdom, and leadership, gained the support of the student union without losing the backing of the government (Lee, 1978).

Ethical leaders act in the common interest, aligning their actions with the vision and goals of the institution or organization while benefiting all stakeholders. The leadership style at the university is democratic. There is a university law, approved by the Sudanese Parliament, which governs the university senate and faculty boards.

Professor Omer Beleil was appointed Vice Chancellor of Khartoum University (1982–1986) by the Chancellor, who is the President of Sudan, according to the university's approved laws. With full delegation as an executive manager, he simultaneously served as President of the University Senate (the highest authority governing the university). Members of the Senate include all teaching staff with the rank of full professor, as well as deans of faculties, heads of departments, and directors of research centers within the university, including the Dean of Students (Berridge, 2019).

Prof. Beleil began his leadership amid an ongoing conflict between the student union and the government of Sudan, which culminated in the first few months of his appointment in a student strike against the new university administration appointed by their main opponent, the military governor of Sudan. This resulted in the student union seizing control of the university, presenting numerous demands. If these demands were not fulfilled, students refused to attend lectures or allow teaching staff to enter their laboratories and offices. Such a strike, deemed unacceptable by the university administration, could have led to the academic suspension of the university for an unspecified duration (Berridge, 2019).

Here, the wisdom and ethical leadership of Prof. Beleil were evident, as he avoided suspension by making appropriate ethical decisions regarding management reforms. For instance, he appointed two members of the student union to the university senate and promoted qualified non-teaching administrative staff to full professor status, similar to that of the teaching staff. This allowed administrators to be part of the university senate as well. By doing so, all stakeholders in the university were represented in the senate.

Following this, he announced many changes that were beneficial for all, ensuring fairness in appointing new university staff by

establishing a law that offers teaching assistant positions to top graduate students in their chosen departments (Brown, 2006). He also organized graduation ceremonies for all past and present graduates, although these were sometimes paused due to student strikes and unrest against the military government of Sudan at that time. During his leadership, new faculties, research centers, and student recreation halls for cultural and sports activities were opened.

He led the university by example; for instance, in spite of being Senate leader and Vice Chancellor (manager), he continued all his previous duties. He established an office clinic adjacent to his main office, taught lectures for undergraduates in the evening, continued his surgery as a urologist and transplant surgeon at the university hospital, saw patients, trained staff, and performed surgeries. Driven by values and empathy for all, he operated with fairness and inspired confidence in everyone. He did not hesitate to admit his own mistakes, nor did he allow others to avoid doing so (Harvard D.C.E., 2019).

Leadership is something embedded; having said that, it is also a skill that can be taught and trained (Board, 2019). From this perspective, in the next five years, I look forward to improving my skills to become a leader in my profession and business. I am a shareholder and rector of a university overseas, Zamzam University College in Khartoum, Sudan, which hosts national and international students. I am leading this university college toward promotion to a full university, with graduate programs in medicine and pharmacy, medical laboratories, nursing, business, and computer technology as the fields I focus on. I have already graduated three cohorts; their graduates have become recognized nationally and regionally in the job market and profession in the United Kingdom, and will soon be acknowledged in the United States of America. I have been leading this new university college from its establishment to the present (www.zamzam.edu.sd).

I am continually improving my skills to be a successful leader by inspiring staff, students, and shareholders to achieve our vision and implement our goals. I regularly review our practices to enhance education, research, and social accountability, which are the three pillars of any university, while also ensuring profitability for the university's shareholders. I maintain a commitment to fairness, transparency, adaptability, and lifelong learning, responding thoughtfully to feedback and facing challenges with confidence (Harvard D.C.E., 2019).

I aim to enhance the image of the administration and the institution by paying attention to our culture and values. Scholars suggest that ethical practices should include trying to do no harm, making things better, respecting others, being fair, and showing compassion (Board, 2019; Brown, 2006).

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